AFTERWARDS

by

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I was suddenly frightened of the idea of another whole night alone in this building. It was ~~now~~ too late to have locks fitted on the downstairs door. Mine at least I could lock. And if I got really scared I could go to a hotel, even in the middle of the night---there was enough money in my pocket now.

I didn't have the evening I promised myself. I ate at a steak-bar in Leicester Square at a table by the window with two teen-agers who giggled and whispered to each other and sometimes screeched with laughter. A vast greyness stretched over the city irrespective of the clear sky there had been at dusk; it got into the pavements and the burdened, grimy walls and filled the waste paper in the gutters, touching the bleak light of the closed shops, entering the buses with their yellow lights and gazing passengers, so that nothing in the city bore an intimate message---only silent plans and a biting wind and millions of thoughts which contributed to no organic whole but shifted dimly along on various degrees of anguish, among which was my own, a sense of loneliness from my wife so raw that it was an urgent hunger---as if I'd been stretched bodily a thousand miles and the torture was only just taking effect. Until I was with her I didn't really know what I felt. Feeling less intently than usual was good but not bearable. I ate half-heartedly and wasn't sufficiently interested to go looking for healthy food. A warm sense of my wife would have been enough for me--- the link would have been enough---but the city in which too many

thoughts had been at cross-purposes made this impossible, and all that lay open to me was an immediate sense of well-being, in a pub by the fire, with a large sherry in my hand. I scrubbed out the theatre and went back to the office early. Pat and Palermo had left long ago, and most of the street was in darkness. The door downstairs was still open, and the kicking I gave it made no difference; I would have to get a carpenter in the morning. I scrambled up the dark, wooden stairs and locked myself in the room. I wrote a letter to my wife describing most of what had happened to me, and that was some relief, to talk to her again. I needed another drink, and reproved myself for wanting it. I switched the light off and lay down in the darkness, in my overcoat, covered with my two spare suits, my head resting on the leather suitcase which was propped against the wall. The silence in the city grew until I was aware that it must be after midnight. There were only isolated footsteps now, and once or twice the passing of a car at a reckless speed. The 'phone below rang twice, once just before midnight and once soon after three. All that time I lay awake listening and half listening. Sometimes I had the impression of a noise. I almost got up, resolving to find a hotel room, but I was too lazy. Once I could have sworn that someone pushed open the street door, but nothing came afterwards. I lifted my head slightly and listened with my breath held. I tried relaxing, breathing deeply, my ribs expanding sideways, my arms loose, my chin dropped, my shoulders pulled down from

my neck, not hunched. At a certain time in the night horses feel safe and go down on all fours, and it must have been about then, not long before dawn, that I fell asleep. In my dozing state I resolved not to appear in the office the next morning but to take a ~~ticket out~~ train into the country. I didn't know why this came into my head. I was looking for an absurd escape.

As usual after sleeping badly I woke early, before dawn, watching it creep across the room with a softness the day never parallels, even at dusk. The same frail blue sky came into being as on the day before, and I pulled myself up heavily from my layers of jackets and trousers. The room was icy cold and I was reluctant to take my overcoat off and to plunge my face in cold water in the narrow kitchen. I shaved slowly and painfully, rubbed almond oil into my face---a habit of years. I brushed my hair with a wire brush and there was dandruff---the emanation, I thought, of recent bad food. The 'phone downstairs rang again, and continued for many minutes. It occurred to me that it might be Palermo wanting my services, but with still ten quid in my pocket I could afford a free morning. I ran downstairs into the icy, deserted street, deciding to grab a cup of tea at the station. The Tube train was still squalid from the night before, with empty ice-cream cartons and silver paper. Waterloo was just beginning to swarm with early-morning workers, muffled and clutching their papers, or with hands stuffed deep in their pockets, in clothes that mostly didn't fit and were in ghoulishly horrible colours, all dark. The icy wind from outside swept

dust across the station floor, while a woman's voice echoed in the steel rafters, giving the times of trains to stations I couldn't understand. I went to the lighted board which hadn't changed since I was a child. I had thirty-five minutes to a train to the South Coast, and went to the buffet where cold men queued for cups of steaming tea, not talking to each other; there were narrow comfortable armchairs, their covers drab and dusty, and I sipped my tea in the same dreaming state as the others, wafted suddenly into cosiness. The crowds grew outside, hurrying across the station, the sound of their steps massive under the roof. I thought of this same station years before on a sunlit morning, so deep in the Before that it was like a postcard scene in my mind, when we had still looked at life as if it were an unfolding story. Well, perhaps it was an unfolding story, only we could no longer find the clue. But it felt to me more like a story that had ended, and like another beginning which was as closed to us in its meaning as Life had always been before the enlightenment that opened our minds and closed our hearts; now again we could thankfully not understand, but had the sensation that life was being lived for us; and we didn't know what the verdict was, we could no longer see ourselves, we weaved hope and desire round our lives, in the ruins that Enlightenment had made.

l.c. Caps

Things in London had looked neater before. I remembered the Tube trains as gleaming and vivid, like toy painted whistles shooting through the dark. And the prosperous, brooding trains

to the North that had drawn out of stations on velvet wheels and hummed among the moors...And the polished buses. The people neatly clothed. But the scenery was irrelevant now, in the Afterwards. It was attitude that counted. The Before was in ruins.

This gave me the sense of a surging freedom of choice---at being hemmed in no longer: here was the other side of the Enlightenment! In this most classless of worlds, where only thoughts and not people haunted, money was the token of this freedom; you could feel this freedom all round you---you only had to disregard the ruins and pick your way through them like a visitor, mentally in the Afterwards, and the only token you needed was money, that one organisational facet of the Before which had had to remain. I felt as if I were suddenly shaking myself awake---I could go into any hotel without feeling I didn't belong, I could take trips to the country and dine at recherché places if there were any left, the whole range of life was for the first time open to me like a giant, brilliantly decorated escalator going nowhere but nice in its smooth movement and the gaiety of its passengers. It required no passion, in fact it refuted it. You kept passion for the silence; unlike in the Before, you didn't hide its signs on your face; you lived in the ruins of the Before, but you were/completely different character, you were the harlequin. In the ruins of class and church and politics---amid scenic ~~construction~~---you were at last your own self.

I got into one of the dusty, evil-smelling carriages which had just been vacated by a horde of smoking, rustling, sniffing people, and waited comfortably for the train to draw out, towards the first dim sunlight of the day. It was empty, and the picture crossed my mind of a tiny country station with one wooden platform among gleaming trees, on a morning when smoke rose in a straight line. Then the train drew out, after a sad whistle from a man on the station who raised his flag like Mr. Horne.

Trees and hills didn't appear for a long time. There were only squat houses on either side, and sometimes a main street sunk under the railway-level like a heap of commerce where only the filthy signs were extant and not the actual product. The buses and the derelict, battered cars moved below only because nothing had yet stopped them, not through their own force and necessity. But then the countryside began, with a ridiculously 'new' townlet now and then, one of those attempts by the Afterwards to dress itself up as the rational and orderly and predictable Before. They were so sure that things would continue to develop nicely---that the scenery would go on being painted with faster planes and faster trains and faster colours and faster girls. They loved their buttons that lifted windows, empires, lavatory seats: the effortless pressure that tilted planes, mountains: the equation that mystified, and ruffled the sands of the moon. With their dark Before-Faces they gaped at the world they had initiated without understanding that a trap had been sprung for them so devastatingly subtle that they would end proclaiming what

they had meant to destroy, the sheer intimate marvel of life as it was from the beginning. They were frightened to think of the game of chance into which they had been flung: that the universe was not perhaps rational. They tore at the surface frantically---exploded and catapulted and combusted for all they were worth, claiming to 'conquer' all the time, even to 'probe.' And there was nothing new. They came back to the same hated kiss. After millions of miles, the same sands, the same light: more millions, and more worlds, the same, the same. They couldn't escape the still gaze from outer space, the eyes that seemed to be watching all the time so calmly and without even any resentment. They came down and reported that no God had been seen up there: only to face the prospect that a God incapable of being seen, yet commanding the millions and millions of miles and the aeons of times with his one stillness (or sameness) was something that the reason had better shudder at, and be contented with its shudder, and find in this shudder the key to conquering and probing such as a thousand wild journeys wouldn't accomplish. But really their bogus science was designed to achieve no such thing even as the breaking of veils to reveal the beautiful naked <u>deus ex machina</u>, but simply to destroy, to blow the veils up once and for all and end that intimacy that stared you in the face and even didn't blanch at what you thought were your blackest and therefore most sacred secrets, but knew no secrets at all.

Out in the country the sun was no longer frail but pierced through the trees and drenched the fields with such colour that if there had been heating in the train I would have imagined it

full summer. By narrowing my eyes slightly I could suppose the trees in leaf and forget the still pools of water that had collected in grassy dips, due to the recent torrents that had come in sudden attacks, strangely coincident with a new spatial experiment---a rocket fired, the moon hit. I had read somewhere that since the eighteenth century, due to natural volcanic explosions, world-temperatures had fallen by one degree: what would unnatural explosions of volcanic power---crammed into one or two decades, not centuries---do? We would see if the Before had reason for its confidence in a plan! They didn't believe in God---of course nothing divine---but they relied on the same old divine balance being kept all the time, in the universe and in the human body, just as if there were a God, and one most sympathetic to us. Lapped in the safety of the Before, they played in the Afterwards like daffy children, destroying the premises from which they started as fast as they could go. Their 'science' was so crass that it couldn't free itself from the explosion: that was necessary to all its probes and victories. Everything started from that. No wonder it was done with military funds. That was the plan---to kill: millions of creatures in laboratories---torture them to death; wreck the weather; hold the whole of life up to ransom, in a promise of one last explosion of all. And 'nature' was supposed to stand up to all this---according to the very people who supposed themselves not to believe in nature at all.

It began to dawn on me that these fields and copses and shallow

streams hugged by willows and low hedges and immense elms and oaks that went by slowly while I lolled in my seat were like a memory: or rather, they were in fact a memory itself, like that sight of Buckingham Palace I had had. I realised that I was no longer looking on them as real, much less as the most real thing there was in life, to which we would return as we had come, dust to dust. They were actually in themselves the memory of a relatively innocent state of affairs; I say relatively because we have never been an innocent part of nature. These things were now the signs and shape of the past. And this past offered no speech by which it could become our present. A major communication had broken down.

And I felt this even more when I got out of the train at a small station near Havant, close to the coast, and actually felt the fields under my feet and smelled the sea. There was hardly any wind now, and the sun had an early-spring strength. I walked down a narrow roadway from the station and turned left onto a path between poplars and freshly ploughed fields where the rooks cawed and swept ponderously down with wings that seemed cut untidily at the edges.

I saw a gull that had come inland, and remembered that on a certain day each year they came to devastate the peas: they knew precisely when the crops were ripe. The light itself contained all England---full of the sea, with its promise of freedom, yet contained on an island, with its intimacy: in which combination was the alchemy of our soul. In the Afterwards we could look back coolly into ourselves, and note our origins, and succumb to them again as the Before had never allowed us to, with its

tyranical emphasis on history and the burden of ordained action which it forced on each generation. Inheriting nothing we could inherit the essence, for the first time.

I got a taste for walking the further I went. After a mile of muddy path I found an asphalted lane where no traffic passed--- a highway nearby had probably outmoded it. There were tall hedgerows, and once or twice, far back from the road behind trees, houses with tiled roofs and mellow brick walls. This time I was going inland, with the gleam of the sea on my shoulders. I began to sweat, with the cold air tingling my cheeks---a familiar effect of mild island-weather which I had all but forgotten.

The dull touch of the asphalt was familiar, and my mind went back to sipping tea in a garden with the smell of roses and dry dusty pollen, and lounging in a wooden summer house, under young beech trees, and staring at the distant sea from among dry tufts of grass, and standing by a churchyard, leaning against the low crumbling wall feeling hungry, and walking along a country path at dusk with loneliness that was also a thrill. This walk was like going into the past: the thrill of memory was there; ~~with the same thrill:~~ my sensations, of sweat and tingling cheeks, weren't real sensations like those office-ones I had run away from that morning; so that bodily reality was no longer any reality at all... The fields now stretched before me in one clear slope that formed vaguely rising hills, under one still sunlight, with the sound of hedge-birds and the squawk of rooks,

but I could only feel the thrill---allow myself to fall into it---if I told myself a lie and made believe that this was all unchallenged; whereas it had all been broken underneath; from the birds to the dimly stirring seeds that would show bright heads under a later sunshine it was sabotaged in an essential link, it was going blindly forward with a faith that had become a habit but was now unsupported. In one moment---or perhaps surreptitiously now, second by second---it could all collapse. So there was a dark hand held over it. Which made it a pleasant memory at best; a morning's indulgence in the past; a walk into a freedom that no longer was freedom at all but deception; and yet still the instrument, the only one we knew, by which deception was shed... That was our contradiction. Our lives were in our own hands as never before---at a time when we had least power over them.

At once, as I thought this, the brilliant slope with water glittering here and there became a scene as separate from me as that in a play. And it was like watching the careful fruits of many cultivating generations: of which I was the first spectator, because the key to its total destruction had been found in my time.

I found my way to Havant, along a highway where trucks clattered close by and sent out sprays of dust, and the first thing I saw when I climbed the hill to the station was---my own backside

peeping through ~~the~~ leaves, ~~of trees,~~ in a gigantic poster that seemed to squash the station into a heap of grimy brick. It made me giddy for a moment---not the size or the shrill colours but the sight of myself, while I was at present hot with real sweat and unguardedly my own property. Palermo and Muriel, even the hot touch of Muriel's breast on my right forearm, were remote from me, like thoughts---not even actual sensations---had years before. But one thing was clear in my mind: without them and therefore this poster there would have been no trip to Havant, and no walk, and therefore no feeling real, there would have been no ten---now seven and a bit---quid in my pocket. The poster had a might more than its size. It contained more of me than all my intimate desires: by being the key to my present survival.

The sweat gradually wore off in the train and gave way to healthy appetite. The compartment had more people than the down-train---mostly women going to town for the day.

I got a taxi to the office and found Pat alone.

She nodded towards Muriel's desk. 'There's a letter for you.'

The lettermark was Cambridge. I put the letter down unopened.

'How's Muriel?' I asked.

'They're letting her out tomorrow.'

'Why did she do it?'

'It's the state of her mind,' was all she said, and returned to her typing.

I opened the letter and the first thing I saw was a green oblong of paper with Westminster Bank written across the top. It fluttered down to the desk just as Pat looked up.

'That's a cheque.' she said.

I picked it up and saw with astonishment that it was in my name, for three hundred pounds. A dozen possibilities went through my mind, and only after a long time did I look at the signature: Louise Grigg. And then I read her letter. 'I've found out the most generous rates for a syndicated article and I hope this refunds you for any loss of copy on my account. For God's sake take it and don't be squeamish, not that I exactly associate squeamishness with you. I shall return the cheque again and again if you tear it up, and if that fails I shall find out where your account is and credit the sum into your bank. I implore you to tear up this letter, too. I never knew I could get so panicky about anything short of one of Jeff's nuclear devices but this has kept me awake at nights, and how. I know that everything's finished if he finds out about this, and not only that but I find I'm scared of him, he can fix me for good, I don't know why I say that or even if it's true, but I've got friends back in the States apart from family and I don't want to lose them, I don't want to lose either. I don't know if that makes you feel powerful, but I hope you have a little Christian feeling, I think you have. You'll think me very weak, which I am. If this cheque is all wrong, I mean if you want something else, let me know. I've done wrong writing this letter, I've

expressed myself very badly and I feel like tearing it up but I know I could never improve on it and it's what I want to say though I hate my weakness for saying it. I suppose I ought to make a clean slate with Jeff but I just can't, a funny thing that I can tell him everything and always have done, we've had over twenty years together but suddenly this is something I couldn't face him with, you know how these things are between married people, you know----a little something which is much less apparently than the big things you've been honest about but you just can't mention it and your silence makes it worse. For God's sake take this, Yours, Louise Grigg.'

'It's for three hundred pounds,' I said.

'Wow.' She was still gazing across at me. 'Did it come as a surprise?'

'I'll say.'

She said 'wow' again softly, and I took the cheque between my fingers. It was crossed, the sum was clear. And suddenly I tore it up. As I did so I was aware of Pat dashing across the room with an awed cry, trying to stop me.

'You mustn't do that!' she cried, suddenly tall and frowning, with more energy than she'd shown in the last four working days rolled together. But it was already in strips.

She stood there. 'Now what did you do that for?'

'It was dirty money, that's why.'

'Well,' she said with a pout, 'you could always <u>discuss</u> it.'

And she gave me a long awed look, as she moved back to her desk: I was as giddy from the tearing as she seemed to be. Nor did I agree with myself in the thought that I'd thrown away weeks of livelihood, presents to my wife, a week-end flight to Italy--- I could even have managed that!

'You regret it, don't you?' she said with narrow eyes.

'Yes.'

'Well, I've seen some damn-fool things in my life but I've never seen that.' And she sighed.

The conviction that it was dirty money refused to return, now that the cheque was gone. It now seemed entirely and perfectly clean. It struck me that I wasn't worried on Louise Grigg's account---the imploring tone of her letter had apparently done nothing to me.

'Here,' I said, leaning over and throwing the letter on her desk, 'have a look at it. ~~That's~~ It's this American professor's wife.'

She read it while I tried to ~~think~~ make sense of Louise's ~~feelings~~ words. But only the money appeared to me---in sixty five-pound notes, or thirty ten-pound ones.

'If I was you,' Pat said, 'I'd call her up and make it six hundred.' And she added, 'You ought to have seen her at the Lincoln last night. She was so drunk she draped a tablecloth round her shoulders.'

'You know her, then?'

'Well, she's been at the club for three nights running, nearly all night, so I ought to.'

'Who with---Palermo?'

'Of course,' she said with slight irritation.

I had the impression that it was night, so absorbed was I in what she said, and I suddenly noticed the sunshine outside as if a new day, even a new reality, had opened. In a way, this was a new reality because of the three hundred, even though I'd torn it up. I had begun to regard it as money earned.

I went upstairs to change the tweed trousers I'd worn for the country, and the room was like an icebox. No blankets on the bed---I must get them right away. And I must find a locksmith for the doors. I heard Pat go out for lunch, and the house was in silence. Louise Grigg's letter was still on her desk and I went downstairs to get it. The green strips of cheque were lying in the empty wastepaper basket; I picked up the letter and folded it carefully before putting it in my pocket, then I tore that up too and threw it after the cheque. I glanced into the street, and realised that the thought of a police visit was no longer strange for me; as if I was already in the network of which they were a part.

I found no locksmith, and nobody seemed to know of one. So I popped into Bologna's and ate a <u>zuppa di pesce</u> with a carafe of white wine at a crowded table where we were breathing into each other's faces. The liquid, heavily laced with paprika, swilled about inside me and I no longer felt comfortable. I resolved to look after myself better. I could now lay in a supply of Health-and-Wealth---the butter would keep in my kitchen

as in an icebox. And that evening I would buy liquor: perhaps invite Palermo up; something to make me feel at home.

Later I went to the lost-property office near Victoria station and found three cheap but good blankets which they said had been fumigated and dry-washed only the day before. I sniffed round for an oil-stove but found nothing. There were new models of course which I couldn't afford. Though if I'd kept the three hundred I could have had a fire, a sideboard of drinks and a fitted carpet by now...~~But it was more than this.~~ I was getting the idea of myself as a---well, an unworthy person: not exactly that, but a person cowed in status, naturally so. Which made me scramble for my rights, of which comfort was the first part. And money was the token of that scramble. It replaced the broken image, somewhat. This had started, surreptitiously, the moment I had landed from Italy. Thinking became more difficult, as pleasures became more cosily pleasureable: the water-logged vessel clung to the safe shallows; at three in the afternoon, with the liquified paprika settling into my tissues, I wanted a strong coffee---with a strong whisky in it. But the pubs were closed and the glittering liquor shops, with their tiers of bottles under blinding strip-lights, weren't open till six.

I took the blankets back by taxi and then, after throwing them on the bed, stood cursing myself for having forgotten sheets. But then these seemed unnecessary. I'd done without them often enough. Pat was now back, thundering once more, and I decided to begin my new régime by locking the door and taking a siesta. I bore my

way under the blankets and fell into a doze almost at once, while the paprika soup continued its slow transmigration into living cell. The thunder from below was like a ship's engine, drugging me. With a siesta a day I could face any number of police interviews. I remembered my German wine-colleague who kept a divan in his office and fair-weather-or-foul secured an hour's siesta every day for himself; yes, you had to have a method these days.

At what must have been about four---it was ~~already~~ getting dark---there was a raucous cry of 'Glen!' from below, not exactly angry but petulant. I was about to leap up but rejected this nervous reaction and took a deep breath instead, stretching my legs and arms as far as they would go, with my spine as nearly uncurved as I could make it. It ~~made me able~~ enabled me to disregard at least three more 'Glen!'s. Then I got up, put my shoes on and combed my hair, walked to the door. After quietly unlocking it I said, 'Anybody want me?'

'Oh!' It was Palermo's voice and he was standing out on the landing below. 'What the hell have you got up there, a woman?'

'I was working on some new ideas,' I said, slipping on my jacket and going downstairs.

To my astonishment he believed me. 'Good to hear,' he said with a respectful smile, looking dark and small---always with that suggestion of shrunken and yet tough frailty---in the dimness

of the staircase. And we shook hands.

'You're quite a stranger,' I said as we walked into the office. Pat was still thundering.

'Come through,' he shouted leading me along the corridor to his cubby-hole.

'Listen,' he said as he swung the door closed, 'I heard from Pat you tore up a cheque for three hundred quid. Never do that, Glen.' And he gave me a wrinkled glance from under his eyebrows. 'Boy,' he went on, gazing at the desk, 'you must have a packet behind you, to turn down that lot.' He looked up: 'Eh?'

'I need a packet to go on working here.'

'I thought I gave you twenty quid not so long ago?' he asked with a conciliatory smile.

'I want a contract,' I said.

He sat down behind his desk and said, biting his lips, 'I'll tell you what, Glen---I'll trade you a contract for Cambridge tonight.'

'Cambridge tonight---what do you mean?'

He didn't reply at once but gazed down at his cigarette as if it wanted to say something. 'The thing is, I'm scared of that Grigg-boy and---'

'But so am I! He wants to kill me!'

'Well,' he said, 'he's invited you up for a party tonight.'

'He's invited me? Just to cut my throat, that's all!'

'No, Glen,' he went on in a soft voice, extraordinarily meek,

'I arranged it. Well, she did it. Lou did it.' He blinked at me. 'I've gone rather a bit deep with that one, as you probably gathered. The position is this---I think we should all come together, I mean I don't want enemies, I want her old man to come inside and feel warm. I mean, you seem to know how to grease rusty joints.'

'And how do I explain the newspaper story?'

'Don't. They'll both eat out of your hand. She already does. I can't very well tell her I put those stories in, can I?'

'I suppose you can't, no.'

'Anyway,' he said, 'for Christ's sake get up there and smooth everything out. You'll get the three hundred, by the way.'

'I don't want it.'

'You'll get it just the same,' he said, turning his eyes from me sullenly.

I felt a tremor of nervousness unconnected with my thoughts, which were about the three hundred. And then with a kind of giddy ecstasy I heard the words come from my mouth, 'All right, I'll go.'

'Dark suit,' he said. 'Begins at eight, arrive at nine.'

9.
~~10.~~

I was in the train soon after seven, with a dark suit on.

This suit had given me trouble, as two nights in the role of bedclothes had creased it everywhere. But I'd found a cleaner's on the Strand and they'd done a priority job on it. I'd eaten no dinner. I was too excited. The starched white collar made me feel protected somewhat. It was like an answer to the professor's poor idea of me---a fool's answer, I thought. The ends of my fingers were trembling and again I resolved to lead a Healthy-is-Wealthy life. I hadn't touched citrus for nearly a week. Earlier to bed, too.

I sat at a table in what was called the Buffet Car, but the buffet belonged to the past and there were simply the fixed tables and settee-seats now. Someone had left an evening paper. The headlines were about a T.V. serial, how a producer with the reputation for ruthlessness was making radical changes in the programme against public protest, and how he had said to the press that he mustn't be accused of honesty and integrity. I sat sniffing the stale tobacco and listening to the dry coughs of the other passengers. Country lights, dim and pin-pointed---a car turning into a narrow lane, then a row of streetlamps---shone through the filth of the windows, and when we were half way to Cambridge a fine drizzle started. It swept against the window and I saw trees close to the train bend in its sudden lights. Strange that a wild wind should start as I drew near to this town again---the same wind had sped me from it. There was a young man near me, absorbed in being a student to the point (so it seemed to a continental) of obsession, with his books and loose collar and scarf and legs

everywhere. An island people: ~~they~~ the English exuded a sense of order while not being very orderly, just through this absorption in life---this relish; as if there were no other possible story in life---no legend across the frontier, because there was no frontier. They enjoyed themselves so much, they languished and bustled and argued their way through their daily schedules of fun. Now only the fun was left. That was how it seemed. Well, it was one way of meeting fate, and neither a cowardly or foolish one. Everything had been reduced---from thought to theft---to ways of having fun. It was all over the evening paper: ~~anything~~ earnestness so carefully avoided, ~~so~~ that it made ~~there was~~ an appearance---nearly---of earnestness; ~~in that;~~ no concentration except what was meant to seem it: only the outsides of things, lightly touched.

Somebody had vomited the night before under the seat and the stain was still wet. There were cigarette-butts flattened hard on the floor. The lights in the roof were dim in a peculiarly suggestive way, as if no one was in charge here and the island-people couldn't grasp that this was so, with the result that the lights were getting dimmer and dimmer. The coach clattered along in the night. Did the rails need changing?

When I got out of the train the wind nearly wrenched the door out of my hands and sent me flying after it. Some girls were clinging to each other and laughing in the dimness, hurrying on high-heeled shoes towards the ticket-collector, bent forward and holding their collars tight. I bent along

after them, my hands in my overcoat pockets, and then as suddenly the gust ceased and we were all nearly overbalanced a second time. I was aware of my nervousness and for a moment nearly decided to ~~go over~~ cross to the other platform and take the next train back. But the tranquil look of the road and taxi-rank outside persuaded me that I and not the visit was absurd. I got into a taxi and looked at my watch---half-past eight, too early to arrive. So I stopped ~~him~~ the cab just short of the apartment block, which shone in the narrow mediaeval lane like a gilt fool. For half an hour I walked up and down outside, pushed and sucked back and ~~then~~ elbowed sideways by the wind as it whistled and roared in the gables and rattled the windows. The glass panels in the lamplights shifted and sometimes seemed about to crash. A few people passed, bent and clutching their coats. Something fell in the distance, perhaps a tile. I noticed one or two long cars pull up outside the block, and I wondered if they were Grigg's guests. The entrance with its carpets and concealed but dazzling lights created an absurdity at just that point, between two low-slung houses, so that it looked like a gap was being marked down in the Book of Reckoning for special retribution. The pace of the people who entered it was long and sure, or rather the sureness had been rehearsed surely. One of the cars had an American number-plate, encrusted with mud; its window had been left slightly open so that the wind sang in it with an odd dark moan like a machine fulfilling a purpose. My cheeks were ice-cold now and my face had been massaged into composure:

I was ready to go in.

The place was extraordinarily silent as if hush was being produced from underground-machines, and paid for. As I reached the door I felt giddy with the sense of knowing no one inside, and thus of not knowing myself. I pressed the bell but heard no sound.

'Well, look who's here!'

There was Louise Grigg before me suddenly, in a chiffon dress slung low at the neck and her arms bare. She was flushed slightly and her eyes were brighter perhaps than I'd seen them on first meeting---more direct and assured; her face was stronger than my impression had made it. She smiled at me, a really intimate smile that drew me into a family where---strangely---I'd never been; and I was just answering her smile and taking her hand, half with relief that we were intimate after all, when a look of fear, like the smallest of twitches, went through her face; and as she closed the door behind me her expression settled for smiling restraint. I slumped after her along the hushed hallway and saw through the half-open drawing-room door that there were many more people than I expected. I had a moment's impression of excellent clothes under dim lights.

'Like to hang your coat, Glen?' she asked.

'Thanks.' We stood in the tiny cloakroom where the walls bulged with intimidating furs and cashmere overcoats.

'Just stroll in,' she said. 'Some wind tonight, eh?'

'And how.'

'There's a man who brings the drinks.'

When I pushed open the door there was hardly more noise than on the stairs outside. Yet everyone was talking. That degree of casual ease should have made me feel easy, but it produced the same giddy sensation I'd had outside, and my lips began quivering as they had that afternoon, as if they had lost command of words, and would say something I had no mind to say. There were collars as white and starched as mine; and as deliberately protective--- that was a relief. One or two heads were shaved; one of them belonged to an army man in a glittering and menacingly clean uniform that seemed to have been sewn and polished to answer all conceivable accusations of filth; as ~~the~~ his shaved hair seemed to demonstrate the absence of lice. His face as he bent down to talk to a woman---he was sitting on the arm of a sofa---was gaunt and hard and yet innocent of its own effects, as if he was clearing his character all the time of bad intentions, but had overlooked that hell is paved with good ones.

No one did any introducing, which was a relief to me; instead, a waiter came round with a tray of drinks, making a slight old-world bow. I chose whisky and soda and stood sipping it while the doorbell rang again. This time a whole group arrived and I heard Louise give a loud family-welcome, a sort of whoop and roguish laugh afterwards. This made the talk in the room louder. The army man slipped into the sofa at the woman's side like a child onto its pot, with a sly glance round. I was determined to sit down before the party filled. I chose the

settee by the fire, where Grigg and I had sat waiting for Louise to announce dinner. There seemed to be no Grigg. One of the men laughed, lifting his chin, an easy laugh---so easy that you wondered how any set of conditions could be so good on earth as to produce it. I stretched out my legs and felt comfortable. My body seemed in abeyance: its heat and softness and angularity of limb was like my Englishness---cut off suddenly from my activity of mind and therefore perplexing; I wondered that I'd been carrying it about so long, an untidy bundle.

The women were pretty. One of them moved about with a tray of dainty sandwiches, smiling whenever she offered it. Seeing me alone she left it on the table and sat down by me. Her dress was the darkest in the room, with a V-neck and slightly old-fashioned flounced sleeves. Her hair was dark too, and in the dimness it framed her pale face like black satin. She reminded me of a Holbein sketch of one of the Tudors.

'I feel sorry for Lou,' she said. She looked at me with very still eyes for a moment. 'Are you English?'

'Yes.'

There was a pause while a new group came into the room, but again no introductions followed. The butler appeared as before, and I sat down again, happy that I now looked part of the arrangements. The talk was loud and people were shifting about with less deliberate ease and more of the real kind, which didn't look easy at all...

'I'm in fashion,' she said. And she gave me another still look, so deep and long that I thought she would fall asleep with me in her vision. 'What are you? Forgive me asking, I know it's rotten form and all that, but I have to single you out from the nuclear nuts.'

'I grow wine.'

'You what?'

'Grow wine, in Italy.'

'Well, listen to that.' She added, 'Got any over here?'

'No.'

Again she gave me her long look. 'Well, listen to that. You ought to connect up with my husband.'

'Why?'

'Well, he's trying to expand his Italian market,' and as she said this she laughed, silently, showing perfect teeth, moist and sparkling, and as quickly stopped again.

Just at that moment there was a roar of male laughter from the other side of the room (I could see I was several whiskies behind) and I ~~saw~~ noticed a flushed plump man raise his eyes, laughing with the rest and saying, 'I couldn't agree more! I absolutely couldn't!' That was an English accent; sewn at a public (Meaning in England, private) school, with a slightly rasping edge, now one of the marks of the higher executive though no longer an exclusive mark. His eyes were flashing with merriment and a kind of boyish goodwill. He had plump gills, which being flushed as well looked like the repositories of years of

wine. He had a protective white shirt on too, and I noticed his plump but delicate hands as they lay on his knee. He had the look of a man who would agree to anything in present company. Yet he was agreeable too---genuinely so.

The first whisky was strong enough for me to begin to think that events seemed kaleidoscopic: the laughter in the corner ceased abruptly and my near-vision came suddenly to life in the form of Louise who was bending down to say something to my new friend and showing mighty bosoms. The dark young woman made a mock-goggling movement towards them, and they chuckled like college-mates.

'He's in wine,' the dark woman said, 'now isn't that something?'

Louise looked at me and straightened herself up, and her mouth drooped while her eyes looked bleakly empty for a moment. 'Oh,' she said in a light, sighing voice. 'Is that what he told you?'

'A side you don't know about,' I said with a smile.

'Oh,' she said, with a glance down at her friend, 'there's a whole lot I don't know about you, I dare say.' And she added, 'Well, well, you're in wine now, are you? Well!' And she gave her friend another pursed look.

'That's right,' I said.

'In Italy,' the dark woman told her, 'Why don't you sit down, Lou?'

'No, thanks, honey, I'll see to the other guests, they're arriving fast, in fact they're cascading in.'

'Where's Jeff?' I asked.

Another word from me definitely pained her and she looked down

at me stiffly. 'He's on a train.'

'He's coming?'

'That's right.' She fixed me with her eyes; 'And I hope you get on. Hear that, Glen? I hope you get on.'

'So do I.'

'Well, that's fine.' And she smiled her intimate smile at me again. It seemed she could do it at will.

I noticed one person not splendidly dressed, sitting in the Englishman's group. He was a young man with an oval face, rather flat and small-eyed, with ginger hair, cut close to the skull like the military man's, and clothes that showed no sense---that is, respect---of the occasion. The colours were drab, but bright enough to clash with each other---his jersey unbuttoned at the neck, with a corduroy jacket and grey flannel trousers. Yet there was nothing deliberate about it. His glances round were shy, even perhaps troubled. I noticed that the Englishman only looked at him briefly when he spoke, and glanced at the others gingerly, as if to get their permission to speak to him: and they as near disregarded him as it was possible to do. I watched them for a time, hiding a little behind my raised glass, shifting in my seat, scratching myself, so as not to appear a spectator: I saw the young man try several times to speak, but only once was he successful, and then he only served to launch one of the older men into a booming speech that the Englishman heard with so much respect written so clearly on his face that I came to the conclusion he felt none.

As I was thinking this I realised that my dark friend had slipped away---like a veil picked off the settee. There was no sign of her. The noise of talk grew louder, and the waiter had lost his benign look as the orders for a gin fizz or a highball or a manhattan grew more peremptory. The military man had increased his public, and there was a group round him mostly of men, with the woman at his side looking abstracted now. He was talking with a peculiar bright and tiny gleam in his eye, his lips pursed slightly, as if hammering a point home with a special fine steel hammer that made no sound and certainly caused no bloodshed. He made the operation seem so smooth and inevitable that his face and words joined with his uniform in one glittering array like stars that had had no natural creation and so were more within the scope of human understanding, and tidier, than life.

I expected to see some jackets come off, because of the mounting heat, but none did. Lou breezed back into the room, her face creased and firmly set, her bosom unashamedly aware of itself as she crossed the room to replenish the canapè tray. Then my dark friend appeared again---quite silent as before, in a wave of air: she stood by the door for a moment looking at the party, her eyes dark, swaying ever so slightly. Louise walked past her without saying anything---or perhaps she did mutter something under her breath, screwing her mouth up strangely to do so, in a way that made it appear very familiar. Then the dark woman's eyes turned slowly and rested on the settee, and lastly---like something floating down to rest---on me. She showed no

recognition but the sight of me did seem to set up associations, for she walked slowly to her place and sat down again. While her movements were light and floating, there was nothing of that in her person: her legs were strong and slim, her hips well rounded.

'What did you say your name was?' she asked, lighting a cigarette without offering me one, and watching the smoke curl away from her mouth with a minute rapt curiosity.

'I didn't.' I said. 'It's Glen, anyway.'

'Uh-huh.' And she blew out some more desultory smoke, with the same rapt interest in its curls and involutions.

To my horror---or rather, instantaneous fear---the military man sat down at her side on the settee. Where and how he'd come I didn't know, but he was suddenly and resplendently there, with his arm round her shoulders, saying, 'How's Myra tonight?' She turned to him without a smile and said, 'Bored, just that!'

As suddenly as he had sat down he looked straight at me and said, 'You in fashion, too?'

'In a way,' I said. How the next words came into my mouth I don't know, but I said irritably, with an eye on his menacing uniform, 'Are you?'

'Do I look as if I was?' he asked a little tremulously.

'To be quite frank, yes,' I said. 'With that ~~uniform~~ thing on.' I was quivering with rage and had no more idea of how it had started than I had of this man's fitness to provoke it.

'To be quite frank,' he said to Myra, imitating me with the

same smile as before. 'They're priceless, aren't they?'

'Well,' I said, 'if you will walk round in fancy dress!' And I laughed easily, my indignation leaving me as quickly as it had come.

At that moment Louise walked past and noticed us together. She stopped and said to no one in particular, 'I hope you're getting on?'

'Like a house on fire,' I said with a smile, and after a doubtful blink towards the officer she went on.

I began to have sensations familiar from hours---even days--- of American company in Naples. At first it offered you an illusion of freedom such as you had never known before---freedom from the intimate coils of self and country, in which lay the hidden springs of speech and love, and also hurts. And then you realised that you had cut yourself loose from these only to float, you had lost your identity, and you yearned for the old intimacy again which bound you to other creatures, dumbly. Your American friends were explicit about everything: smiles, frowns---these were important indications of feeling; then after a time you wanted to go back to the dumb form of life, in which your identity was taken for granted, not stated in smiles and exclamations and observations all the time.

Yet it was always refreshing: there was always the chance to say what you thought; like you, they were looking for somewhere to anchor themselves (only their search was desperate).

Mostly un-American Americans had come to our farmhouse, like Alexander Parsons. Hate was his great theme. He told me once, when we were walking in Naples harbour, that he lived by it. Imaginary, of course. And his hatred was America. It was like a duty, nothing to do with his nature, which was bubbling, ingenuous. They all cursed and complained, even American accents they seemed to hate. They sank themselves further and further into local provincial life, trying to forget themselves. But they were American in one basic tenet---even their cursing and complaining were part of an important moral revolution: like the Americans they hated, they thought themselves the moral climax of Christian, even world, history; even their hurts had a special flavour which <u>our</u> hurts lacked. I knew their psychology so well, after ten or fifteen years of their intermittent company: perhaps its one fatal lapse was a failure to grasp that our lives too---those of other peoples---were improvised like their's, that nothing is really and truly inherited except the will to improvise according to certain ~~xuku~~ forms. They therefore created a false moral picture of other peoples, without the slightest suspicion that they had created a picture at all. To a greater or lesser extent, even Alex, they saw the rest of us, from the Chinese to the wine-farmers of the Midi, as asleep in a kind of inherited cradle which we had never questioned (while <u>they</u> were asking all the relevant questions of the century, on our behalf). I knew that look of detachment---even pity---when they were listening to my English phrases: a special look, neither disrespectful nor lacking in curiosity, but it quietly divested me of the right credentials for being really

and truly contemporary...

They had bitter discussions among themselves, to which I was admitted, through having an American wife.

The arguments went backwards and forwards. There was the argument that America protected Europe with her arms: and the counter-argument that this was just her way of keeping the war off American soil. There was the argument that after the last war the world divided into two camps, and America was by her riches the natural leader of one camp: and the counter-argument that America had done the dividing, with the clear idea of doing the leading. There was the argument that Russia had been hungry to invade the war-tired states of Western Europe: and the counter-argument that Russia had been the most war-tired of all, and only America had had energies for conquest ~~at that time.~~ in 1945. There was the argument that Hiroshima had prevented a prolonged war with Japan and thus many deaths, and the counter-argument that a warning bomb could have been dropped in the ocean. There was the argument that the man who had dropped this bomb had gone mad: the counter-argument that he had simply spoken his conscience, and been certified as mad to keep him quiet. There was the argument that the Bomb had been developed as a necessity of defence: the counter-argument that it had been developed to terrorise the world and keep it safely divided into two camps. There was the argument that America had won the war, and thereby saved humanity: the counter-argument that she had won it with other people's lives, in other people's lands. There was the argument that America had been

generous: the counter-argument that she had introduced the most shameless system of bribery ever known. There was the argument that her generosity had revived life everywhere after a devastating war: the counter-argument that it had used bad men against good, mediocre against gifted, so that she alone could shine in the surrounding darkness. There was the argument that she had trusting and trusted allies: the counter-argument that she had satellites whose independence she had subtly suppressed and undermined behind the scenes. ~~There was the argument that she had inaugurated a new era in the countries under her influence: the counter-argument that she had turned their clocks back to a rebirth of lasser-faire capitalism.~~ There was the argument that she was the mecca of the downtrodden: the counter-argument that she was the haven of the rich. There was the argument that she was governed on sound representative principles: the counter-argument that her constitution was two hundred years out of date. There was the argument that she was beyond nationalism: the counter-argument that she was the most obsessively nationalist power ever to have existed. There was the argument that she was peaceful: and the counter-argument that during the period of her 'leadership' she had been responsible for more unthinkable cruelty than ever before in the history of the world.

So they went on, as we dozed, woke again, had another drink.

The venom sometimes generated was fearful. 'I can never forgive that' was a phrase I heard more often than ever before. The words used about other people had a relentless flavour:

people whose behaviour didn't suit you were 'sick'; arguments you disliked were part of a 'complex'. An argument was never quite sound---never quite devoid of interests, insecurities of a personal kind which kept intruding. All our friends had a certain loneliness which gave them a weakness for the tritely moral or popular or easy argument. None of them had what I'd grown up to think of as a mind. If they did argue objectively it was with a juvenile element: as if they were playing at being psycho-analysts. It seemed that they couldn't achieve for themselves a settled identity: without which a mind was impossible.

Only the Hundred Per cent. Americans, as they were called---that is, Germans, Italians, Englishmen who had forfeited their own passports for American ones---were absolved from these waves of hatred and resentment. Even Alexander Parsons was polite to them. They were hors de combat: just enough inside the camp not to become the dreaded (and fascinating) enemy, and just enough outside not to remind them of themselves. The cleverest of the Hundred Per-centers were aware of this and spent half the year inside the States and half the year out ('We'd be in America all the time, only we have our business over here.') Thus they steered clear of the agony of both worlds, and neatly profited from both. Above all, they restored American morale, even un-American American morale: they were the ones who, when Americans were in an agony of self-examination over a war or a brutal political murder or a nation-wide scandal, came forward and said, 'You have

the finest country in the world.' They were the ones who said what a 'big' country America was---just when Americans were feeling the smallest creatures on the earth. Even civil violence was justified---ex-crime, robbery: the fact that 'you couldn't even walk across Central Park nowadays for fear of attack' was turned into a little homily about how, yes, the Americans were a little 'wild', they always had been, it was a sign of their vitality. The Hundred Per-center, putting it in his cool English voice, or with that slight German accent, made it feel much better, in fact quite a picnic. (The Hundred Per-centers reserved their hatred and venom for each other.)

And it was they who fertilised the American sense of having a moral mission: even violent un-American statements were taken coolly. 'The fact that you can say America is the most fascist country in the world,' I heard a Hundred Per-center tell Alexander Parsons once, 'shows what a free country you have. I wish the same degree of self-criticism existed in the rest of the world.' This did a lot to isolate any rebellion in the Un-American American, and to turn it into a victim's 'sick' outcry. And the Hundred Per-centers returned to their villas to take a quick dip in the pool.

'Lou tells me you're a liar,' the dark woman said to me suddenly.

'How's that?' I asked while the army man chuckled, trying with a hug to recall her to politeness.

'She says, as for growing wine in Italy, you don't know a grape from a blackberry.'

As I didn't answer she explained to the man, 'He told me he's a wine merchant. Don't you think that's a scream?'

As there seemed nothing hostile in this, and as the whisky was beginning to knock my mind out, I said nothing and they talked together again, making me feel in a most uncomfortable way a minor. The Englishman's group on the other side of the room had got smaller and more feminine: he was now quieter, and a woman who might also have been English, with some lace at the neck of her dress, was talking.

All of a sudden Grigg himself appeared in the doorway. I had no idea how much time had passed, only that the room was getting hotter and hotter and that as soon as I finished one long glass of whisky-and-soda another was put down at my side. Dimly I began to suspect that I was being doctored with the stuff, but Palermo and shady deals had fallen into a distant background and there were only my desires left, which were to see my land and to be with my wife, and never to see this room again. Grigg went round to the other groups but seemed to avoid ours, with a gingerly glance at the army officer's back: whether he saw me or not I couldn't say. He seemed to have grown taller during his journeys, and his stride was more loping and authoritative; his creases, that marked his face like reckless pencil lines, were deeper. The room was roaring with talk, and the couple a foot or so from me, his epaulets touching her shoulder, were laughing as if they were alone.

Not only was the room hot enough from the central heating but

Louise Grigg, too familiar with everyone now to turn or even nod at us, began piling more logs on the fire, making sparks fly into the chimney. Her friend Myra seemed to understand the significance of this and uttered a strange cattish howl, evoking a wink from Louise as she went away.

Myra suddenly put her hand on my knee, leaning forward, and said in a whisper, 'You ought to talk to this guy, you really should. Well, they say the dopes all go in the army!'

The army man didn't hear a word, or at least he made it seem he didn't, looking in the other direction.

'Well, Myra, I guess I'd better git,' he said, turning back to her with a smile.

'A council of war?' she asked with mocking curiosity.

'A date, as a matter of fact.'

'You exciting feller.'

Grigg passed again, and again didn't look at us. But the moment the army man got up he turned to him and went with him into the hall.

'He says his wife went to the top of the Eiffel Tower and tried to throw her two babies off,' she said with a smile, 'and they shipped her over to one of the nicest hatches in the States, where they positively <u>like</u> you to be mad.'

'Is that funny?' I asked her.

'Well, isn't it? Here, give me a cigarette.'

'I don't.'

'Well, of course it's funny. To go through the trouble of

having babies and then throw them off the Eiffel Tower. Anyway,' she added, 'didn't you know this man has orders to gas all wine-growers in Europe in the event of a nuclear catastrophe?' She made her delightful laugh. 'As you can probably tell,' she went on, 'I see the funny side of the most horrible things.'

The central light, a chandelier, went out, and nobody seemed to bother.

Myra slipped off her shoes. 'Here we go,' she said.

'Go where?'

She didn't reply to this, but gazed in front of her darkly, smoking, her lips pouted, with the flames making her eyes bright, yet not with attention: they seemed not to see. A couple came over and talked to her, saying 'Hi' quietly and sitting down.

All at once I found myself with Wrigg. He drew me to a corner outside in the hall where there was a straight-backed settee and a coffee table, under a tassled lamp. No signs of anger on his part—— not even a sense that we were estranged.

'I'm glad you could come,' he said. 'How's the party?'

'Too much drink.'

'That's it, I always tell Lou, you lace the damn drinks too much, but you know how women are if they get an idea.' Then he said, 'Your wife never seems to be with you. Are you happily married, Glen?'——with a wink.

'Yes.'

'Well,' he murmured, yawning, 'I wish I was happily married like that. Perhaps it's the only way——never see 'em!'

We heard Louise's voice behind us, coming from one of the private rooms. 'You can't sit there like that, without a drink,'

she told us.

'Why don't you take your jackets off?' she asked on her way to the kitchen. 'Make yourselves comfortable.'

This seemed to awake Grigg in a strange way, and he gave the parting figure of his wife a long look from behind, his eyes half closed.

'A good idea at that,' he murmured. 'Peel it off, Glen.'

'It's certainly hot in here.'

'How's our amateur photographer?' he asked with a wink as we stood up to take off our jackets.

'Who?'

'Palermo, isn't that what they call him?' And we sat down again in our shirtsleeves. I had a waistcoat on with six bubble-buttons I'd found in Salzburg, while he sat in shirtsleeves and braces.

'He's all right.'

He yawned and was hidden in thought, staring at the coffee table. Louise came from the kitchen with a small tray and as she did so I heard her say, 'Thanks loads, Mr. Sidney,' to someone behind her. In the shadows I saw the butler in white scarf and overcoat leaving. She put the drinks in front of us---- a whisky-on-the-rocks for Grigg.

'Wake up, dad, it's milking time,' she said, and then returned to the big room. 'Well,' I heard her say from just inside the door, 'doesn't this look cosy.' And there was a murmur of voices. The place was much quieter now: no efforts

were being made.

Grigg put out a blind hand for his drink and drained it more or less in one gulp.

'It's bad,' he said, 'when you take this stuff for medicine, which I do.'

'How did they like the lectures?'

'They just goggled. Chromosome damage, alpha radiation, C.N.S.---they know nothing. They can't tell the difference between fifteen megatons and a lighted match.'

'I bet they would if one went off.'

'That's about it,' he said earnestly, looking at me sideways with his chin thrust forward, 'they've got expendable written all over them, Glen.'

'What does C.N.S. mean?' I asked, to divert him.

Yawning once more he answered, 'You lose control over your limbs, Glen, you get very excited, you have difficulty breathing, you sort of black out now and then, and you're dead in, say, eight to ten hours---that's C.N.S. Central Nervous System Syndrome.' He spoke all this sharply and clearly. There was no doubt he knew his job.

He went on, 'I gave a ~~shorty~~ quicky on vaporation, which some people call vaporisation. But I prefer the other word, it's more graphic. And it's nearer what happens. Well, they had the effrontery to be horrified. The Germans too. I don't just mean by the facts, which is more or less permissible, but by me. That's like this bunch all over, they've been living on our sins---oh, don't worry,

I know what we've got ourselves into, it only needs one of us to light a match and that's the end of this terrestrial history all right, but they've been living on it, they had their moral indignation well-fed and well-clothed for a couple of decades, so they could turn round to us at the end and say, Now you've kept us out of a war which we damned-well deserved to get into we think you're a bunch of trigger-happy punks.'

'Which you are,' I said with a smile.

'You're right at that. But it kept you out of war.'

'We've been at war since 1945,' I said. 'A state of arms. If you call that peace you must think we're funny people.'

'Well, I prefer that kind of talk to dirty looks,' he said sleepily.

'What's vaporation, anyway?'

'Effect of the fireball.' Again he spoke sharply and clearly. 'Everything gets evaporated---buildings, people. Nothing left inside a certain circle, not even ruins.'

There was a pleasant murmur of talk from the other room. It was one of these nights when I could happily have stayed sitting and drowsing until dawn, in sheer reluctance to accept the full energies of my body, which called me where I couldn't go (short at least of a two-day journey).

With my jacket off, the heat now seemed desirable. The lights were kindly. The darkness of the hall, with the kitchen lights pinpointed at the end, was like a state of sleep where dreams were willed, not fated. Once again I heard the Englishman's

laugh, quieter and smoother now, with an echo of civilised warmth---no performing this time. Then a sighed 'Oh!' went up from one of the women, and silence.

'That guy is what you might call one of our kept gentlemen. He collects antiques, he looks down his nose at Lou---'

'Who's this?' I asked.

We were sitting with our legs stretched out in front, our hands in our pockets.

'The General. We like to get rid of him and the butler early on. It's his butler, by the way!' He tried to drain more whisky out of his glass, but the blocks of ice clinked against his mouth drily. 'That's right, without his Sackville and Drummond and Sidney he can't drop off at night.'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean your English poets. The thing is, they mustn't be too famous, then he feels all right. And he doesn't buy wine in a shop, In a shop, him? Not Chester. He owns a vineyard---hey, that was good gag of yours, Glen, saying you grew wine!' And he laughed pleasantly and huskily.

'It's true.'

'He wouldn't dirty his hand with nuclear tools. He thinks he's in a tradition, the crumb. He even rides a horse. We wheel him all over the world. Good advertisement. He tells everybody things are fine. 'When I saw the President a couple of weeks ago,' he says. They feed him with dope about how nice it is to release twenty megatons. But it's terrible, 'Glen,'

l.c. he said quietly, 'The most terrible necessity that has ever befallen the human race, and unless we get to understand it, almost you might say in its magnificence, like the most magnificently terrible gesture the human race has ever made, in a climax of scientific hard work---.' He broke off and started again. 'Of course, it's like a threat, but science always is! Europe's the home of intellectual persecution all right, they've always tried to break the first signs of exploration, right from the first explosive. Of course it's dangerous, of course we get our fingers burned, of course the pioneers look like rogues and murderers, they always have done, the Galileos and the Brunos and the Newtons, but whatever they do sticks, it's here for good whether you like it or not, and crumbs like General Heeley are the chocolate soldiers who give it an air of respectability, but science is never respectable, it's the finest revolt ever made against the imprisonment of not knowing, ~~of~~ against just coming on the earth and sticking it like clams, just sittin' and suckin' and dreamin'!'

He laid his hand on mine, 'I guess we're both a couple of poor hicks when you get down to it. You're a hired shyster, and so am I. Listen,' he added, moving closer to me, 'when you look round and think to yourself what kind of a world we've got, the crowds and the stink of automobiles and the whole phoney racket---listen, you don't believe in the racket, you leave that to poops---now is it worth preserving? Wouldn't a damn good blast clear the air a bit, make the universe a better place,

wouldn't it be a piece of real decent apology to God, to just get rid of some of the stink? Is there anything in it you want to preserve, can you say what a nice place the earth is?'

I hesitated, and he interrupted before I could speak again: 'There, you couldn't say yes right on the dot. Because though you want to tell me yes now, you don't mean yes, you don't register yes right deep down, and that's what I mean, Glen, we need the power to blow the whole damn lot to pieces. We all know we'd like to do it in some of our moods, and somehow that stops us, it makes us think.'

'What say to a drink, Glen?' he ~~asked.~~ added suddenly.

'Yes.'

As he got up he ~~added~~ said, 'And take that waistcoat off, you'll fry.' He waited, expecting me to do so. And when I didn't move he said, 'Come on, I'll put it in the bedroom.'

So I took off the waistcoat and handed it to him. 'Come and look at my Rembrandt,' he added.

I followed him and we turned into a large, silent room as hot as the others, if not hotter. One of the bedside lights was on, inside a soft red-silk shade. The curtains reached to the floor very grandly, from the top of tall windows, and were drawn. Louise's dressing table was chaotically full of opened pots and alabaster bowls and sprays. A further door stood ajar, leading to a dressing room. He took me over to a far corner.

'There,' he said, showing me a tiny framed Rembrandt,

The pissing woman. 'How do you like it?'

'Original?'

'Like hell. It's in the Amsterdam museum. But there's not a connoisseur can tell the difference. I've had a couple down from London. The crook made one slip-up. He dated it 1637, and it should be 1631.'

There, under the signature R.E., was the date, 1637.

'It looks to me she isn't only pissing,' he said quietly with a slight guffaw. 'See the dark object in the background?'

'The faker could have put it in.'

'No. It's in the original. Quite a piece of work, eh? I like it in the bedroom. I like to be reminded of what we are, and there's something a little savage in it, don't you think so?'

'No.'

'You don't?'

'No. It's a picture of enjoyment, more. Just simple pleasure. Nothing savage in that.'

'Oh,' he said, stroking his chin for a moment, a little abashed, 'I think it's about one of the most savage little comments on the human creature I've ever seen.'

We walked away past the bed. There were piles of coats there, and to my surprise he began taking them off and hanging them in the wardrobe which was set into one wall, along its whole length.

'You never know,' he murmured, taking out hangers carefully and draping the coats on them. 'People start sprawling about in

the early hours, and a fur can get in a real mess.'

Just as I turned towards the door again, facing the other wall, I saw a crucifix with a little red light under it. I stopped, gasping at what was to me a sudden little piece of Italy. And more: a recollection of something I'd felt I'd forgotten. I mean, the figure of Christ. I stood there trying to recapture a sensation I couldn't even name: and Grigg must have seen this, because he said softly, hanging up the last coat, 'You Catholic?'

I hesitated again, and once more he spoke before I could say a word: 'You don't seem sure about all the things you should be.'

I asked him, 'Are you a Catholic?'

'Yes.'

'Your wife, too?'

'Why, sure.'

And we left the bedroom. He closed the door carefully and quietly.

'Park your arse,' he said as we came to the settee in the corner again, 'and I'll bring you some more fuel.'

I had forgotten the high, roaring wind outside in which I had walked up and down for half an hour. ~~There was no evidence of if here.~~ Only the murmur of talk came from next door, and sometimes a shadow passed softly across the doorway, getting a drink. The talk seemed to be split into groups, and the mutual friction of tones made a hum like a wild song from inside people, where there was no speech; it must be midnight, more perhaps. Whether it really sounded like that I don't know, because I was drunk.

I could think clearly but my ears and eyes told me only what I wanted, and gave me this drowsy background. Probably the talk was quite as before, and everyone was standing up in the same attitudes, and the party would soon come to an end. Grigg appeared in the lighted kitchen doorway again, with the same tray Louise had brought. He stopped, talking softly from the doorway, leaning for a moment against the wall.

'Were you having whisky-and-soda?' he asked me.

'Yes.'

'That's what I thought.' His voice sounded with extraordinary clearness along the hall; which proved how quiet the large room was. He glanced inside as he passed, and nodded to someone, his face changing its creases for a moment from pain to quick embarrassment, which also was lost in a moment.

'Here, pour this down, foul-mouth.'

He winked at me and put the drink immediately by my hand in a movement that suggested sympathetic knowledge of my drunkenness.

'Guess what they're doing in there,' he said.

'What?'

He sat down with a groan and seemed to forget his own remark, then took a sip or two of his whisky.

'Yes,' he said. 'We've got a hell of a world, ~~on our shoulders,~~ and unfortunately guys like you with brains on your shoulders spend your time kicking guys like me instead of buckling down to work. Because there <u>is</u> work to do.' And he took another exhausted sip. He turned to me suddenly, his

creases a few inches from my nose: 'I'll tell you something, Glen. You're in my house because of your foul mouth. You don't mind me saying that?'

'No.'

'I like the truth. You were born with a foul mouth, Glen, and you know how to use it. Well, that's something. Now if you extended your knowledge to the rest of life, you'd have an overall picture instead of a partial one, which most of the nuts and semi-nuts of this world have. Like that kid next door.'

'Which one?'

'The one dressed for a day on the river.'

I couldn't think through to all the guests I'd seen but then tumbled to the fact that he meant the young ginger man. He was the second young ginger man I'd met since arrival at ~~Dover~~ London airport, and I began to doubt that either of them ~~were~~ was true. Merciful that this second one had no beard.

'The one with the beard?' I said.

He looked at me, his creases like magnificent pencil-gashes.

'That's right, and a ring in his nose. Listen, you're as drunk as a rat in a tank, Glen. I'm surprised. A man don't drink on duty.'

'I'm not on duty.'

'Yes? I bet tomorrow's evening edition carries a contradiction. But try and publish the details of <u>this</u> party and, oh, boy----!' He laughed, sitting back in the settee so suddenly that it was like a bang half-way down my spine.

'I gave a ~~shorty~~ quicky in Bremen on the rationalisation of hell----'. He turned to me intimately again: 'I remember you had a go at that in your first column on me.'

'Oh, yes?'

'But it's a serious idea, Glen. When you face up to the fact not just that we're in hell, but that we've got to sort it out and make it liveable, you'll be a contemporary of mine, not before. It's no ~~going~~ good just saying it's hell. We all know that. In fact,' he added, taking my arm with a strong grip and putting his face close to me again, 'I wonder if you really know how hellish it is?'

'I bet I don't.'

'I bet you don't, too.' For a moment there was complete silence in the flat, as if everybody was waiting for a speech to be made.

'Thing I always wanted to ask you,' I said in this silence, my voice lowered. 'Has that thing called the domesday machine been invented? Some people say it has. The thing that blows the whole earth up in one go.'

The silence went on, and at first I thought he wasn't going to answer. ~~I certainly sounded drunk.~~

'Could be.' He was looking straight ahead of him. 'It's the kind of thing even I can't know about. The rumours they put out could be deliberate ones. And they could be real. I can only tell you one thing----and, by the way, this is no

revelation because I wrote it in Afterwards---that everything we know would lead logically to that. I mean, it was the obvious deduction from a whole set of premises which I know have long been in the bag. I don't know if someone has drawn the obvious deduction and produced the thing. But the deduction could---at terrific expense, really staggering expense---have been drawn without much more thinking. And to repeat something else I said in Afterwards, if I had the decision as to whether to make it or not, I'd say yes.'

'You'd make it?'

'Yes. Because it would end war for all time. It would be the one threat no one could gainsay, Glen. It would give us the total responsibility, too. Total.'

'But suppose somebody else produces it? Then two people have got total responsibility.'

'But the threat's the same. It means we've educated others to develop the weapon, therefore we have an increasing number of total threats against anybody who steps out of line.'

'It's a novel definition of education,' I said.

'It's education to hell.'

'Well,' I said, raising my glass, 'here's to hell.'

He nodded with a vague smile, his mind still working. At that moment the Englishman, or the man I thought was English, came out of the sitting room and went down the corridor. He too had his jacket off. His footsteps made no sound on the floor, and I realised that he was without his shoes as well.

I nudged Grigg. 'Is that chap walking in his socks?' I asked in a whisper.

He made a light chuckle and murmured, 'Could be.' Then he called out softly to the figure on its way to the lavatory, 'How does it go, Charles, boy?'

The other man didn't turn or pause, only said, 'Couldn't be better, Jeff.' And the lavatory-door closed behind him.

'Is he English?' I asked.

Grigg nodded. '~~He~~ owns this flat.'

'Embassy?'

He looked at me. 'Embassy? I wouldn't have embassy people here. Leastways not after eight in the evening. No, Defence. Defence of your leisure and pleasure, Glen.'

'One of your lackies.'

'More a give-and-take.' He gave me a hard look this time, with his chin thrust forward as before, and the frown low over his eyes, as if to secure my lip-service for a fiction neither of us believed. 'He's got the tradition, we've got the power.'

I looked back at him as steadily as the whisky allowed and said, 'Are you sure about the tradition?'

'He's a friend of mine. A damned good friend.' The would-be hard look continued.

'As Charles says no to nearly everything I suggest, he's not exactly a yes-man.'

'But where does he come in? I mean, ~~with~~ about lectures on hell?' I asked.

'He likes to tap my brain, I need his.'

'Why do you need his?'

'Let's say I need his co-operation.'

'What, as a lecturer?'

'Listen,' he said with a grim smile, 'I don't know if this interview is your editor's concoction or not, I know he was enrolled in the communist party for eight years, but you could get your hands burned, boy, and I wouldn't like that.'

He said it mildly. And I took it with surprising mildness. It was like arriving at a bargain. He had shown me the frontier to which I could go and no further and I, with more sense of self-preservation than I had ever credited myself with, concurred.

After a long pause during which the Englishman returned from the lavatory and went back to the big room with deliberate steadiness, only touching the wall briefly to keep on his feet, not once glancing at us, I said, 'Who did you say was in the communist party?'

'Your editor.'

'I haven't got an editor.'

'We've got a dossier on him that thick.' He indicated the rim of his glass.

'Who's we?'

He stared before him glumly. 'I guess I'm drunk now too.'

'You don't have to worry about me remembering any of this,' I told him. 'I'm drunk too.'

I raised my glass at him and said, 'You're down to the rocks, dad. Get yourself a re-fuel.'

He raised himself up slowly, as if aching all over, and murmured, taking up our glasses, 'I guess I'd better put the heating up.'

'What? You mean down!'

'You've still got your shoes on.' He moved away heavily.

'Why not?' I called after him.

'Take 'em off. Everybody else has. Rule of the party.'

He looked in at the big room, swaying and bent forward, his wrinkles like thick brush marks now in the dim light, and I heard him say, 'How's folks for drinks, Lou?' And I heard her answer, 'Fine. Hey, Jeff, don't you think it's kind of chilly?'

'Just what I had in mind.' And he went on to the kitchen.

I leaned forward with one hand on the coffee table and made several tries to undo my shoelaces. I hummed ~~to myself~~ softly. I had a moment's illusion of being in Italy, and of ~~being~~ feeling relieved to ~~sit apart from the main body so as not to have to talk Italian.~~ be sitting alone and not talking Italian. Then I realised it wasn't in Italy. Just then Louise slipped quietly out of the room in her stockinged feet and went towards the bedroom, past me. I only looked up after she had draped something over my head---its sudden quaint touch made me jump out of my skin.

'What the hell's that?' I put my hand up and found it was

a kind of stiff lace, and I touched a tiny buckle. I took it down, with her standing at my side, and found it was a white brassiere. I laughed and she made a pale smile, looking less robust than before.

'You can keep it as a memento,' she said. 'I'm glad you're making out with Jeff,' she added, walking on to the bedroom behind me.

'Who's is this?' I said, holding it in front of me.

'Looks like my wife's,' Grigg said, coming out of the kitchen with two drinks at that moment.

He put the drinks down as Louise disappeared into the bedroom, and handed me something small on a string.

'You two keep handing me things,' I said blearily. I looked at the object and found it was a disc with a number on it, 49. 'What's this for?'

'It's your number tag.'

'I see.'

'You'll find your sack in the cloakroom.'

'My sack?'

He sat down heavily and made a scowl sideways, without looking me in the eyes.

'Sack. Sack.' And he said no more, taking his glass and with a quick push taking a gulp of whisky.

I had given up work on my shoes, and took a sip too.

There was more noise next door and one of the guests did the same as the Englishman had done a few minutes before, steadying

himself on the wall.

'Watch it, Vance,' Grigg said with a chuckle.

The man was dressed in some sort of white jacket. As Louise had just switched out another light I couldn't see exactly, but when he was on his way back and there was the muffled roar of the lavatory cistern I had a harder look and saw to my astonishment that it wasn't a jacket at all but a white undershirt, short-sleeved with a round neck. That he too was without his shoes seemed quite ordinary to me. I took another drink and again set to work on my shoes, feeling that having them on was getting to be odd.

'What do I need a sack for?'

'Oh, can it, Glen. You know the rules as well as I do.' This was spoken in such a familiar way that it made me feel warmly included in the party, and I said no more, only sipped happily, my shoeless feet stretched out and twitching, my bare elbows---I had rolled up my sleeves like Jeff, putting my cuff-links in my hip pocket---on the table, and my tie, like Grigg's, loosened.

'You actually put the heating up?' I said.

'I actually did,' he replied with a yawn. 'You know, Glen---' A 'phone bell rang from the bedroom and was quickly answered by Louise. She kicked the door lightly closed with her stockinged foot before replying.

I looked at Grigg, waiting for him to go on. But his ears were straining towards the bedroom.

Someone laughed next door, and a woman giggled in a most sympathetic way. I told myself what a difference this was from those Neapolitan conversazioni I was sometimes obliged to attend, where you moved from chair to chair until you'd talked nonsense with everyone in the room, then you left, with two small cognacs inside you. Louise's voice was unheard. Then she opened the door.

'It's for you, Glen,' she said softly.

'For me?'

'Don't sound so surprised. They probably want your story.'

Grigg turned to me quickly. 'Mind what I said, Glen.'

'Like to come and listen?' I asked him, getting up.

'I will at that.' And he got up too, following me to the bedroom.

I found I still had Louise's bra in my hand. She was sitting at the dressing table doing her hair with that strange slow movement only unfaithful women have, as if each strand is a plot. Grigg sat on the bed, making it sag tremendously, and I answered the 'phone. It was Palermo.

He didn't say who he was, only, 'How's it going?'

'All right.'

'I hear you're staying the night,' he said quietly.

'Yes?'

'She's got you a hotel room. Accept it.'

'Thanks.'

I heard Grigg say to his wife, leaning forward so that the

bed nearly tipped me over, 'Sounds like a code. What craps you pick up with, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'I'm married to a crap,' she said quietly and firmly, 'so I got used to it.'

He made a disgusted noise and I heard Palermo say, 'Somebody's put a carpet in your room. A Mr. Parsons. You seem to have influence.'

'A carpet?'

'Listen, take the first train back in the morning, unless he murders you, and I'll have the contract ready.'

'You had it ready yesterday.'

'No, I'll have the advance ready.'

I decided to accept this as normal, and said nothing. Grigg yawned and got up. He looked down at me for a few seconds, then left the room. She turned and winked at me, still slowly drawing a brush through her hair.

'He didn't leave a bill?' I asked.

'No.'

Louise turned and looked at me for a long time, her brushing stopped.

He lowered his voice. 'Is she still there?'

'Yes.'

'Listen, Glen, get the old man to a party of mine tomorrow night.'

'A party where?'

'Lou knows all about it. He won't come on my invitation.

He's watching her like a hawk.'

'He's watching me too.'

'Get him to that party, eight-fifteen at the club for drinks, dinner at the 1810, and if you don't you won't get that advance.'

'What are you going to do with him when you get him there?'

'Fix him up with a nice girl.'

He rang off at once, not saying good bye.

'Well,' Louise said, turning to her mirror again, 'it sounded like the closest code in the service.'

Grigg had ~~closed~~ shut the door and this gave me the chance to say to her in a low voice, 'He wants your husband at a party tomorrow night.'

'So do I,' she said in an ordinary voice. 'There's nothing mysterious about that.'

'He makes everything sound mysterious.'

'Oh, come off it, Glen,' she said, flicking a hand at me in the rudest way, ordering me out of the bedroom.

I returned to the settee and found Grigg there staring at the table. There was much more noise in the other room and it seemed that a sort of performance was going on, as there were claps and appreciative sighs.

'Well,' he said, 'did you hand in your story?'

I didn't answer this, only drained my glass.

'Tell you something,' he went on, 'can't face any of these people tonight. I'd rather stay with my enemy.'

And he looked me straight in the eyes.

'You're all mixed up in it together, that bitch as well---' He made a movement of his head towards the bedroom.

'You know, I like you. You're such a damned crook I'm not

sure you haven't made hell your home as thoroughly as I have.' Then he said, 'Here, we're behind. Come on.'

With a hand on my shoulder he took me down to a kind of cloakroom, ~~which was~~ a dark, windowless place, just short of the lavatory, and when he switched on the light I saw not only overcoats on hooks but white canvas sacks hanging side by side each with a number-tag like the one he'd given me. I stood in the doorway while he peered at them and felt some of them to see what had been put in. And I watched his rather hunched, tall back, that seemed so long, blocking the light like an enormous statue.

'Gimme your shoes.'

'I left them under the table,' I said.

He still peered at the sacks, going slowly along the wall.

'Here, damn it, can you read the numbers? I need my glasses.'

'What are they for?' But he looked at me impatiently and I read off the first number: 'Thirty-seven.'

'I'm in the twenties. What are you?'

'Forty-nine.'

'Well, you're up there, close to the door. Well,' he added, peering into his sack, 'son-of-a-bitch if somebody hasn't put his shoes in mine. That kind of thing takes a whole night to work out, and my experience is it's like a running sore.'

'What's it for?'

'Ah, come on, Glen, chuck your boots in and let's have your shirt.'

'My shirt?'

'Like this, crumb.' And he took off his shirt; after sweeping out the strange shoes and putting his own in, he carefully folded the shirt and laid it on top.

'You've already got my waistcoat,' I said.

'You mean vest.'

'I've got my vest on.'

'Like hell you have,' he said, staring at me. 'You're in your shirtsleeves, two-timer. Do you have to lie about everything?' He made a leering smile in the dim light and swayed perilously.

'I've got a vest under my shirt,' I said.

'Yeah, and I've got an overcoat under my trousers.' We both started laughing, and Louise came in at that moment.

'Well, isn't this nice,' she said, 'I thought I'd never see the day when you two'd be club pals.'

'Come in, honey,' he said in a throaty voice, with unexpected intimacy, still smiling. 'These English people insist on calling their vests waistcoats, and he starts telling me he's wearing his waistcoat under his shirt, believe it or not.'

'You're drunk.' She came further into the dark cloakroom, and said, 'Come on, Jeff. They're screaming for us.'

'O.K., O.K., I can't be rushed. I don't even know how to stand. Honest, Lou.'

She said nothing but to my rapt astonishment unbuttoned her dress and slipped out of it. She folded it carefully and slipped it into a sack. It was number twenty-three. I thought she was going to change into another dress but instead she took her petticoat off and was suddenly naked except for stockings and girdle. She had jettisoned her bra on to me, I remembered, and the knickers must have gone to someone else.

'Come on,' she said to me as I stood there with an idiotic smile on my face, 'you're behind.'

'Seems to me, Lou, nobody briefed this guy, else he's playing dumb.'

She began loosening her stockings from the girdle, and Grigg started taking his trousers off.

It seemed to me as I watched them with my mouth open, that the entire Anglo-Saxon race had nothing better to do than take its clothes off. At least, it seemed to happen a hell of a lot.

'He's always playing something,' Louise said, giving me a glance upwards as she took the second stocking off. 'He'll be telling us that this is his first one next!'

'First what?' I said.

'There, listen to him!'

Grigg chuckled, folding his trousers carefully, 'I reckon he's smarter than his boss.'

'That's what his boss says,' Lou told him, lowering her girdle and stretching its elastic down over her knees.

Grigg answered this in a snarling voice: 'Well, you ought to know.'

She looked smaller than usual now she was in the nude but her robustness was even more striking. She had strong shoulders and her breasts hadn't sagged, because she carried herself so well, her back quite straight from her neck to the base of her spine. Only her stomach was slightly rounder and larger than it should be for her height, but this increased the sense of robustness. Grigg was down to a pair of underpants now, showing a hairy chest and hips much more youthful and fragile than one would expect. Where Lou protruded in the stomach he had put it on in the back, so that his spine curved slightly and made him seem bent forward all the time. The lines of his face were at complete contrariness with his body, which was as smooth and unblemished as a girl's, except for the dark hairs. Now, with both of them naked before me, my being clothed began to seem obscene.

I went on smiling at them. 'Am I supposed to do this too?'

Grigg turned to her for the answer. 'How are the rest?'

'Well,' Lou said to me as she passed on the way to the door, a hot, intimate air coming from her skin, 'I should stay like that for the moment.'

And Grigg followed her. The lights outside had been turned down even further, and it was now so hot that I wanted to strip

off just for the comfort. The big room was much more crowded than I had thought while sitting outside. There were people on the floor, and sprawled on the two settees. Some were sitting on the arms of chairs. I could see the Englishman. He was down to his vest or---as most of the guests would say---undershirt, now. And all the men were the same. Only one was still in his shirt. But he'd taken his trousers off. His underpants gleaned from the floor. The women were in all states. Some had pulled their dresses down and were showing their breasts. Others had simply taken their shoes and stockings off. How they had done all this, and deposited their belongings in the sacks, without me noticing, puzzled me utterly. I stared from one person to the next, and took a seat on the floor as far from the blazing fire as I could. The young man with ginger hair was nowhere to be seen. A great sigh went up when Lou and Grigg appeared. I tried as best I could not to stare at the half-nude women, but then as Lou and Grigg began to dance I became accustomed to them, and even lay back comfortably against the wall, my eyes half closed, asking for no explanation. Some of them were most clearly complete strangers, from the way they passed each other cigarettes, or offered the canapè tray which was still half-full. One thing I could never have expected---that the room with this invasion of semi-nudeness had become more gentle. Even, a certain innocence had entered it. The slurring American accents sounded kindly and humbled. The Englishman was in his seventh heaven, leaning against one of the women, his smile so broad and

delighted that it seemed designed for an even fatter face. One of the half-nude women looked down at her own breasts reflectively for a moment, then smiled at a man. It wasn't that sexuality was bypassed as that it was excited to a complete new equality, which couples normally achieve only in privacy. Grigg wasn't handsome at all, especially in this dim light and the flickering flames, which made him look rough and odd in silhouette: but the equality drew in everything, and made it feasible for sex, so long as it was warm flesh.

Their first movements, I mean, those of Grigg and his wife, were like those of a ballroom dance, except that they only touched each other lightly with one hand, half-turned towards the audience, her bosom shining luminously pale in the dimness while the hairs of his chest made a swaying dark patch at her side. There was nothing impersonal about it. They smiled and talked to everybody, and took suggestions---'Turn right round,' 'At a boy, let's see that hip, Jefferson,' 'Oh, Lou, they're pointing right at me.' I seemed to have missed an essential experience in my years abroad, as ~~most of~~ all these people ~~seemed to know~~ knew exactly how to behave: their remarks had a professional smoothness. And others ~~said things~~ made under their breath, little exclamations---'Jeese...', 'Hey, Lou, girl!', 'Wow, it's hurting me!', and then, urgently, from one of the men, 'Git, git, Jeff!' I looked across at the man who said this but from his expression, which was fascinated and yet gentle, you couldn't tell what he meant. And Grigg only smiled in his direction and did another turn, holding Lou's

hands. Now and then she made a slight jump so that her bosom wobbled, and then there was a real appreciative groan. It struck me suddenly through my drunkenness that the strangest thing about this was that there was no music. You could hear the soles of their feet brush on the carpet, and their breathing, and sometimes a slight stamp of a heel, and the smack of one of their hands against the other's thigh or hip. Really it was no dance at all, just a few movements holding hands, and when one of the men got up and joined them, first taking off his clothes, I saw what it was designed to do. The dance was a kind of pretext to unclothe completely. Then a woman walked up to them and joined hands, after slipping her skirt off and leaving it on the floor. I heard one of the other women say, 'Believe it or not, I've lost my tag.' Those who heard her laughed, and encouraged by this she called out to Grigg, 'Your organisation's breaking down, boss!' She seemed to be a person of some influence as he smiled politely in her direction, and Lou did the same. So far she had only taken off her dress and high-heeled shoes, leaving a petticoat in black and a gold-leaf necklace that clung tight to her neck. She was perhaps the oldest of the women and the others seemed to attribute to her a certain position and authority. The skin of her neck was dry and slightly wrinkled, but her plump shoulders had such a smoothness that the cares of her life seemed to have concentrated above them in her face ---the ravage had been committed by other people's gazes. I realised I was sitting next to a man who was still in his shirt: and his shoes were at his side, neatly

placed together.

'You're behind,' I said to him, nodding towards his shirt.

He looked at me slowly. Then he yawned, and answered in a slow, polished voice, 'I guess I'm off the game tonight.'

But he began taking off his shirt just the same. I saw the Englishman get up and thread his way between the others. I thought he was going to dance, but instead he left the room again.

The man who had joined Grigg and Lou was taller than either of them: in fact, he was the tallest man in the room. I found ~~that~~ it ~~was~~ impossible to guess from his nakedness what he was---- military, academic, diplomatic. He could even have been one of the younger peasants in the vineyards near mine, except for his stoop and the consequent caved-in chest. I watched him, focussing hard, sometimes keeping one eye closed so as to get a better picture. It was amazing how much accidental grace he and Grigg had: they danced on their toes, or rather they walked and trotted round each other, making the most unashamedly feminine movements. I looked round in the dim light. No hard yet frightened eyes. No over-casualness springing from tension. They were all authorities of some kind. Or perhaps my drunk eyes made them so. Not at all like those parties in Naples which had made me avoid American company for years, and lost me a quarter of my business. These people before me had the ~~real~~ ease of people confirmed in power. They reminded me of English officers as they had once been----the brigadiers and lieutenant-generals and corps-commanders, at the time of the last years of

colonial India, when the sun had not yet quite set in these faces, and the investments had become not quite valueless, and a pleasant, ungrudging magnanimity still soothed and shone its way onto their faces. I remembered how they lit their cigarettes, lifted themselves with healthy agility onto motor-cycles, stood in messes drinking their tea: I remembered the comfortable drone of their voices, their flushed cheeks and those same unashamed feminine---only we had grown up to think of them as feminine---movements being made at this moment by two naked men in front of me. Something of the glow had passed into these men perhaps, sealed and doomed by something indelibly German, which had been transmitted subtly and invisibly by Hitler: a lesson here---not to defeat your enemy too thoroughly.

I saw the older woman lean sideways in a familiar way and show her bracelet to someone whose bare shoulders only were visible to me. And I thought I heard her say with a chuckle, '<u>That's</u> not going in the sack!' The three dancers were beckoning to others on the floor to join them, and I wondered that they felt no sense of ridiculousness---the only thing that would have made them look ridiculous. Their hands were joined delicately, and the new tall man was smiling down at Lou while she moved close to him for a moment, her nipples protruding so that they seemed to be directed at him. As for his sexual interest, and Grigg's, the effect was of something gently participating, without need for satisfaction. Lou looked down every now and then, and I was reminded for a moment of the smile I had seen many times on

Etruscan and early Greek heads. Several times she touched them with a swiftly passing hand, and this was noticed mostly by the women. But the remarks were nearly all from the men. The Englishman came back---stark naked this time. He suddenly appeared in the doorway like a tomb-frieze in Cerveteri, except that his skin was very white, contrasting with the bad flush of his face. His body too had a fragile and well-kept look, but he had allowed his stomach too much leeway over the years, and when he walked further into the room you could see that his flesh hung thickly round his hips, at the back. His legs were little exercised, as if he'd driven too much in a car. But his skin had a pleasant fineness, and his smile gave the rest of his body an unashamed youthfulness: all his mistakes had been towards the sensuous. He threaded his way back among the sitters, with some applause for his new state. He showed no sexual interest until he sat down next to one of the women with only a skirt on, and then it quickened, as he glanced in her direction. No drinks were at present going round. People seemed to have forgotten them. Where I'd left my glass I couldn't remember.

Grigg wouldn't let the Englishman sit peacefully. 'Charles,' he called out, 'come on, do your stuff.' And reluctantly, with a smile at the woman next to him, the Englishman got up and threaded his way back, and joined hands with the others. This was something more for Lou to be interested in, and she watched him with a smile. The tall man called out to the rest, 'We need more women,' to which Lou at once said, 'Hell, we don't! I'm having a <u>whale</u> of a time!', with a laugh that made Grigg look at her with

an interest so fierce and galvanising that I was surprised she didn't shrink under it. But it seemed to stimulate her. She wobbled more, and pushed her hips against the tall man until he too showed more than his former interest. One of the young women in the opposite corner whom I didn't remember to have seen before got up deliberately, took off her blouse and skirt, laid them on the head of the man sitting next to her, and slipped off her petticoat, standing at his side naked for a moment while a little applause was drawn, and then joined the others. Now there was little or no real dancing. They simply shuffled about near the fire holding hands, taking more and more interest in each other. I watched the man on whom skirt and blouse had been draped get up and with a look at his sack-tag leave the room. The woman to whom they belonged was a little taller than Lou, and she was so thick in the middle that I wondered if she was awaiting a baby. She hardly moved, but drew the others round her, her face quite still and her lips pursed, as if doing something that required thought. Gradually the men were drawn close to her, almost to the exclusion of Lou, but a crisis of jealousy was prevented by Grigg, who with a little pressure engineered Charles the Englishman towards his own wife so that there were for a moment two groups. This seemed to be the chance for a new kind of dancing--- clasped closer together, in the ballroom style. The tall man, the Englishman and Lou were suddenly together in a close group that moved little, only swayed, their heads close, and Grigg and the other woman did a conventional kind of two-step, so close

together that she was hidden by his shoulders. There was more noise in the room now, some taut had been broken, and several others got up to change. The man who had gone out with skirt and blouse returned as naked as his woman-friend, and he too joined the dancing, going to Lou's group, making it three men to one woman now. The older woman with the bracelet also rose, and I saw her carefully take off the rest of her clothes and even let down her grey hair, which came to the middle of her back. This drew Grigg's polite attention, and there was a sycophantic little sigh of appreciation from one of the sitting guests. She joined the Lou group, which now split up into two, with her and the tall man together, and Lou with the remaining two. More space was required for the dancing, and people had to get up from the floor, which decided them on taking off their clothes. There was soon nearly a minority of clothed people. I saw the dark young woman Myra join the dancers without a word---her body was as tight and muscular as an athlete's, with the bosom of a girl, not a mother. She swayed about with her eyes closed, and I had the impression that she was looking at things in the darkness of her vision that we others had no idea of. She seemed to be following something spectacular and stirring behind her closed lids, ad every now and then a faint smile passed over her lips, making them twitch slightly. Yet she moved carefully, and her body seemed quite aware of the contact it was making with the two men dancing with her: only it existed for itself, not for them, which made her more brazen than the other women, her hips pushed forward, rolling, though

without great sexuality. In fact, those with most sexual interest were the stillest and least demonstrative. They simply, like Lou and the older woman with grey hair, smiled and watched and moved gently, talking and nodding in a polite way. The man next to me moved and I realised it was my turn too, unless I was going to make an exhibition of myself by remaining dressed. I followed the queue towards the cloakroom, and looked again at my tag number. This, by the way, was worn by most of the naked guests round the neck, or secured to the wrist, and while I was waiting in the hall for the cloakroom to clear I hung mine round my neck. There was an intimate smell of sweat as people passed, and I strolled back to the settee where Grigg and I had sat, and took a sip of my drink which was still there on the table. The noise from the main room was quite deafening now. It seemed an ordinary dancing evening, except that there was no music. Once or twice there was the sound of a kiss. A buttock was slapped, and there was a chuckle of laughter.

In a most strange way sexual contact seemed unthinkable, not tactless but unwarranted and irrelevant. This movement to and fro seemed enough. Perhaps it was the drink that did this. Sometimes a couple----a man and woman who seemed unknown to each other----kissed as they passed, and their bodies showed a quickened sexual interest, but that was all. It was a new experience for me which I could never have predicted. I noticed that my interest quickened and died with the close proximity of a woman, as she brushed past me for a moment; or it might be through some-

thing one of them said. We talked to each other constantly. Nakedness, far from being a stripping of the veils of self, was the most complete mask ever devised. People were no longer faces---staring eyes---questioning brows: they were their whole selves, so that while they lost any intimidating quality they found a dignity ~~that~~ which clothed people never achieved. If concupiscence was written on one or two faces at the beginning, there was none now.

There was also a cancelling-out of attraction. One person rarely seemed prettier than another. In fact, a woman's attractive face was once or twice belied by the unreadiness of her body: something in her haunches and bosom that hadn't surrendered to the pleasures of contact but had clung to self. A less striking woman, on the other hand---dumpy, with fat haunches and a thick, lined smile, with no suggestion of erotic pleasures in her face, showed them dumbly in her body, so that the experience written in her face became suddenly irrelevant and superficial. The stupendous irrelevance of half our public values became clear to me: I saw how far we were from any appreciation of the realities. That women had been allowed to become pretty was proof of the blindness. In a moment, with nakedness, the carefully practised vanities fell away, showing a sex unfitted for narcissism, but on the contrary strong and frank.

As I looked round I found that the faces which had interested me earlier no longer did so, and others I couldn't remember having seen kept drawing my attention. Another surprise for me was the

sheer number of people. Either Grigg's whisky had been very strong or else I had been in too numbed and nervous a state to notice people coming in. There were also guests in the dining room, from ~~the~~ which the table had been cleared. I wondered where the Irish cook had been sent. Unless she was one of the naked bodies. It was stifling now and sweat was running down my upper lip. Standing in the corridor just outside the cloakroom I slipped off my vest and leaned my bare back against the wall, yawning. The woman in front of me turned and said quietly, 'That's a good idea.' She had taken off her shoes and stockings but nothing else, and now she unbuttoned her dress and pulled it over her head with my help. 'Thanks,' she said, while I took the dress from her. Her black bra clipped at the back, so I had to help her there too.

'I'd do the same for you,' she said pleasantly. 'It's certainly some heat.'

I handed her clothes back to her, plus my vest, and then took off my trousers and underpants. She showed as much interest in my revealed parts as I had in hers, and we both gave evidence of the mutual interest.

'What's your name?' she asked as the queue moved on.

'Glen.'

'Mine's Nancy.'

We smiled at each other and I took all the clothes back from her.

'What's your number?' I asked her.

'Oh, the tag's in my----' She took the number-tag out of a tiny pocket enclosed somehow in her bra, and said with a smile, 'Cute idea, don't you think? Good place for letters. They never dare look there.'

The tag was forty-seven and I remarked, 'Two numbers away from me.'

'That's cosy.'

We ~~found~~ traced our way between naked bodies into the dark cloak-room and I found myself guiding her by the arm to the hooks, then ~~it~~ my arm was round her waist, and this seemed the most natural thing in the world.

Our bags were empty, by a miracle, seeing the number of people milling about, and we put our clothes in. I again guided her through the crowd, this time with my arm involuntarily lower down, so that my hand rested comfortably on the base of her spine.

I asked her, 'Known the Griggs long?'

'My husband's in the same line as Jeff.'

'Nuclear physics?'

'Well, more the actual experiments.' And she smiled at me pleasantly, while we joined the so-called dancers and began shuffling round together, at first touching only slightly, then drawing ~~a~~ closer until I had my arm round her again, making cool sweat on our skins. All the time we gazed round at the others. Once, when there was a crush of dancers round us, we kissed, but again as the most natural thing in the world, without the slightest personal overtones. A public kiss----of the kind going

on all round us. It reminded me of the way people kissed in my childhood; even strangers kissed you straight on the lips, then.

How much time we spent doing this, moving slowly from one end of the room to the other---for now the whole room was being used---I had no idea. Sometimes I thought I saw dawn peeping behind the curtains, but it always turned out to be light reflected from the fire. When we were in the middle of the room, talking to each other in quiet monosyllables about the different little pleasures of life, how often and how long, Lou passed, still with two men in tow, and after a surprised look at us said to Nancy, 'You've got him, right there---the guy I was telling you about!' Nancy looked at her, then me.

'What?' she said. 'The Tongue?'

Lou nodded and gave her a slight warning look---for her to be careful, so it seemed to me.

We had now separated slightly and were only clasped by one arm. She smiled at me placidly again and said, 'You're a low-down son of a bitch, from what I hear.'

I smiled back, 'It isn't true.'

'I don't care what they say about you, I like the way you dance.'

We were just about to clasp each other in the close dancing position again when with a completely involuntary but common movement our right hands went between us, hidden, instead of round each other, visible. And with our hands laid on each other in this way, we went on dancing. I looked round to see if

others were doing this, and saw that in one or two cases they were, but with the difference that they were doing it visibly, their hands quite still, with an innocent look of inactivity. Again we kissed and our hands began to move slightly. But the drink secured us against any great involvement, and we went on moving in the semblance of a dance, and talking---again about different pleasures.

'Why they let you in,' she said suddenly, with a slight squeeze, 'I don't know. This room must be hot with secrets.'

'I thought I was a friend of theirs.'

'They have none.' She looked me in the eyes, again with her placid smile. 'They're on the make, like you.'

'Does your husband have secrets?' I asked.

She gave me a long questioning look and said, 'I wonder if I'd trust you with your clothes on.' Then another squeeze.

'He's got the F.B.I. to keep him warm, honey,' she murmured, close to me.

'Are there F.B.I. men in this room?' I asked her.

'Well, what do you think? Where secrets go, they go too.'

Some people were beginning to sit down, as if the dancing had only been a ceremony of initiation. There was a movement towards the door in which we all became involved, and we were soon among several other couples, the touch of the men angular and that of the women soft, and always with the pleasing fineness of naked skin. Grigg and the tall man were together in the corridor outside and there was a murmur of 'Food.' Looking back into the room I saw an untidy mass of cushions on the floor and armchairs turned sideways, with

the carpets rucked up in places. Little smoking had been done during the dancing. But one man had a cigar on now, and kept it stuck in the corner of his mouth inclined upwards as a precaution. He recognised another male for the first time and said to him through half-closed lips, making smoke drift up with every word, 'Why, hullo, Shepherd----week-end run?' I couldn't see the other man, but the answer drifted towards me, 'On the way to Germany----just stopping off. How's the kids?' 'Oh, fine,' uttered the big man with a kind of final scowl, and blew a huge cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, before turning to the woman at his side and saying, 'Chicken sandwich, honey?'

Many people had drifted into the dining room, where they stood about with empty plates, waiting for the food to come in. Grigg seemed to be looking after this, with the tall man. The bedroom was full too, mostly of smokers, sitting on the bed and some on the floor, their bodies made dark and rosy by the dim light. I stood in the corridor, separated from my partner. The Englishman was in a dark corner with the grey-haired woman, and I saw her bracelet twinkle like copper on his shoulder for a moment. People were getting tired. A man near the cloakroom door leaned ~~tiredly on~~ wearily towards the woman at his side and without saying anything to her kissed her in the bosom, which didn't even make her turn round. One couple was left in the big room, playing and joking. I saw Myra for a moment, blindly going to the dining room, touching every person she passed with a light hand, on the shoulder, the buttock, the stomach. Now it really must be

near dawn. I yawned and so did the person next to me. It seemed that the exertions of nudity had made us hungry, and people now gave little evidence of interest in each other, apart from the Englishman and his hidden partner.

The sandwiches had just arrived from the kitchen, wheeled by Grigg, when I felt a touch on my back and turned to see Lou.

'Come and sit down,' she said, and led me towards the same settee where Grigg and I had sat. 'Well, how do you like the party?'

'Fine.'

'Nancy's a great girl, isn't she?'

'Yes.'

She peered meaningfully into my eyes for a moment in the dimness, just as we lowered ourselves into the velvety seat, and said in a hushed voice, 'You haven't been 'phoning your boss, have you? I mean, your editor?'

'No!'

'You'll be good, huh?' She took my arm and put it in hers so that the by now familiar cool sweat started between our skins and my hand that lay passively on one of her legs.

She went on looking at me, half with pity and half fear: and I began to feel uncomfortable under her gaze.

'Yes,' she said, 'you're quite a guy. I suppose you know all about me now?'

'No, not exactly.'

'Well, I'm in further than I like to admit.' Before I could ask questions about this she said, 'He told me about some of your side-activities too.' And she laughed to herself, a slightly appalled laugh.

'Who's he?'

'Well, the one and only. I guess he needs somebody like you---he's not all <u>that</u> immoral, but he'd like to be. You're quite a pair.' She looked at me squarely: 'Is it true you work for a male chaperone outfit, Glen?'

'But he sent me! I didn't know what it was---there was this mad woman---!'

'No, no, she's not mad, Glen,' Lou said firmly, gripping my leg where legs hurt, just above the knee, 'he introduced me to her a couple of nights ago at the club and she's quite a girl. I found she has a sense of humour, too. Oh, she's had a tough time. Girls like her shouldn't marry crooks, just for the kicks. But she's on the level herself. I'd say she was about one of the most quietly gifted people I'd met in a long time.'

'Jean de Lisle Swiburne?' I asked.

'That's it.'

'But she's mad.'

Lou nodded and smiled. 'And she says you're <u>bad</u>! By her account you were too. No, Glen, your smears just don't stick. There's some truth in the world, and I think the truth wins out in the end.' She patted my knee. 'That'll be to your advantage later on. Because you won't be able to live on smears all your

life.'

I said nothing to this and we sat there watching the others pass in the corridor, eating, laughing quietly in the dimness, their buttocks shining.

'Listen, Glen, do you want to know why you're here tonight?' she asked me suddenly.

'Yes, I wondered.'

Again she studied me. 'There's not one card the devil ever offered you that you haven't played, is there? But it isn't that. There are plenty of smear reporters, and procurers, and male whores. I realised, by the way, that you procured me for John Palermo. You were dead right. I was just the type and my legs went weak the minute I clapped eyes on him.'

'Who told you that?' My state was a strange one, chilled and clear, whereas it should have been indignant and frightened. But I had become so removed from myself that any reference to me was like statistics. Only in appraisal afterwards would they mean something.

'Listen, Glen,' she said again, pulling me with an ever so slight hug closer to her, 'there isn't a thing I haven't wheedled out of Palermo. A woman has a right to that. Now he got a neat description of me the morning after you came to dinner. From <u>you</u>. It enflamed his fancy, he said, and he used those words. That's the smoothest procuring job anybody could imagine. Of course he's no better. As I say, you belong to each other.'

My partner Nancy walked past with a drink, unaccompanied, and

Lou said to her quietly, in such a way as to keep her at a distance, 'Hi, Nance.'

'He asked me if you were attractive and I said yes, that's all,' I told her.

'No. He looked at you with a leer in his eyes, a leer you've known for a long time, and all you had to do was nod. That's what happened.' As a matter of fact, I remembered him doing exactly that: and myself doing exactly that. I just looked at her sideways, mute, with as perplexed an expression as I had ever had on my face. And all she said, after studying my expression in the dark light, was, 'And you don't even look sorry.'

'I can't tell when your legs are going to go weak. I can't predict it.'

'That's just what I think you can do. I don't know what it is, Glen, perhaps it's something old and ancient in you that we Americans are too damned innocent to know anything about.'

I stared miserably at the bare white buttocks in front of us, moving towards the dining room.

'Well,' she said, 'I never told you why you were here. It's because one look at you tells anybody with the slightest power of judgement that you're none of these things, not a smear reporter or a procurer or a male whore.'

I looked at her hopefully, and had a sense of God's mercy, which suddenly descends on men.

But she went on, 'You're playing with these things. You're playing big stakes. I don't know what they are and neither does

Grigg. But you're no small man. A look at you tells everybody that.'

'It makes me supremely diabolical,' I said.

'You couldn't have put it better. And that's why you're here. At first we thought you'd make a friend.'

We were still arm in arm, close together.

'I suppose it's hopeless to try,' she said. 'I'd like to try. Frankly, you scare me. Not because you look scarey, but because you don't. That's why it's so uncanny. I feel exactly like that girl with the funny name---we talked about you for a couple of hours!'

'You did?'

'She wondered if you had a feeling in your body. She said you seemed in your seventh heaven just mocking and pulling somebody down all the time.'

'Is that what I did to her?'

'The whole evening! Now if she's a liar, she speaks with great conviction, that's all I can say. You had her crying out for mercy, she said. Now that's something I can't understand. Women are easy to push down---I mean, it seems such an extraordinary thing for a human being to do unless he's got some kind of a perversion, and you don't seem perverted at all, you look healthy and normal, in fact that's the first thing anybody'd say about you, the first remark!'

The sweat between us had grown, especially as she was speaking so urgently, her face close to mine and her shoulder leaning against

me. She took my hand in hers, and to my astonishment put it for the briefest of seconds between her legs.

'There,' she said in a soft voice, 'I don't know if you've ever really and truly experienced a woman, but it's the only thing that could do you good. I just don't believe a man can give up being good. I don't think it's possible. For one thing, my religion doesn't allow me to.'

'Nor does mine.'

She turned to me quickly and fiercely: 'God in heaven, you're not Catholic, are you?'

I hesitated ever so slightly as I had done when Grigg asked me that question, and in the pause she formed a clear idea, though what this was I couldn't say. She only whispered, 'Glen, go and find a priest, I can take you round to our little church in the morning---take communion!' I looked at her with my perplexed expression again and this seemed to make her wilder. 'I mean, don't you <u>ever?</u>'

'What?'

'Confess?'

'To a priest? I haven't done, no.'

'Darling, you look miserable,' she said, and kissed me on the lips after a glance round to see if we were being watched. 'I'm not going to let you be damned. Jeff even wouldn't want me to.'

'God's the judge of that,' I said.

'You think we've got no power at all? I'll show you that

isn't true! I might save you---I'm weak and stupid but I could have a try!'

I breathed out heavily and sat rather slumped at her side.

'A woman's softness could do it, perhaps,' she said. 'That might be one weakness you've overlooked, that every man is born of woman.'

'I think I realised that.' I looked her in the eyes. 'It isn't true, by the way, what you said---'But I gave up.

'Well,' she murmured, leaning back and away from me for the first time, 'I'm going to have a try.'

I thought suddenly of my vineyard, how a slight sea-wind brushed through its leaves, making them rattle: and how I stood in one of the rows at night sometimes, looking down the hill. This was such a strong image that the white buttocks in front of us were absent for a moment, and the warmth of Lou's breast against my arm was translated into hot June air.

'Come on,' she said, 'you'll fall asleep. Let's grab a drink.' And as she got up, drawing me up too by the arm, she added, 'I wonder if you've heard a single thing I've said.' She looked into my eyes again, her face screwed up. 'Honestly, I think you're the biggest test I've ever had.'

'Test?'

'Of my charity. And perhaps my understanding.'

We threaded our way towards the kitchen, which seemed to be in darkness. Most people were eating or drinking, talking casually. Some, succumbing to an unreal sense of chill because of the first

dawn-light appearing through the blinds (though the flat was still stifling), had drawn a blanket over themselves or a shawl, anything they found near by. One young woman in the bedroom had put her petticoat on and looked more suggestively sexual than any of the naked. Everyone was tired, a little disgruntled. More people were smoking now, some of them carrying the ashtrays with them. The dining room, where fresh canapé trays were laid out, was the most crowded room and at first I thought Lou was guiding me there. But instead she pushed past people into the empty kitchen and switched on the light.

'Let's mix you a drink,' she said, stepping back to let me pass.

There were no sandwiches here. I wondered again why we didn't go to the dining room. The light was bare on the polished plastic surfaces of the kitchen and there was a pile of dirty dishes in the sink. She took some ice out of the fridge, while I sat down.

'These damned tiles are cold on the feet,' she said, getting up. 'Here——' She threw me a teacloth. 'Use that as a carpet.'

She brought me my drink and instead of putting it on the table at my side lifted it to my mouth and said, 'Come on, you need it. You're falling asleep.'

I took two sips and nodded thank you. There was little noise from outside now: people were even drowsier after eating, and I had the impression that many had fallen asleep. I turned to see if the dawn was up properly but the plastic curtains were

drawn tight. How much time passed I had no idea---the shining surfaces and the lazy hum of talk outside and the suggestion of chill air that came through the door onto ~~the~~ one's feet drowned in each other and became one slow wave of time. My eyes closed but I woke suddenly to find Lou standing close to me, bent forward, gazing at me as if closed eyes might tell her more than open ones had done.

'You refused the cheque, didn't you?' she whispered.

'Yes.'

'Why?' she said, kissing me on the lips so that her words and breath were the same.

I had no answer to this. For a few seconds I fell fast asleep.

'I'm not used to late nights,' I said drowsily, blinking at her face, which was too close for me to focus on. And I fell asleep again.

'Did you want more?', I heard her ask me, always gentle. And after she said that she lowered herself onto me with her legs astride, so that I was aware of the touch of hair. I tried to puzzle out what she meant by 'more.' All I could think of was its possible connection with the body---more kisses, something like that. And I fell asleep again. I woke drowsily, aware of her bosom pressed against me, and her heavy weight on my middle, the heat pouring comfortably round my stomach and thighs.

'More what?' I said, smacking my lips as one does in sleep.

'Cash, honey.'

'I'm not interested in cash.'

'Listen, if Jeff gets to hear there's no end to what he can do. Even to you.'

'Hears what?' The warning in her voice woke me a little.

'Don't let your tongue wag, Glen. That's all I mean.'

'About what?'

'I'm <u>going</u> to soften you, you <u>can't</u> be hard all the way through!' And she kissed me again, rather fiercely, and moved her middle to and fro, giving me to understand at last what my sleep had refused to acknowledge.

I was exhausted. My body suddenly decided to take no further interest. I sat slumped and passive underneath her. She put her hand down.

'Is that your trouble, Glen?' She asked with new alarm in her voice. She brought her hand up as if the pot had been empty.

'What trouble?'

I blinked at her while she gazed at me with a certain horror, her mouth open and slightly drooping in the suggestion of shame felt for someone else.

'What are you talking about?' I asked, trying to struggle out of sleep.

'I won't give up, though.' And she kept her hand there, massaging me and letting her fingers wander, raising herself slightly in her seat---which was me---to give herself freer play.

The kitchen-door was suddenly pushed open, but, because of the pleasant massage, I kept my eyes closed.

Then I heard Grigg's voice, 'Comfortable?'

I opened them and saw him standing in the doorway dressed in a pair of black socks. He looked drunker than before, and whatever charm he had shown me earlier had drained away in the sewers of the night. To my astonishment---for now I was quite wide-awake---Lou didn't move, only turned round to speak to him.

'No, Jeff. Take it easy,' she said in a level voice, so level that it was clear she was terrified. Her hand was still in its earlier place, and from Grigg's point of view it must have supplied a picture of unmistakeably intimacy.

'Am I too early or too late?' he asked quietly, still standing by the door.

She raised herself from me very slowly, keeping her eyes on him. And when she was on her feet again he inspected my body with as dry a pair of eyes as I have ever seen.

'Too late, it seems,' he said. And to Lou, 'Congratulations.'

'I haven't done anything,' she said in a high voice like a girl. And she shivered, while gooseflesh appeared on her arms and the top of her legs. She watched him, quite still. And I was aware of a flat suspended weight of fear at the pit of my intestines.

I was bitterly ashamed---not, strangely, for being found with Lou, but for having been numbed at first to her little attentions.

Grigg still looked down at me, his teeth tight together. And slowly he came into the kitchen. He didn't trouble to close the door and I could see other guests, drowsy and unaware of what was going on.

Still looking at me, he said to her in a murmuring voice, 'I knew it was one or the other. Tell you the truth, I thought this one was too normal for your tastes.'

And he stood directly in front of me.

'Know what I'd like to do?' he said to me, his legs astride.

'No,' I replied with a sheepish crack in my voice.

'Can't you guess?' And when I still looked puzzled he made a motion that suggested a man pissing---all over me.

'Go ahead,' I said with an attempt at a smile, though smiling under that gaze was difficult: it was a gaze not of brutality but total and absolute indifference to the human creature, such as I had never seen on a human face before.

'She's right, by the way,' I said.

'If you keep your mouth shut you'll make me happy,' he murmured. And with a cool movement he stood on tiptoe and took a vast iron saucepan of the old-fashioned type down from a hook on the wall. It was so heavy and massive that it was only used as an ornament. People didn't cook like that nowadays. I jumped up, terrified.

'Now, Jeff,' Lou said in a whisper.

I wondered whether I should try for the door or just wield off the blow when it came. But I didn't really believe a nice

man could be violent. It depends how you're brought up, I suppose---to study the violence in men or the peace.

He seemed to have no intention of knocking me on the head. Instead, with a sullen look at me, his lips pursed into a disgusted horseshoe, he placed the saucepan deftly over my head so that in a moment I was in darkness, with the iron rim resting on my shoulder blades. If I'd known he was going to do that I could have made a getaway. As it was I was fixed in my chair---no longer by Lou's soft flesh but by about twenty pounds of iron.

'Jeff!' She had her voice raised this time, and by the sound of it he was capable of doing odd things with this sausepan.

And indeed he started pushing it down by the handle. I found myself bowed under the weight, them almost doubled under it, then pushed slowly down so that my feet scraped and slid desperately on the floor, trying to sustain my weight.

'Son of a bitch,' I heard him murmur to himself, 'dirty, lowdown, two-timing male whore...'

Lou now approached him, and I was aware of a slight struggle, which released some of the weight on me. Taking advantage of it I made a lunge upwards, but he was quicker and I felt the weight of the pan even heavier than before, grinding into the bare skin of my shoulders so that again I was slipping down in my seat and scraping desperately with the soles of my feet like a man on a permanent banana. It was the kind of saucepan my wife and I had scoured the backstreets of Salerno looking for once, to make really tasty stews in. Well, I'd found it now. In fact, I had my head in it.

'Now, look, Jeff---' I called out, but my voice made an absurd broken echo inside my temporary helmet and I realised that shouting was ineffective.

I was surprised none of the other guests came to my rescue. But probably I was hidden from the corridor outside by Grigg's body, and my head by the saucepan.

'Son of a bitch,' he went on, 'low-down crumb...'

And he went on pressing, apparently with Lou tugging at him from behind; there was slipping and stamping of bare heels. I was forced further and further down. I steadied myself by putting my hands on the seat of my chair and with a frenzy of effort tried to raise myself upwards. But it didn't work. With a sudden plunge he had me on the floor. I went down with a great thud, the chair flying from behind me. There was a gasp of astonishment from Lou, followed by a tearful, 'Oh! Oh!' I still had the saucepan on my head because although I was downed completely now, with a nasty pain at the base of my spine, he kept the thing in position.

To my surprise he said in a low voice, 'Keep still, son of a bitch.' It seemed he was studying me closely.

The noise had attracted notice and I heard the tall man say, at the door, 'Anything wrong, Lou?' She said nothing, but I hoped the arrival of help would mean twenty pounds less of iron on my shoulders. But it didn't.

'Son of a bitch here getting rough,' Grigg said, out of breath. 'Help me pitch him out of doors, Vance. Only thing.

Cool him off.'

This was really too much and I made a kick and lunge with my legs. I was suddenly angry. I pushed my shoulders up with a terrific movement and I could feel that Grigg, in suddenly loosening hold, was frightened. More guests were attracted, and it must have been interesting, watching me struggle like a madman, kicking and flaying with my feet, while Grigg held the saucepan, inside of which I was yelling curses and threats. Unhappily my splaying feet caught the tall man with a hell of a smack and I heard him draw his breath in quickly between his teeth, saying, 'Son of a bitch, right on my varicose veins! Son of a bitch!' And naturally it co-opted him on Grigg's side at once. Together they dragged and pushed at me, Grigg using the handle as a man uses the shaft of a cart, while the tall man gripped me round the middle, so that I slid and thudded and bounced my way across the tiled floor, catching my skin painfully, until we were out of the kitchen onto soft carpet. This gave me more levering power, and my lunges became stronger, with the result that they puffed and groaned like old men as they dragged me along. I was amazed not to hear noise from the other guests. But I imagined them looking on in paralysed astonishment. What about Nancy? Why didn't she do something? And the Englishman? Didn't blood call to blood? But when I remembered his face I thought it probably didn't.

They got me to the front door. They were pitching me out of the apartment naked! I felt a curtain brush past me, touching ~~my tongue~~ me with a nasty, dusty warmth for a moment---surely that was

the curtain by the door? I plunged and shouted even more, kicked, raised my middle up in the most absurd way, tore at the saucepan with my hands, felt for legs and arms and hands, punched at them when I found them, and even ~~used my teeth~~ pinched once, evoking such a yell from the tall man that I stopped. Naturally I heard nothing from outside, as I was making such a din myself, and the din echoed back to me at once from the iron sides of my helmet. I heard the front door open. A breeze came in. I was given one mighty and final push, then the door was slammed closed again, and I was free: shockingly and outrageously free, with the saucepan crooked on my shoulders and silence all round me. I half-lay there for a moment, panting and exhausted. Then with great effort I took the saucepan off. I was outside, by God. Outside in the nude. To say it was like the fulfilment of a dream everyone has had would be untrue, because under/neath the dream there is always the comfortable feeling of being asleep. Here I actually and un-deniably was, in the nude, feeling a chill breeze coming up the well of the carpeted stairs, with a saucepan at my side. What made it more unlike a dream than anything I have ever known was the fact that I was ~~now~~ completely wide-awake.

I couldn't hear the party going on inside the flat. <u>That</u> could well have been dream, for all the connection I had with it now. I rubbed my face and made a groan of despair. At least I didn't have a saucepan on my head. Vapour drops had formed all over the inside, from my breath, and I studied them idiotically. What about Lou? If she wanted to save me, why didn't she save me now?

Where could I find clothes? Should I go down to the porter now, in the nude? There was no sound from the rest of the building. I remembered that the entrance had swing doors, which was a blessing because it lessened the chance of a cold wind from the street. The floor was luxuriously carpeted. A blessing there, too. But it was decidedly colder than the flat. In fact, very cold. The more I stood there, the more I felt it. My teeth began to chatter. I had a panic-stricken feeling that I would catch pneumonia. I found myself with my arms clasped round me rather like a girl caught ~~naked.~~ dressing. I walked up and down. I looked down the well of the stairs with the eyes popping out of my head when I thought I heard a sound. There was no traffic outside. The morning light had not yet come up. At least it hadn't penetrated the back windows yet, and these were the only ones on the staircase. Then I began running, with short little steps. And hopping. I ran up and down one flight of the stairs, and back again. How to explain this sort of thing if someone caught me? Meanwhile, keep moving. I continued running up and down the stairs. The best way, while I thought things out. But the breeze from below continued to trouble me, and provoke gooseflesh all over me. The building was heated, but not enough.

I stopped suddenly, panting, as if only now soberly aware of being nude on a public staircase. The exercise must have driven away the last effects of drink. I stood quite still, staring before me with my mouth open. I was in the nude, on a staircase! It wasn't so much that people might come, it was more that the situation

fitted too perfectly into the dream: as in the dream, I had no convincing explanations ready. They would arrest me! There would be enquiries at Grigg's flat. But even this wasn't my main worry. The thing was, where would my clothes come from? What would they put round me? I looked everywhere for a piece of covering---if I could drape myself in something, that at least---! But there was only carpeting, fitted horribly to the floor: I tried to pull a corner up, and realised that it would have made a nice overcoat, but it seemed to be pasted down. There were no curtains. One curtain would have done me nicely. The glass of the windows was frosted and the frames were designed in such a way as to make curtains unnecessary. At the same time I felt healthy, in fact better than I had all night. The struggle had sweated my whisky out. I noticed nasty dark marks on my shoulders from the rim of the saucepan, partly grime and partly bruise. I had begun to ache, but pleasureably, especially in my back. I listened. Not a rustle or scrape, not a snore from the other flats. ~~No traffic passed.~~ It must be---what: six o'clock, half-past? The enormous saucepan was lying face downwards by Grigg's door. How could they all have forgotten me so implacably? I suddenly felt as miserable as a child. And this gave me the ~~sudden~~ angry resolve to march up to their door, my genitals swinging as I realised they never did with clothes on, and begin hammering and kicking and pressing the bell and shouting insults. 'Come out, you bastards!' 'Open up!' 'Shithouses!' 'Come on, Grigg, you bloody tripe-hound!' I yelled horribly.

The door didn't open, nor did a sound from inside give promise of the smallest attention. I was cold again. My teeth began chattering and there was gooseflesh all over my arms and legs. I jumped up and down on the same spot, felt like crying, prevented myself from sitting on one of the stairs and doing so. The silence was absolute. I wondered, in the midst of this most helpless situation I had ever known, how such a thing could be allowed. That a porter didn't intuitively understand something and dash upstairs amazed me. And wasn't there a responsible---or even just civic---person at the party? And Cambridge, wasn't this supposed to be a civic town? I was convinced they were all discussing the matter inside the apartment. Perhaps a sort of civil war had developed, and Grigg's side was winning. I kicked, shouted, pressed the bell again, but more absolute silence drifted back to me. The more time that passed, the more astonished I was. Didn't they <u>realise</u> I had no clothes? Perhaps they were all nude-drunk: so accustomed to it now that they thought you didn't need clothes even outside! He could get put in prison for this. It must be illegal. Shutting a man out in the nude. I could run to the nearest police station. I could run fast. But where was it? I would have to make one straight dash, but where to? In my other visits to Cambridge, as a child, hadn't I been to the police station? Or should I run to one of the college porters' lodges? They were used to this kind of thing. Of course! I might be an undergraduate---a porter would take it in his stride! But at the same time I didn't really believe that the people inside

Grigg's flat could just forget about me, so I stayed where I was jumping up and down on the same spot, swinging my arms round my body as I had seen workmen do on icy days.

Now I was frozen. The gooseflesh had hardened into one hard covering of flesh, probably nature's protection. I sat down on one of the stairs and put my head in my hands. I just couldn't believe it. That people could be so irresponsible. I huddled myself into an ungainly heap, and tried to wriggle into a warm corner as deep as I could. And at that moment she opened the door. At first her head appeared, pale and drawn down at the mouth. She looked round and couldn't see me, and in my crumpled misery I made no attempt to be seen. Then her eyes drifted down to the remote corner I was trying to fill with my bones. More than her head now appeared. She was dressed in a silk dressing gown, though her feet were still bare.

'Gee, I'm sorry,' she said quietly. There wasn't a sound from behind, no civil war, unless they'd decimated each other. 'You can come in.'

To these words only my body replied. It dashed as fast as it could into the flat. And with the warmth of Lou's central heating, the most grateful furnace in the world, I breathed a sigh of relief that might have been heard throughout the flat. She closed the door behind me, and I registered that there was no Grigg waiting to fling me out again. In fact, there was just Lou: other guests were nowhere to be seen or heard. I leaned against the wall, my hardened flesh thawing down to gooseflesh again, and

then to the usual soft fatty cushion that transmits warmth from outside so lovingly, as long as there is the warmth to transmit. She stood there too.

'They're mostly asleep,' she said quietly.

As my eyes got used to the darkness of the corridor I saw there was noone in it, no white shining buttocks, no bosoms like great white globes. And no Grigg.

'How did you get me back in? I whispered.

'Well...' She didn't answer, but walked further into the soft quiet of the flat.

I didn't follow her at once. There was a very slight murmur of voices from the big room: one or two people perhaps talking very low as if not to disturb others.

I walked stealthily into the kitchen---and slap into Grigg. We made a fleshy thud together. He was standing in the doorway alone.

'Come in, Glen,' he said softly, putting a hand on my shoulder. 'Gee, I'm sorry.'

'Everybody asleep?'

'Seems like it. We cover them up. Lou's doing it, she'll be right back.'

He stood there looking yellow and creased, bent forward. The struggle had taken it out of him.

'Well, I mean, they get cold,' he said with an involuntary duck of his head.

'Sit down,' he added, 'we'll break a bottle of Mouton-Rothschild.'

I sat down but with superstitious reserve avoided the chair by the table. The saucepan must still be in the hall outside. That would be a strange find for the porter.

'Kind of a misunderstanding,' Grigg murmured, taking down a dusty bottle without a label from above the stove. He held it out to me without enthusiasm. 'Charles's cellar. Sold it to me.'

'What, the bottle or the cellar?'

'The cellar.'

That might have been a joke four or five hours before, but now it fell into the ambiguous night-cum-morning air of the flat with a heavy forbearance. He uncorked the thing clumsily and got the thick delightful liquid over the back of his hairy hand. He was still in the nude, apart from his black socks. The smell of the only true wine in the world---apart from what the Germans do along the Mosel, came across to me. It brought me back to a sanity which I realised all of a sudden, without being able to fix the thought precisely, was our most precious inheritance. It had something to do with care and concern and civilisation. He poured out two glasses carefully, and it came out with that deep, dark-brown, muddily transparent quality of matured wine. Sometimes I had got that colour from laying down a particularly good year, but I knew I could never achieve this taste. We raised our glasses slightly to each other and drank. I had read that Goethe drank wine first thing in the morning. I realised why. It went down with such an amazing embracing softness and variety of suggestion that I finished the glass in several gulps.

'What I like to see, Glen,' Grigg said quietly, and leaned forward and filled me up again.

I smacked my lips and made a great satisfied sigh, leaning back.

'Wish I could get it like this,' I said, holding it up to the light. 'By God...'

He looked at me puzzled. He was too tired for questions, as I for explanations. I took another sip, and another. Long ago before I'd started in wine I realised that you need to be healthy, and to work hard, before wine means anything. You have to sit down and need it. Best after working outside. And I'd certainly been outside. I downed the glass in a few gulps, while Grigg only took gingerly sips and looked as if he'd tasted vinegar.

Lou came back with soft steps. 'They're all tucked in till lunchtime,' she said. And she bent down to Grigg, her bosom appearing out of her dressing gown, and kissed him on the temple. 'Feeling O.K. now, honey?'

He nodded in rather a desolate way.

'I think I'll throw myself down somewhere,' he murmured, and got up heavily.

Lou took him by the arm. 'I've got the maid's room ready, dad.' And they walked off together.

'Kill that bottle,' Grigg called out from the hall, raising his voice just enough for me to hear.

I poured myself another glass, tried to find the label. But there was only dust from years of storage. And the firm

lettering on the cork. No wonder Charles the Englishman had winey gills.

Lou returned silently and went straight to a chair. I was now not only wide-awake but warmed through, and I felt in an opposite mood to the one she'd found me in.

'How did you cool him down?' I asked her.

'Well,' she said with a certain flat irony in her tone, 'as a matter of fact I gave him what I was fool enough to think I was going to give you.' And she looked at me with a brief searching expression, her eyes red from rubbing.

So while I was standing outside, convinced they were all discussing me, Lou and Grigg were...

'Thank you, by the way,' she went on, 'for not letting it happen. I've given up trying to save people,' she added. 'As from tonight.'

I finished the third glass and, after raising the bottle towards her in a questioning way and she had refused, I poured myself a fourth.

'I must be going after this,' I said.

She looked up, with the first semblance of being wide-awake. 'Going to the office?'

'Yes.'

'Honey, don't let on, I'll do anything for you! I'm sorry for what happened, so is Jeff.'

'I wish you'd start to trust me,' I said.

'OK, I will. But we couldn't take another scandal, Glen.

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I mean, Jeff's career couldn't. The last one nearly wrecked him.' We sat in silence, and from the far bedroom came the sound of snoring. This time the light was really penetrating from outside, in neat single strips, through the blinds.

'He made me swear on a Bible,' she said.

'What?'

'That it wasn't you.'

'Just now, you mean?'

She seemed to fall asleep for a moment, much as I'd done some time before. Then she opened her eyes and blinked at me.

'He took me to the Madonna in the bedroom, and made me swear on the Bible---that it wasn't you. I swore it wasn't you. Well, I didn't sin there. Thank God, he didn't make me swear about Palermo, that's all.'

Another silence, and a moment of sleep intervened, and I sipped my wine gratefully.

She looked at me again, blinking, then---after seeming about to say something more---lowered her head on tc her arms and slept soundly. I sat there for some time more, stretched, yawned, got up. Then I walked into the big room. There were sleepers everywhere; they had all been most lovingly covered. They were like children, mute and pale and seeming to stare at things behind their closed eyelids. Their heads were sometimes thrown forward, sometimes back, their mouths were open, snoring. I saw Myra, her head slumped forward, dribbling slightly. Nancy was nowhere to be seen. One of the men was covered with a rug from the floor.

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I walked softly through to the bedroom and the first thing I saw there in the dimness, but quaintly encircled with some chance light from the window, was the genitals of a young man, limp and innocent, surrounded by ginger hair. There were other sleepers, some on the bed, some on the floor, all of them covered. Nancy was by the dressing table, dark and concentrated on sleep like an athlete, her mouth tight closed and her face so still that she seemed to be waiting tensely for something. To my surprise the ginger man was awake.

'Hi, there,' he whispered in a throaty voice. And he coughed slightly. 'My name's Nelson.'

I was wide-awake enough to be facetious. 'The one who lost his eye at Trafalgar?'

'None other.' And he made a pale smile.

'Are you English?'

'Yes.'

'One of these atomic aces?'

'No.'

'What are you doing here, then? You've got to want to scorch somebody to death to get into this sort of party.'

His eyes didn't really take me in. I was an 'Englishman', rounded off like a portrait; decorative and admirable, but without surprises, as few as any picture hanging there for hundreds of years can have...

'I hate these people,' he said. 'How I hate them.'

'What are you doing here, then?' I asked with the smiling casualness he expected from me.

He thought this over as a question in itself, not as an expression of my curiosity. He had thick flesh round his eyes, that seemed to have come from defensive attitudes, which themselves had come from intimidation. My thoughts about him formed in my head as clearly as statements of logic, in the first cool minutes of the day. I felt lonely and miserable as I hadn't done all night. I thanked God suddenly that there was Cambridge outside---streets and walls and words that I understood.

He fell asleep. And his face was translated into that democracy of innocence shared by the others.

I thought of the stone kitchen floor at this hour, before Luigi brought in the milk, laying it on the scrubbed wooden table; and the light invading the house like dust, edging past nearly a metre of wall. I walked back down the corridor,

straight to No. 49 in the cloakroom. He hadn't thought to ransack that, at any rate. I quickly pulled on shirt and trousers, knotted my tie clumsily, wrenched on my shoes. And I hurried through to the kitchen again. Lou was gone, but my shoes must have made an unusual noise on the carpet as she appeared all of a sudden from the maid's quarters.

'Come and say cheerio to Jeff,' she whispered. 'He's still awake. Hope you enjoyed it,' she added as she took me by the hand towards the dark end of the corridor.

Grigg was in his pyjamas, under a single blanket. We shook hands in silence and I said, 'Thanks for a nice party.'

'Like hell,' he said. 'Was it cold out there?'

Lou said to me suddenly, 'Didn't you want to have Jeff in town tonight?' And to Grigg: 'Party at eight-fifteen. Sounds like fun.'

'OK,' he said very quietly, with an ever so slight touch of wariness in his voice---and, perhaps, fear.

I said nothing, so as to make it her doing.

'Can I bring friends?' she asked me.

'It isn't my party.'

She gave me a sharp look. 'Thanks, I'll bring friends.'

We shook hands and she opened the front door for me. The sight of the saucepan outside was strange.

I didn't draw her attention to it, and she closed the door softly behind me. I went downstairs slowly, my hands in my pockets, and was reminded for a moment of apartment-houses in Italy, with similar wide staircases, where a remarkable sanity seemed to prevail...

10

I found a serene morning so different from what I expected that I stood where I was between the gilt swing-doors and the long, grimed, deathly official cars at the kerb, my hands in my pockets, just looking at the sky. The wind had done its job and there were only the last fine white traces of cloud high up. No one was

about. It was cold and only an electric milk-trolley throbbed from a nearby sidestreet---a ridiculously suburban sound that made me want to laugh. The silence was in me too. There was as near as no thought at all in my head. It felt as if even my organs and glands were still. With an odd impersonality I also wanted to cry. I remembered Grigg's face, dark and rather yellow on the pillow. I walked towards the Backs, it being too early for the cafés to be open. The colleges were still and closed, their windows reflecting the first watery yellow of the sun. It was too good to last. The high whisps of cloud also portended bad to come. I was warm all the way through from the wine. One or two men cycled past, their heads down, and a heavy truck clattered along the road behind the Backs, hidden by the trees. At first it was like a scene for me, the same I had seen a dozen times as a child, but without my participation now, and it was so different from the darkness of the apartment that my body was stilled---to watching and waiting, as if I had left another body behind and this new one didn't yet fit my thoughts. The touch of the chill air, the sun that bore into everything like a diamond, the new silence I found when I reached the river were like judgements on the night I had had, but not in language or even consciousness. The birds were awake on the river and all at once three swans throbbed with a happy will overhead, tracing the river-line precisely, gleaming in the sun, their wing-beats echoing on the water and between the college walls. I sat down on a bench and looked across at King's chapel, vast and, as always, so fixed against the space of the sky that it was beyond this actual sky and beyond time as well. I didn't feel soiled or bleakly in need of recuperation as I had done years before after similar nights out. I felt well. The fight with a saucepan on my head had even done me a power of good. I could see my vineyard clearly, my wife bringing in the well-water---we kept our running water for drinking. This silence and the blazing sky made her steps across the stone courtyard seem a tiny distance away. I could hear her voice, how she would call me. I knew the way her skirt swished against her. All of a sudden in the clarity of the morning I remembered that there had been a real motive in my leaving, which my wife and I had talked over night after night. Yet this had not once occurred to me in the last few days: namely, that our living on the farm was little better than a dog's---I made enough money to keep us decently fed, but there was nothing for a trip to Naples even once a month, unless someone popped up with a business deal, and this was unlikely. I refused to take local prices for wine: that wouldn't have paid for the manure. I had made

good contacts in Germany, some in Holland and France. I refused to dose my wine, even with boiled sugar to repair the ravages of a bad year. There had been three bad years---incessant rain that had broken down my terraces, sudden frosts in May to blight the first flowers, hailstorms when the grapes were ripe, depriving me sometimes of over half my yield in two or three minutes. I had kept a diary of the weather - my 'missile diary', I called it. I noted all the disasters in the other parts of the world. People said, 'Yes, of course, it's well known---the stratosphere has been knocked to cock.'

I closed my eyes to the fact that somebody else doctored my wine for me---after they'd bought it. And I had to take a lower price, for lower alcoholic content. My own vineyard was tiny, little above six hectares. I had rented more and more land from other farmers, until now I had thirty or forty hectares under my control, which was still not enough to make more than a slogging livelihood. It wasn't a day-to-day drudgery like keeping cattle or running six crops. It needed care---more exactly, vigilance. It meant breathing down the necks of the handful of workers I employed by the day so that mildew, blackrot and mould were kept away, though my hardest time was in the vintage itself, pressing and storing the wine my way and not the local way. With the weather going wrong the work was doomed. The taxes and the endless repair to broken terraces, plus poor yields with too little alcohol content to permit me to lay aside a certain number of barrels as a quality wine to mature over the years, broke me. My main hope---to produce a quality wine which would sell in the bottle---was knocked on the head: though I doubt if it could have come to anything with even the most stable Italian weather. My casks were old, my barns let in the rain, I sometimes had to wait weeks for labour, in an endless struggle against rates I couldn't afford but which they thought a foreigner was morally bound to pay. Yet all that had left my head when I got to London. I knew that whatever happened down there, even if I had to sell my six hectares and close down my barns, there would still be a chance for me and my wife. We could still eat. The house was ours. Well, we paid rent, but it was nominal. Outside our door there would always be spinach, beans, tomatoes, maize, marrows, an asparagus bed, artichokes, peas, we would always make polenta from the maize, we had the space to keep livestock if we had to.

The light flashing from the river that moved slowly between the lawns reminded me of summer afternoons long ago when I'd looked at the passing punts and bright clothes with a troubled, numbed awe, feeling dark in my clothes. King's had been there the same, the lawn rising from the water was identical, the Bridge of Sighs

had looked the same, as if it enclosed watchers from the past; the undergraduates had looked men to me then, pushing their poles deep into the water, laughing sometimes, talking to girls on the bank. With the convenient unifying eye of childhood I had put them all into one dream, that wasn't spanned by the afternoon or the river but went on without me, in an endless celebration that shut me out. I could remember being tongue-tied if anyone suddenly walked out of that dream and became a person in front of me, talking. Strange, those exclusions, awes, hierarchies from long ago. It seemed so long ago to me now that it was far beyond the movement of years: so lost in the past that it had become impossible. There were just no connecting links. The scene itself wasn't a strong enough connection. Nor would the same punts be, nor would fresh undergraduates. It had simply happened in another world. It had come to an end so conclusively that this scene, even the same soaring King's chapel, even the delicate river and the arched Bridge of Sighs reflected darkly in the water, were an imitation. Especially the fresh undergraduates ~~would be~~ were an imitation. It wasn't even that things had changed. If anything, they had changed too little. They had failed to develop. They had stopped. A world had come into being in which the illusion of a connection---a past---a world under God---anything that might provoke awe or forbidden longing was there only for childhood. The child's steps hurried forward to meet the next stage of life: and it was not there. The people to look up to, and the stones to remember, like King's, and the dream that could be evoked by the river, were simply not there. Everything was a hoax.

I saw one or two windows open, a head looked out briefly. A scout with an apron round his middle passed across the college forecourt. A 'scout', meaning college servant. He was there now, dressed as before, with the same name as before, not because the past was intact but because it had been broken. He wasn't even there as a habit. He was only there because the organisation demanded it, the college was there and students arrived. They were received, so to speak, from the past. They, together with the Chapel where a choir was formed and good singing heard, had been found there by us the survivors. So the thing had gone on, together with the scouts. It had all emerged from a slowly and consciously evolved form in the past: but with us it had stopped. There was no further form. There were buildings, some new roads, but no form was being chosen now. Really we were treading about in the ruins, we were marking time: the spires and massive mediaeval walls stood there in mute unfittingness. The safety-curtain between thought and the painted scene outside had fallen and the lever to recover it was gone. It <u>was</u> a painted scene.

The colleges had been washed, there were new quadrangles build identically on the old model (except for cement to replace stone): the scene could be washed and painted again and again, or it could all be torn down. It would be the same. We would remain spectators of a past our thought was impotent to bring to life. Alone of all the epochs in Christendom, ours had failed to bequeath its form. It just stood and gaped. Sometimes an urge to rebuild everything seized a town. But all you got, from the newest town under the sun, was simply the faithfully painted scene of the dreadful play---comedy?---you had tried to shun. You got its face staring at you without delicate interpolations from the past like this lawn and this chapel and this Bridge of Sighs.

And then---'England'. I had come back to 'England'. What England was there here, in this most English scene, where the river loitered between two bright banks and the light in the sky had that special heady excitement of two seas close by, flashing together in sparks of intimacy? My shoe moved slightly over the gravel path, making a fine, sharp sound in the morning silence; a song-thrush sang briefly behind me as if it was spring. An aeroplane with two conventional engines, probably from the military airport near by, went over, making the air throb as if it were twenty, thirty years ago: the plane wasn't even a turbo-prop, let alone a jet, so that it suggested the last previous lazy and bee-humming world of a war where only TNT had been dropped: so thoroughly and conclusively had that former world been sealed from us that its instruments of murder seemed not only mild but evocative of drowsy moods, belonging to what is heard on summer days, on trips from the city.

Yet there was only my testimony for it: that this island-light was no longer that of a home; that it was no more a home to itself, with its own concerns. Yet surely my testimony counted? And as surely it didn't count at all. That was it---the testimony of men no longer counted; it no longer formed the life all round us. The human testimony had collapsed. It remained private, separate. There was no England, no hubbub of testimonies rising to crescendos and then dying in a proper rhythm. Something was missing. I always felt it. Something deprived the scene of full authenticity. Really and truly people were waiting for an explosion. And no one knew whose finger was on the button---only that it wasn't their's.

But we always thought that <u>somewhere else</u> was different. THERE life was authentic: THERE people lived as they always had done, making the life all round

them. I'd come to England with just that feeling, since by now England was somewhere else for me. And millions, poor dreamers, came to Italy---especially Italy---with that feeling, seeing us all wrapped in history, tilling the fields and cutting down the wine in an enviably blind absorption in the past. They overlooked the fact that the wine they drank was less than thirty-percent grape; that there was no peasant in the area who didn't know the chemical components necessary for making this tourist-concoction; they overlooked the vast communist party, its theology the new opium of the people, allowing them to sit back and wait for the revolution which would never come, and invent a status quo long dead; then there was the mass-produced feed for cattle, that fattened them prematurely, the powders for the tenderisation of meat, the artificial insemination of cows, the 'sophistication'---as chemical poisoning was called---of butter, milk, mineral water---in a massive and wilful onslaught on natural life that put even the industrial world of the north in the shade. These were the brave tillers from the past who grinned at you and bowed and dandled their children in front of you, because they knew the requirements of the dream you carried in your head. They could see you, but you couldn't see them. So each country looked at every other, through little binoculars provided by the agencies out of information from the Before, for two weeks, three: and so the Before was kept alive, as a painted scene, because people needed it, otherwise they would go mad. They had come to my farm and smiled and minced and coyly shown interest, taking me for a southern ghoul: not Americans from three thousand miles away---but Italians from three hundred!

Everybody believed that everybody else was leading the real life, and only he was out in the cold. And everybody was wrong.

We were facing the same blank, all together, at last, each in his appointed situation.

~~Things no longer counted, in our own lives. There was something outside us~~ all the time---not even constantly drawing our attention, but always there, like the sky: but not the sky. It was a light, a blank. But something men had done. We were facing it. They kept on telling us---the last children of the nineteenth century---that nothing had happened, that there were governments, arguments, wars, revolutions, intimacies and discoveries as before. But we knew better. Over everything there was a mask of the Before: just the painted scene, a sort of canvas cover, needed for certain interests---beyond which we must not see. So

all the time we talked it was secondary talk. Every time we decided, a counterfeit decision. Every time we planned, a wishful plan. A fool, nowadays, was one who took the painted drop for reality.

Look at this soaring chapel, firm and precise in the sky, touching space itself, pointing to past and future: or rather, it should point to past and future, away from the here and now, but it didn't. It used to. That had given it its special quality---it had raised the heart, confirmed resolve, spelled home. Belonged to everyone, because to no one here-and-now. That was what the pale-blue sky behind suggested, and the sunshine that drenched its stone. But now it soared towards---what future? We couldn't be secure about a future. It wasn't ours. So there could be no past, either. It sealed us off into ourselves, sealed us even from the meaning of tangible objects, this lawn, the natural river, the whitening buttresses of stone. A few miles away there was that aerodrome, people said, where...it was an old story now...the personnel sealed off even from the groundstaff, forbidden all contact with the local natives, replaced by new men every two weeks from a foreign land... With what orders? What trigger might have to be pulled? Doing what? What appalling thing might have to be done, and by whose permission, in whose name? What was government if it didn't come from us, if it got no sanction from us? Perhaps the aerodrome existed no longer. They'd pulled it down perhaps, as obsolete. But that didn't matter. Nor did it really matter that it had existed, or for what purpose it had existed. The important thing was that we didn't know. People wouldn't tell us---the few that knew. Most didn't know. And in our not knowing what could befall us at the whim of people unknown to us, for interests unexplained to us, lay our real impotence, that stretched across all our lives and rendered everyone academic, redundant. It was this that tore up our history in one movement. It meant we had no future, because we had no power to form it. And if the aerodrome had been torn down, it meant no change---only that the mechanism of planes with secret orders was considered primitive now, and that the same matter could be as adequately looked after by the pressure of a button perhaps three thousand miles away: our ignorance was therefore made greater, as the mechanism became more distant and abstract.

A gardener---he looked like a gardener---cycled along the gravel path in front of me and said a ringing 'Good morning!' I answered politely. Perhaps he mistook me for an inmate: a don, porter, scout. It made me feel included.

At once my clear thoughts were behind me, I was lost again in the business of life. Just a ringing good-morning could do it. A few more windows had opened. There was now the sound of cars from the King's Parade. The noise seemed to be driving out the party of the night---ushering the people home. More undergraduates hurried across the forecourt, carrying little pots---something tasty from home, to add to their breakfast. I saw the edge of an academic gown---early-morning chapel perhaps. And a church bell started, followed by others. This most demanding of all sounds reinforced the walls and lawn and soaring stone for a moment, and insisted on past and future being intact, and I gave in happily and willingly, and let the dream suffuse me. I got up, my hands in my pockets, and strolled over the bridge again. I was hungry. Something must be open now. The King's Parade was now bustling with bicycles and slow cars, and sleepy people hurrying across in the sunlight that made the narrow roadway like a place too intimate to take account of death or any interruption.

I chose one of the old hotels, as being safest for breakfast, and took a seat where I could still see the sun streaming in at the plumed entrance. People looked gay this morning, and I had a little chat with the waitress about how you expected to see the trees blossom as if it was spring, and what a difference it made, and how nice it would be if every day was like this. Then, throwing health-is-wealth to the winds, I ordered an enormous breakfast, though with a first course of healthy porridge, as a sop to Cerberus. I went to the foyer and got a morning paper---the tabloid Palermo touted for. I wanted to be sure that there was no fresh item of Grigg-news. There wasn't. I read every life-is-nothing-but-fun paragraph in every column, and to my relief no visiting American was touched on. I wanted to hurry round to Louise and show her. But she was only a name to me at this moment. The porridge was superb---not even the pre-cooked type. The taste of the wine was gone, my body began to warm with sustenance. I ought to go to a barber. There were some drowsy clients at the other tables---a few travellers, the parents of an undergraduate, looking uncomfortably honoured as they always had done in the Before, as if reality was still here! I thought of my farm again, how the soil was too good ever to produce a quality wine. You needed a stony, hard soil for that, such as the finest French and German wines had. When you saw a cornfield next to a vineyard you could depend on an inferior wine. And I had a cornfield bang next to mine. The soil was dry enough, naturally, but it had a splendid fertility which produced fat, juicy grapes only good for eating, whereas I was after the small, hard

grapes that had grown by sheer triumph over suffering. But I could produce a wine better than anything from North Africa, and only a little inferior to French ordinaire. Namely, a table wine---for guzzling and gulping, not tasting. Therefore cheap. I could do that if I had a secure market, preferably one man, in Germany or England. That was what I ought to try for while I was over here: a merchant who'd buy everything I produced, on a contract, and pay prices that gave me a decent living.

I got through my breakfast with great relish---eggs, bacon, tomatoes, fried bread, and three or four cups of tea. Then I went to the lounge, waiting for my bowels to work. I intended to nurse my body back to sanity. After paying my bill I found a barber's and had a shave---the hot towel he laid over my face seemed to draw out the whole night before: when I got up from the seat it even seemed I had had a night's rest.

While I walked to the station the whispy traces of cloud high in the sky gathered together and became urgent heralds of rain, so that the roadway darkened and burst into brilliance again, until it darkened for good. I browsed through the books in the station kiosk. As I was turning over the pages of Maud in a new edition the rain came in a stupendous avalanche that made me turn and stare. People were hurrying, dustbin lids clanged, porters shouted across the lines, trolley-loads of parcels complacently left out in the sun were pushed, kicked, rolled, flung under cover. Every rain-spot sent up a little bursting spout of water, like a tiny nuclear smoke-cloud. Then as suddenly it died, and the world seemed to be left mourning, gathering life together again. The sun tried to smile in a last pale encouragement but then it got angry and went in and shut the door for the day. There was nothing now but dark stillness, like a signal that you could forget the weather and once more suppose the world to be that of men. I was glad my vines were doing their work invisibly under the earth. I could remember the sad sensation of the wet, swollen, smell-less grape in my hand, as if it was happening now, after a hailstorm.

My train drew in, a housewife's mid-morning express, almost empty, its windows drenched, the grime running down in channels.

12.

I was disturbed and stopped in my tracks as memories of the night came back to me. I had no impression of faces---except Grigg's, at the last moment, and this was perhaps because he ~~was~~ 'd been clothed. There had seemed to be no personal encounter. I couldn't remember people in terms of the subjects we'd talked about---neither Myra nor Nancy. They were only presences. Yet that was more than they would have been had they been clothed. The night didn't seem full of licence or daring, much less vice. I felt no aftermath of tired renunciation. It seemed even that I had had many experiences like that before, which wasn't true. A strange ambiguity of reactions remained in me as I went across King's Cross towards the Tube---secrets had been revealed all night; we had been not persons at all but whole bodily selves; yet the night for that reason was under a veil of secrecy; it was behind closed curtains, beyond walls that mustn't speak. I mustn't speak either: that was my sensation. But what about? What had I done? The very necessity of standing in the nude raised the question of secrecy, it pointed to a strong consciousness of the secret that lay underneath, so strong as to require it to be revealed. The words tried to form a clear notion in my head. The night seemed to lie under a veil of secrecy. Yet I had done the most unsecretive thing in my life. As I thought this I went down to the men's lavatory, and the marble curved walls being automatically flushed with water seemed a confirmation, and in that a warning, of this vague need which was being imposed on me, to keep secrecy, not to speak. But it wasn't just a prohibition to speak about <u>this</u> subject, <u>this</u> night: it included in a formidable way everything. There was something preventing my being clear, outspoken, about anything now. I even began to have the consciousness of being watched, as I came up the steps of the lavatory again. Yet I knew there was no one watching: this made no difference. Put more precisely, I now felt watchable. I felt not quite clear in my record---I don't mean that I felt blemished in guilt: my sensation was opposite, in fact; but something was on my record which though I didn't know it---though I was ignorant of the secret mark made on it---involved me in something which ~~again I was ignorant of and which~~ made me ~~feasible as~~ a target for fruitful watching. I had to be careful, I mustn't speak, but precisely what the forbidden subjects were I didn't know. They had something to do with the greatest secrets of all, which lie at the bottom of life, all the things that aren't spoken,

from childhood to old age. And I could be more precise about this too: they involved commonly recognised secrets---secrets that everybody knew were secrets, such as those buttons deep along tunnels behind many yards of reinforced concrete, and experiments few knew about, and all the things that Grigg talked about and wrote about with a freedom that made you think he must be drawing a fictional veil over the real activities because otherwise he would be stopped. And now I was involved in this. How or why it was so I couldn't say. Nor could I say that it really was so. In fact, I told myself that of course it wasn't. Yet my feeling asserted it, not even as a feeling either, but a fact. I was involved because of the night I had had. I had done nothing, yet I had done no less than any other person there. I had been a kind of spectator, but everyone there had been a spectator of a kind. There were things I couldn't---or perhaps simply wouldn't---say about that night, if questioned. Therefore I had been involved. I had been made an ally, with nothing crudely signed or even suggested by the lift of a brow. There was a veil over the night, the night of the revelation of secrets, and this veil was like the veil over all secrets, including the most terrible ones of all which were whether the machine of total destruction had been made, and where it was, and who controlled the button, and then who controlled those who controlled that button and other subsidiary buttons which could nevertheless remove life from the greater part of the earth, and then above all when (if ever) the major button or any of the subsidiary buttons would be pushed, where and with what effects, in a series of questions we dared not ask ourselves day after day because that would have made life as plainly unbearable as it really and truly is, under a veil of logic and bearability. So the opening of secrets during the night, showing bulging haired parts and strong shining bosoms and hips fruitful of suggestions and legs curled over others and hot skin touching more hot skin with thrilling unconcern, drew a veil across life at the same time--- a veil from the world outside. And so to be unsecretive involved an absolute secrecy. And I felt as if this was the whole basis of all our life, the streets and dusty buses, the piles of newspapers selling on the corner, the sensation in the stomach, the grind of trains on rails, the comings and goings, even the kisses, of every creature, so that when they did rarely come together in open nakedness and touch each other's hot skins it only served to reveal the total state of secrecy on which everything ran. You knew, after a night like that, that you had come to the very core and germ of the world, that you were now irrevocably at its core,

had touched its secret, which was a veil---over a secret. This is what our epochs had risen to, their crescendo of history---a silence and dumbness beyond anything in the world before. Basically and truly all modern life was secret service. The thought made me shudder, in that I was involved now with full consciousness. I didn't know what I had entered. I had no further hold on my life. My shudder was an acute physical one, the gooseflesh of fear climbing all over my thighs and stomach until it reached my chest and then my cheeks. I was exhausted. I felt pale and could hardly walk. My cheeks drooped and I couldn't bear to look into the eyes of other people. My mouth was open. I wanted to sit down somewhere. I had managed to pass the Tube-entrance blindly, and was in the street I didn't know where. The night had suddenly caught up with me. Its reality had been delayed. Here was its full effect as it might have descended on me in Cambridge if it hadn't been for the familiar scene, the lawns and birds and gliding river, fooling me with patterns of the past and lulling me away from the deadly veil that had stolen over my life. How little we knew where we were going! How little!

I found that without me being conscious of it I had resolved not to go back to Palermo and therefore to my room. But I didn't know where else to go. Let me get out of it now---back to Italy. All of a sudden I jumped on a bus---I found myself getting on a bus---and this was going towards the Strand. The Strand was a few steps from the office, from my own belongings, and this was where I found myself going, after jumping off the bus. I hadn't seen the new carpet. I wanted to see that. I would collect my things and leave, having seen the carpet. I had enough money to heal my nerves in France for a few days, before facing my wife. I couldn't afford to let my face break such news to her. I mustn't disappoint her like that. But what was this? What <u>news</u> had to be broken? What had happened? I walked past the pub where Palermo and I had sat. The sky was still dark, giving the narrow street a thoroughly logical look, as if not a nook or cranny could escape or would want to escape an enquiring eye. Everything was routine, the little street said. And I hurried on. The office-door was open as usual. I heard the sound of typing from above. I thought perhaps I saw a light at Palermo's window, but then remembered he had no window. My nervousness was such that it had lost claim on my identity: I felt they weren't my feet going noisily up the stairs, and when Pat said in a surprised voice, 'Hullo, stranger, where've you been?', I found myself nodding to her

casually and not troubling to reply, with that tired face I had often envied for its ability to shoulder the deadly strains of a city and not fear to show itself. I saw it was no bravery to look like that, but deep fatigue. I only needed a cigarette in the corner of my mouth to complete the expression. The time when I had smiled to put people at their ease or to throw their minds off my own predicament was past and dead. I was among them now. I shuffled through to Palermo's office. He was there, quiet and delicate-looking, in a spotlessly white shirt that made his hands look frail and his lips fastidiously soft. You could never predict him. He wasn't smoking, and the ashtray wasn't even full. He looked up slowly and nodded a charming good morning, without moving his lips, and he signalled me to the seat in front of him.

His first words were, 'Thanks, by the way,' quietly.

'What for?'

'Getting dad to come.'

I began to feel the comfort of the chair after running---I realised I had raced along---from the bus to the office. He saw that I was out of breath and looked at me with a slight blink for a moment, before looking down at his desk in a fragile way. I became aware of the ache in my back from being dragged across the floor that morning, and two places on my shoulder where the rim of the saucepan had grilled into me. There might be blood. I must look. I yawned and rubbed my eyes.

'All-night session?' he asked, watching me again.

'Yes.'

'She phoned me up just now.' He kept his voice under the sound of Pat's typing. 'Asked for you.'

'Why?'

He shrugged and added, 'Anyway, thanks. You'll hold my hand tonight, eh?'

'I'm not going to any parties. I've had enough of them.'

'No party. Gathering at my club. Part of your work.' He looked at me in silence, while I rubbed my eyes again. 'Get some sleep.'

There was one of those silences that had been happening all night, when you didn't know how long they had lasted. I looked up suddenly, blinking and smacking my lips.

'You sounded drunk last night,' he said with a slight smile, softly. Then: 'By the way, I opened an account for you today. Put three hundred quid in.'

'What?' I was suddenly awake.

'I didn't know if you had an account, anyway it's the bank we use. Bank charges fall on us.'

'What three hundred is that, for God's sake?'

'The advance I told you about.'

'Is that in my contract?'

He made a fragile suggestion of his lecherous smile and said, 'Why, want me to take it back?'

'No.'

'Chandler-Williams and I had a talk about it, thought you were worth it, so---' With a shrug that was not quite casual--- 'we did it.' With another fragile smile: 'Probably fools. But there are plenty of fools making big money.'

The sound of Chandler-Williams's name made me feel better and I said, 'Thank you.'

'I'll need you this afternoon, that's all.'

I nodded. 'It's an advance on salary, really, then?'

'Well, we haven't thought it out yet.' He blinked again and looked at his desk, where there was no work. 'We thought of it more as an honorarium.'

'What about salary, then?'

'That's still to be discussed.'

We said nothing more about it and after another silence he murmured, 'I'm under the weather too.'

'I noticed you weren't smoking.'

'Ticker.' He pointed to his heart.

'<u>You</u>?'

He nodded.

'I'm saving myself up for tonight,' he went on. 'Great things. Have to be careful.'

'Looks as if <u>you</u> ought to be in bed,' I said, getting up.

'No. Just not raise the voice, sit still, think easy thoughts.' He pressed the bell at the side of his desk, and when the typing next door ceased he called out softly, 'Pat, give Glen his nice new cheque book.'

She handed it to me in the other office: I noticed it had been lying on her desk, ready. And I signed for it. Her hands were grimed from carbon paper and there was evidence of intensive work. She looked pale, with puffy skin under her

eyes, and a sour smell of smoke clung to everything in the room.

'How's Muriel?' I asked.

'Oh,' she said with a slight shrug and a wary look through to the other office, 'back on the conveyor belt.'

I didn't know what this meant and said nothing. My back and shoulder were hurting and I wanted to lie down. Just as I was going she said, 'I signed for your carpet.'

'Oh, thank you.' I was about to ask her more but there was a sickening sensation in my stomach exactly like that on the station not an hour before, and I again felt prohibited from speech, from even thinking about what a few simple words would---might, perhaps---have cleared up. I looked at her to see if I could detect a strange expression but there was none. She had settled back on her little swivel seat.

e.e. The carpet was not only new and genuine Persian, it lay on the floor like a misty suggestion of palaces, the faint kind I had always looked at in the shops, as if worn-through, at first sight; ancient, with golden, shimmering, veiled traces that glowed against the boards of the floor. If it had been big, I said to myself, I really would have taken it back. But it was quite small. An adequate centre carpet for this room. It made the lack of curtains ludicrous. I would get some straight away, cash a cheque. But above all this carpet married the curved chest of drawers, which I already called the cembalo in my mind. The two smiled together, removed everything from the street outside except what was old and no longer honoured: the night's experience was hurried away, a sudden courage seemed to swirl into me, perhaps dutch; as if history had come out after all and proved itself still there, with its sanity and mellow stamina, outfacing a thousand experiences like mine. I sat down on the bed. Palermo had put a bottle of whisky on the chest of drawers. Nice of him. At least, I supposed it was him. No glasses. But the stopper had been unsealed.

I went downstairs to thank Palermo for the bottle but Pat said he had just gone out. The light over his desk was still on.

'Did he put some whisky in my room?' I asked.

'Yes, we had a drink up there together.'

'Oh.'

I walked away and realised I had asked her the question just in case somebody else had left the bottle. But who? And why not ask her for the bill for that

carpet? Ask her at least what she had signed. But I went back upstairs. Sitting on the bed again I noticed that it was rumpled. There was a whitish patch on the inner blanket. Pat and Palermo? Well... I yawned. And without being conscious of it I lay back, and slept for over an hour. When I woke I found myself with my feet still over the side of the bed, in a sitting position. Not a sound of typing. I stretched and yawned, looked at my watch. Just past two. I peeped down the well of the stairs. No one there. I must go to the bank, which was at this end of the City, then buy some curtains. This wasn't really a resolve. It was just that it was the only thought remotely like a resolve that had come into my head, and I followed it because I didn't know where I was going, what my role was.

I walked all the way in the rather biting air, and the first thing I did at the bank was to telegraph fifty pounds to my wife. And sitting at one of the desks I wrote her a note, saying not to worry (the one expression to make her worry). As for the curtains, I had no idea where to start. First I had to find the material, then someone to measure up the windows. Of course I could get a firm to do the whole thing, send a man round. But without my wife what was the sense? Curtains were such a woman's thing. And then the firm would probably say they needed six weeks. So I left it. But I did need curtains. I felt the need more than I had done before. I realised it was because I didn't like being watched. I didn't like the idea of two great windows sending a shaft of light down on to the street. Still, I did nothing. I strolled back to the office, stopping at a bar for a cup of tea and something ambiguous called a bacon roll, which I ate ravenously without stopping, standing up.

Palermo was waiting for me when I got there, in another suit with a sparkling white shirt, the cuffs well down over his wrists with mother-of-pearl links.

'Have you been waiting long?' he asked me absently, looking at some sheets Pat had just typed.

'No. I've just come.'

'Where from, upstairs?'

'No,' I said, 'from the bank.'

'Oh.' He laid the sheets down again and made a familiar smile at me, going to his overcoat by the door. 'You must have a packet, ordering a carpet like that for your floor. I sprinkled a few drops of whisky on it by way of blessing.'

'Thanks.'

'I left my bottle up there, by the way, I'll get it back tonight.'

I stood there, and he too seemed to be waiting.

'Well,' he said impatiently, 'aren't you coming? We've got a conference.'

'Conference? Oh, I didn't realise.'

He looked at me with pursed lips and went downstairs, me following quickly behind. Rather good, I thought, that I'd come back at just that moment.

'It inspired confidence in Chandler-Williams,' he said in the street.

'What did?'

'The magic carpet. When I told him.' He winked at me, while I answered him with an idiotic expression. 'We'll take a taxi,' he added, 'and you pay, being the wealthier of the two.'

I had thirty pounds in my pocket, in single notes, which felt a huge bulge. I kept involuntarily feeling it at my breast. He gave the address to the driver, somewhere in the City, in fact only a block from where I had cashed the money.

'What sort of conference is this?' I asked him.

'About photographs,' he said, looking out of the window, his eyes bloodshot, yellowish, sullen. 'Christ, that woman's taking it out of me. And it's the finest time of my life. You see, Glen,' he said, still without looking at me, 'I've always wanted it like that. And I can't stop. I couldn't stop for any man on earth. We're at it all night, whenever the old man's tied up. By the way, he knows, doesn't he?' And he turned his tired eyes on me.

'Not that I can see.'

'Well, he'd better find out. Because I can't stop. I'm going to get him into it up to his teeth. I want to do him a good turn, Glen. In a day from now he'll be eating out of my hand. And want to kill me at the same time. You'll see. I'm working on something big.' A pause. 'She says the scandal's going to kill him, well, I don't reckon it will. That's hopeful on her part. You'll see.'

'But don't talk,' he added. 'I'm hanging on by a lifebelt, so are you for all you know. You do your own swimming, cock, and I'll do mine.'

'How do you mean?'

But he didn't answer, his head ducked towards the window again.

'Shouldn't I know what this conference is about?' I asked him as we got out of the taxi and I paid the meter.

We stood for a moment in the biting air.

'Just don't talk and you'll be all right,' he said. And we went through a tall, ugly doorway to a carpetless staircase, which made our steps echo as in our own office.

We walked past two doors, one a solicitor and the other a broker. Then we came to a small wooden sign jutting from the wall, SELSEY ASSOCIATES.

As we went in I said to him quietly, 'But what am I supposed to be?'

And without moving his face or looking in my direction, but going straight to the receptionist's window, he said under his breath, 'They'll recognise you.'

The receptionist jumped up from her swivel seat by the switchboard and said brightly, 'He's with Mr. Klydonhall.'

Palermo made an amazed whew noise under his breath and looked down at his suit, straightened his cuffs. And we followed the girl, who was much tinier than she had seemed: the reception-office floor must have been raised. She clicked along on her high shoes and suddenly Palermo imitated her from behind, pushing his hips from side to side. At that moment a door at the end of the corridor opened and there was a huge, beaming, red-faced fellow holding out his hand and saying in an enormous voice, 'Hullo, old pal, still up to your dirty tricks? Come and meet my playmate!'

He shook Palermo by the hand and putting his arm round his shoulder ushered him into the room without seeming to see me. Palermo was clearly trying to raise himself out of his mood of fragility, into an imitation of his other self.

'Oh,' he said, turning and forcing the huge man to stop also, 'I've brought my stooge. Glen, this is Leonard Harcourt Selsey, the biggest hypocrite in Fenchurch Street.'

No hand was offered me, only a quick nod from a flushed face, and the man said to Palermo over his shoulder, 'Not in my game, is he?'

'God, I should hope not!'

'Oh, that's all right,' the man said with another blank look at me, 'don't like people looking over my shoulder.'

There was some laughter from the other side of the room, another red face, but this time that of a jovial young man: or at least he was one of those who would be young for the better part of his life, because of the sheer readiness of his smile, which sent a sparkle into his eyes that never quite disappeared; and when he composed his face into seriousness you felt it was being held back by a

rein and would burst into light again at the slightest release. He had curly hair, which added to his youthfulness of indeterminate age. He had an ordinary business suit on, which suggested he had just slipped over from another office. I nodded to him, and he gave me a polite sparkle, before taking Palermo's hand in a formal introduction. I wasn't introduced. That was apparently my role. I only heard the name 'Percy Klydonhall', and saw Palermo look gracious and, very nearly, feminine: he was all of a heap with awe. I was almost not given a chair. The huge man was bubbling with professional laughter, talking most of the time, going to an untidy desk and then foraying out on to the carpet again, rubbing his hands together and ducking his head in an odd way with a little hissing sound through his teeth. Palermo had to indicate a chair for me, a straight-backed one near the edge of the room, while he and Klydonhall sat on armchairs.

'The point about Palermo,' the writhing man said with a great diving movement, laughing and hissing, 'is he's an amateur. Right, John?'

'Right, indeed,' Palermo said with a smile that showed the gold of his side-teeth. I'd never heard him called John before, and to judge by his flattered look neither had he.

And Klydonhall replied with his dazzling, boyish look, saying nothing, only nodding encouragingly at Palermo.

'What I mean, John,' the writhing Selsey went on, walking up and down, his hands behind his back, 'is these companies big and small have all got hardening of the arteries, one way or another. Burdened by official tax-forms---' A laugh--- 'and that sort of thing. What we want is a man working alone, and naturally I thought of you.'

'You see, Junior,' he said, turning to Klydonhall again, 'it does depend on people in the end, you simply can't handle this kind of thing through firms that ask you for a hundred thousand dollars on the nail and then try and interest you in a lot of blasted TV presentations.' More writhing and hissing. 'Well, John,' he went on, 'Percy and I have studied the goods you sent over---oh, by the way, is this---?' And he made a gesture towards me, blankly, not including me in it personally.

'That's right,' Palermo said, also not giving me so much as a glance.

'Well, I might say,' Selsey said with a rich grin, 'you do pick 'em up!'

And that, it seemed, was the end of me.

'Now, as you know, John,' Selsey said, flinging himself with an almighty crack into his chair behind the desk, then as quickly rising again as if it had bitten him, 'we're interested in this sort of thing as the first of a series. I mean, you know as well as I do, we want to get into the publishing line, and it may as well be something artistic to kick off with. We mustn't lose money, John.'

'You're telling me.'

'We won't lose money. Now if you like to take this thing on your shoulders, OK. But it has to be faster than anything you've done before.'

'A week to first proofs.'

'All right, Percy?' the writhing man asked the other.

'Yes.' His voice was clear and boyish like his face: direct, nothing tenuous at all; ~~there was~~ no youthful ambiguity the moment he spoke.

'And, of course, John, keep our names out of it. But if you can launch us safely, and get the imprint known, you'll make a packet. I can promise you that.'

'You'd better,' Palermo said with a touch of vengeful grimness, having achieved his commission.

'Shouldn't there be something written?' Klydonhall asked in his level---almost fearfully level---voice.

'I don't think so,' Selsey replied a little dangerously. 'John and I have trusted each other for years, eh, John? And if we start playing the cuss with each other now, the whole boat's going to rock, for both of us---because we happen to be in the same ~~boat~~ one!' And he broke into an easy, writhing laugh that ushered away all the danger there had been.

'All right,' Klydonhall said with his youthful smile and nod, glancing politely at me as if to include me in the cleverness of it all, 'that's all right.'

'Now as to the other thing, John,' Selsey said, 'it depends on Charles. I've only met him once. I've given Percy here the outline. He's definitely interested.'

Klydonhall showed no response to this, only gazed in front of him: it seemed to be a very serious matter indeed.

Palermo said, 'Good. It's outside my field, really. I was approached, that's all. Thought it might be an idea to bring you together.'

'Well, Percy's agreed to that,' Selsey said. 'Naturally, he knows Charles's work. Matter of fact, Charles and I were at school together. We never met---he was in the Lower School. He was a crack shot on the range, I seem to remember.'

He said nothing more, only appeared to wait: Klydonhall---looking every bit his nickname 'Junior'---gazed ahead. Suddenly it was clear that the conference was over, cut off in the bud, as it were. Enough had been said, and Palermo jumped up, with a glance sideways for me to do the same.

'At the club, then,' he said.

'That's right,' Selsey replied, as we all shook hands again, 'I just thought you ought to meet Percy beforehand, we're terribly tied up this afternoon, otherwise we could have chewed the fat a bit more. By the way, I don't think your professor's had a very good deal from the press since he came over.'

'Oh,' Palermo said, 'he'll get a better one.'

'I bet he will,' Selsey said with a wink, 'once you get working.' He turned to me with an abstract smile: 'Cheerio,' he said, 'I only know you in the nude, I'm afraid.'

And the door was closed.

'What did he mean by that?' I asked as we walked by the receptionist again.

'Nothing.' He wasn't really aware of my question.

In the street he said with excitement, glancing back at the tall block for a moment with his eyes narrowed, 'Well, you've just met the reason for Muriel trying to commit suicide.'

'What?'

'Klydonhall, none other,' he said. 'By God, I've got to the top now, boy. I've seen him at the club, I've watched him wheel Muriel round the dance-floor at the 1810, but I didn't know I'd actually be shown to him. I reckon I worked that well.' He hunched his shoulders together, shivering, with cold and excitement. 'I'm all right from now on, he'll sign me a cheque every time I turn over in bed and fart, you see if he doesn't. Old Selsey worked that, I knew he would, I've been watching that pot-bellied old cunt for years, trying to squeeze a really good contact out of him, and I've got it now, by God. That Klydonhall spends his time running between Wall Street and Threadneedle Street, some of the jobbers call him Ariel. There isn't a pie on either side of the Atlantic he hasn't got a finger in. And my fingers are in now as well. No wonder I've always loved that Atlantic

alliance. By God---!' He rubbed his hands together again and made a peculiar fixed smile. 'If anybody'd told me this was going to happen a week ago I'd have laughed in his face. Come in, Glen, I'll treat you to a taxi this time, stay by me, boy, you're made, you need never look back, I'm in the money, and not only that, there's nobody in the world wouldn't like to know me now. I'll make everybody green with envy---it'll eat through them, corroding their guts.'

In the taxi he told me, 'Don't think you haven't played your part. You have. You're worth all that three hundred quid. I'll tell you the key-name to all this, and it's Charles Dornelling.'

'Who's he?'

'Who's he, he asks,' Palermo said, gazing out of the window fervently, 'you were at his flat all night.'

'What?'

He gave me an impatient look. 'In Cambridge, you chump!'

'Oh!'

'Now he's got a pet-project, I've got a pet-project---is there a man on the earth who hasn't? The art is to bring them together. And I did it by accident. I rang up old Selsey and talked about both these projects in the same breath. Of course I knew it was up Junior's street, he's got most of his fingers in oil and he wants to branch out. I mean, he's got an ocean of money, but he'll do anything to add the tiniest little drop more. Sort of hobby.'

'What projects?'

'Well, you keep your mouth sewn up and your eyes open, and you'll learn something. It's dangerous being alive, Glen. By God, I've learned that. I might say I've practised life rather than lived it. Well, now I'm at the peak, and Chandler-Williams had better watch out how he talks to me. It's taken a long time but I made it. I did, by God, I did!'

He was silent, still gazing outside as if the buildings offered him explanations of some kind.

'You know, Glen,' he said quietly, 'a woman always lets something drop when she isn't thinking, and this something always makes you think afterwards that she really was thinking, which is true---she was, but not with her brains. She was thinking somewhere else, between her legs. And Lou just dropped his name, like a penny. 'Charles,' she said. And I happened to know that Charles had a project he'd give his right hand to exploit. And I knew it was only a matter

of time before Grigg got interested. A matter of time and money. Well, the money's here all of a sudden, in the form of Percy Klydonhall. I've got them all in my hands nicely.' He smiled. 'And shall I tell you something? It doesn't interest me one damned bit. That's how I can do it so easy. Keep those words of mine in mind, Glen. Never be too interested. Know what I'm going to do?'

'No?'

'I'm having Jeff Grigg and Klydonhall talking business within six hours from now, while I'm in bed with the wildest creature on earth.'

We got out of the taxi. I noticed that in a subtle way Selsey had destroyed my status even for me: I shuffled along at Palermo's side like his office-boy.

'What was the idea of calling me your stooge?' I asked.

'I thought we were realists,' he said. 'Tomorrow I might call you my boss. Whatever fits. As Jack Ryan says, the world we live in was cooked up by Marx and Hegel, with Hitler doing the souffles. Opportunism governs, Glen, and I'd like to see an exception to that. You're not trying to tell me <u>you're</u> one, are you?' he asked with a nasty look sideways.

His fingers fluttered ever so slightly now and then, pale and slim, darting up to his collar and then diving into a pocket unnecessarily, as he stared at the pavement before him, still excited, his lips tight together. There were dark rims under his eyes which I hadn't noticed earlier in the afternoon. I noticed one thing---whenever he rasped and hissed at me the effects on him seemed to be as painful. It made me feel I was a kind of inner enemy he was fighting off: even, a part of himself. His eyes didn't really see me, and in a most strange way I didn't feel included in the conversation when the subject was me. It was a hypothetical me for which my face and speech only supplied the pretext.

'By the way,' he said, 'Percy Klydonhall's a lord. Did you know that?'

'No.'

'He doesn't use the title any more since he became American.'

'What?' I said. 'He's an American?'

'Why shouldn't he be?' He stopped and looked at me. 'Any objections?'

'No, but everybody seems to be!'

He studied me with a kind of ironical amusement. 'You'd better not harbour dark thoughts about our Percy, you know. Best not to gnaw the hand that feeds you.

Take a little bite now and then, this is almost what they expect, but never gnaw steadily. He may be our keeper for years, decades, remember.'

'And what's Muriel got to do with him?'

'Ucch! You know these girls. They get ideas after a couple of dances.' And he said no more.

At the foot of the office-stairs I said to him, 'Come to my room and have a drink,' and to my surprise he turned to me with a smile, rather like someone waking up slowly, and replied absent-mindedly, 'Well, I wondered when you were going to thaw.'

He called out for Pat but she wasn't there. 'Bitch,' he murmured, 'I tell these girls, never leave the office empty---'

'I'm up here!' came Pat's irritated voice---from my room.

'What, drinking my hooch?' he said, more cheerfully: and we went straight up.

'By the way,' he said to me on the stairs, 'I want you to look at this Adam and Eve thing.'

'The poster?' I asked. 'I'm in it!'

He gave me an exasperated look: 'Don't you ever listen? I mean the preface!'

'What preface?'

'Oh, go to hell!' Then, 'I thought you were bloody-well dreaming this afternoon. No wonder old Selsey held his nose and pulled an invisible lavatory chain behind your back when we were leaving.'

'I'll pull his chain, if he's not careful...' I grumbled.

'Not while we're making money out of him,' he said as we got to my room and found Pat sitting on my bed with a glass of whisky in her hand. 'Well, blimey, this is ripe, who told you you could swill my stuff in office hours?'

She took no notice but addressed me: 'I bought you some glasses.'

'Oh, that's nice of you.' There were five on the chest-of-drawers, and she was sipping from one. 'Thank you, Pat!'

'You see how sweet my girls can be,' he said, sitting on my bed at her side.

With a yawn she got up and prepared whiskies for us, while Palermo winked at me and pointed at her rear quarters with an obscene gesture.

'All right, funny,' she said quietly, 'I've got eyes in my arse, you know.'

He smiled at this, showing his strong white teeth. Some of his other self---one hesitated to say his real self, in case this frail partner proved his real self---came back.

'I met Percy Klydonhall, darling,' he said.

This made her turn, the glasses in her hands. 'Honest, you did?'

'I thought that'd shake you.'

'Has he been to see Muriel?'

'Well, of course. At least---I suppose.'

There was silence while she brought the glasses to us, with a thoughtful look.

After a sip he said to her, 'I bet you'd like a lick off that barrel.'

'Not me.' She sat down with a sulky movement.

'No? I can read poppet's faces.'

'Not mine, you can't.' She gave him a steady look, suddenly with the earnestness of a child.

With the first gulp of whisky inside him he took out a cigarette and lit it, with that thorough movement of hands and lips that seemed to try to tidy up the broken bits of the day. He sucked in smoke cleanly, through lips formed like a tube, and emitted it in one fine shaft, after a hissing sound in the teeth, everything in his face sharp for a moment. And it seemed appropriate that this cutting symbolic motion should be by means of a drug, which brought a grey film to his eyes and could strike him down with disease. His satisfaction as he sucked seemed all the greater for being dangerous, in a helpless contradictory ecstasy, so private that it only showed via a tiny light in his eyes, like the fear plus cunning you see in animals sometimes.

'Well,' he said, studying the tiny glowing point that had supplied his dangerous pleasure, 'you can keep away from the club tonight because I don't want you and Muriel tearing each other's eyes out.'

She pouted at this, staring into her glass with unnecessary closeness, swirling the whisky round quickly: 'We'd most likely tear yours out.'

'You'd rue the day,' he snarled at her quietly.

She turned to me again: 'I think you need a nice table on that carpet.'

'It's some carpet,' Palermo said, leaning back and gazing at it.

'It makes a nice room to come up to,' Pat said. 'Humanises the place.'

'I'd like some curtains,' I told her. 'And I think I'll fix that door downstairs, you never know who might come in.'

'Do you need Pat?' I asked him when we'd finished our drinks. 'She could help me buy some curtains.'

'Out of whose money?'

'Mine.'

'Oh, I don't mind that. OK, Glen, take this poppet and see she keeps away from the club tonight, that's all. And you be there by seven sharp, with all your faculties alive.'

'Where?'

'I told you, at the club. A great night is ahead of us. And listen, Glen---' I stopped. 'From now on we only sing hymns of praise and paeons of love for Professor Grigg, get it? If you know anything bad about him, keep it dark. In fact, keep your mouth shut altogether. I only want you to use your ears tonight.'

The whisky had made Pat look tired and pale, and she stood waiting for me, a child whose face was strangely swollen beyond its first innocent proportions, with a rim of tan make-up round her neck, showing the starved pallor of her actual skin.

'Do you know where to go for curtains?' Palermo asked her with an unusual paternal care, screwing up his eyes.

'I think so,' she said helplessly, at the door, her bag in her hand.

'A small shop won't do it in under six weeks, by which time I'll have kicked him out of his job, so go to a small one.' He didn't even wink at me to make it a joke.

'I'd take the curtains with me,' I said, 'if you did kick me out.'

I steered her in the opposite direction from Parson's shop, where I had a nervous feeling that I could find a perfect table for the asking, and some gorgeous curtains too. I resolved to go to that shop as soon as possible and find out where I stood. Now that I tried to remember the conversation I'd had with Parsons I couldn't, and therefore what there could possibly be of the incriminating in it I no longer knew. Of course he would present me with a bill--- this was a sane world, after all---and the bill would be immense. That I had allowed the carpet to lie on my floor even for an hour astonished me. There was the chest-of-drawers, too. What was I being bribed to do? Must that too take its place in the chest of secrets being hoarded on my behalf? And when would it be wrenched open: what would I find? I had the delirious impression as I walked along with Pat's arm in mine that these secrets formed one pattern, which would

be a total indictment of me in the end. There being an element of nightmare in this, something that didn't belong to sane and predictable life as I had been brought up to believe in it, there seemed to me no way I could halt the process, my will was as limp---though not quite, quite dead---as in that dream where you try to run and your legs remain still. If I could have had a moment's pause from this peculiar gathering routine of events it might have been all right, but I saw the possibility of pausing nowhere, having asked this girl to come shopping with me, having agreed to be at Palermo's club (where was it, by the way?)... Yet what obligations did these things constitute? None at all. Then there was something in me that needed them? What was that need? I had two hundred and fifty pounds in the bank, I could go to a hotel tonight and never see that miserable narrow house of two storeys again, I could take the next plane out, buy my ticket right away, have enough in my pocket when I arrived at Milan airport to wire my wife and prepare her for a week's holiday---say, at Santa Margherita. It occurred to me, as I went blindly down ~~to~~ the Tube at Pat's side, that I really did believe in the sanity of the world round me, I believed that its coils would turn out to be embraces, that things were all right. And wasn't this insanity?

'That's one thing he'd never do, think of making a place nice,' she said.

We went to one or two big stores, and managed to get a promise of two weeks for the curtains. They would send a man round the next afternoon. It would cost a good bit more than I'd thought.

'You pay for the name,' Pat told me.

And I could have sent that sum to my wife!---hot panic swept through me. Two weeks---did I mean to be here another two weeks?

After that we looked for a man to fix the door downstairs, but were unsuccessful. A local man, everybody told us: a carpenter-and-joiner would do it. Just a matter of planing down the bottom of the door. If we had a plane we could do it ourselves... Pat and I were looked at as a young couple---she persisted with her arm in mine, even in the stores: it made my skin tingle in an actual sensation of falsity, my body trying to fly out of a situation it didn't fit.

And just before we said cheerio to each other, after taking a cup of coffee at a bar, I asked her, 'Where's this club of Palermo's?'

'Oh, don't you know?'

And though I did my best not to concentrate on the directions she gave me, they were as clear as a map in my mind, and would remain clear until the tall doors of the club---she described them too---closed behind me.

12.

As soon as I got into the club my reluctance to go seemed mad. It was so clearly a sane place. I was introduced quickly to a group round Palermo, all men so far, on long settees and deep in armchairs. There was somebody called Jack who unlike everybody else in the room was dressed in a sports jacket with a casual shirt, sharp, bright and attentive, switching his head quickly from one side to another, whenever someone spoke, his eyes clear and almost devoid of expression, as if they were waiting for somebody else to fill them with feeling, out of information given; he nodded to me pleasantly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and I immediately had a desire to go over and sit by him and just talk, unload everything on my mind. But I was put by Palermo, and next to a man whose name I think was Pew. I think Palermo introduced him simply as Mr. Pew, and he did most of the talking, not looking at anyone in particular, his speech lacking point and direction.

'Old jobber Carter-Staines,' Pew was saying, 'grumbling the other day, no bloody crises, have to engineer one, he said. If only the PM'd be caught in a toilet soliciting, we could work a day-crisis and have the bloody prices down, but all the sex perverts in the cabinet are in hiding.' The others smiled, sniffed, looked in the direction of the bar, turned to each other and mumbled things.

It was a club for women as well, like most of its kind in Soho---little more than a bar and a dining room attached. But this one was comfortable---fitted carpets, soft wall-lights, plushy chairs, and a smart staircase leading from the entrance. A commissionaire was standing outside, but not a beefy one: the uniform and stature were modest, and the nod he gave you established intimacy at once. It was a club for deals. Some people were already eating in the dining room, and there was the slight clatter of dishes. The people sitting on stools

up at the bar were well dressed, quiet, smoking together, probably on their way to the theatre, or on their way from work.

Palermo leaned over to me and said under his breath, 'Biggest crooks in London here, you should be in your element.' And he winked at me. 'See the one by himself, corner of the bar, that's de Lisle Swiburne's moving brain, he nearly killed Jean for putting his boss inside like that, would have killed her but her husband appealed for clemency.' The man, dressed in what looked like a fine cashmere suit, very dark and smooth, was talking to the barman, matter-of-fact and with such a thoroughly unblemished expression that I realised suddenly what Palermo meant when he said 'the more crooked, the more innocent the expression.'

A whisky was put in front of me, and without a thought in my mind I took it and drank off two or three gulps. Pew was a plump, bald-headed man with a large belly and wasted, damp skin: he had a twitch of the eyes that accompanied all his talk, and even when nobody was listening he went on. 'I could have made a nice packet out of that, I had it all over the morning papers, nasty lot of buggers stock-jobbers, but I'm no angel, eh?', and he wheezed with laughter silently so that his belly shook.

There was also a man everybody called Tan, perhaps because of his swarthy face, who kept coming to the group and talking for a few moments, then leaving. He looked at me keenly once when Palermo was talking to him, and I had the feeling that Palermo had told him something about me. But such was the quiet ease of the place that it made no impression on me, and I only remembered the keen, silver eyes set with terrible evenness in a dark face afterwards when I was walking home, after Palermo had turned the corner with Lou on his arm, swaying, in a deserted street.

Lou and Grigg appeared late, and said they were hungry and would like to eat right away. So we all trooped next door to a long table in the corner, with potted plants round it, which confirmed my feelings of safety and trust. The man at the bar whom Palermo had called de Lisle's brain had disappeared. I saw Tan nod towards him briefly and say to Palermo under his breath, 'Zero hour tonight, you can take it from me.'

'I'll believe it when I see it,' Palermo said, giving the parting figure a narrow glance. 'Not with the French police. They use guns.'

Grigg nodded to me, his face clear of lines---or perhaps it was the effect of soft lights. At any rate, he showed no mark of the previous night. Lou wore a gown to kill: her shoulders were bare, and Palermo kept glancing at her; so did the others, she being the only woman at the table. Whisky was served all round, neat, as an aperitif, and the talk became loud. The man called Jack didn't stay at the table long, he had to be back at the office. But he said he'd be round for a chat again, and he gave me a wink. He seemed to be on good terms with Palermo, perhaps even to know me. I had a sensation of thickness: that is, a barrier between myself and life, so formed that my real self could sleep safely while my hands and voice and eyes did their work proficiently outside. I never tried to make conversation, I just ate and nodded when I was spoken to, yawned, scratched my face. Everyone except Grigg smoked between the courses, which were brought by waiters who never said a word: only the head waiter spoke, in an undertone, to Palermo, taking his order as if it was a private deal. Lou hardly had a glance for me. I knew at once that this wasn't neglect at all: she had accepted me at last. And in that I knew how deep I'd entered into---I knew not what.

Grigg showed no nervousness, certainly no presentiment. I wondered how much he knew. But knowing didn't help. You just had to look after yourself, and he was doing that, lowering his head to scoop up some food, wiping his mouth with his napkin, gazing round with drowsy eyes, leaning sideways to take in something Pew was saying, with a laugh at the end that was no more than politeness ~~required.~~ I ate everything put before me---consommé, rare steak, pancakes done at a side-table, flambés: three things I never touched usually. Yes, you've lost yourself, each mouthful said. I tasted nothing, nor was I hungry. The drink helped. There was a claret, a bit inky, which I gulped down, followed by a Chablis which hadn't been cooled properly. I felt sick where normally I should have felt afraid. There was no cause for fear. The man called Jack returned just as we finished our brandies, and he was with Muriel this time. She was dressed in black, which made her look like a child, very pale, with fuzzy hair, like a Reynolds portrait. She hardly took note of the company, didn't seem to see me. She went straight to Grigg, whom she didn't know, and sat next to him. Palermo watched her mildly, his hand on his chin again. He was still holding himself back: or was ill. There was an extra pallor on his face tonight, reminding me of when he saw the police in his office, interviewing me.

As we walked back into the lounge Lou touched my arm softly and said, ever so slightly pushing me aside from the others, 'I'm glad you took it, honey.'

'Took what?'

'The cheque.'

'What cheque?' I asked her, stopping.

'Didn't he give it to you?' I looked from her across to Palermo with my mouth open. 'For three hundred pounds?'

'He said it was for---!'

She took my arm and walked me on. 'Anyway, I'm mighty relieved. So is Jeff.'

Then she asked, 'Have you used any of it?'

'Yes.'

'That's good, then it's too late to be proud.'

'It is.'

I was stunned not really by her news as by my feeling that I had known all along and half-conspired with Palermo to call it an advance.

But then her news had the opposite effect. It made me feel good. It even gave me a sense as I sat in one of the armchairs opposite Grigg and Muriel that I belonged in their family. There is nothing like getting money from people on false pretences, having done nothing whatever to earn it, for inducing a sense of intimacy. I felt no obligation, least of all shame. Only the fool is ashamed to receive money. I realised more, that this sum gave me more pleasure than all the sums honestly arrived at in the south of Italy, by painstaking sales in sweltering dusty lanes and cool cellars with the half-filled glass held up to the light and that familiar bubbling and swilling noise of the mouth when the wine was tried. I was now cancelled out, in a real sense. And that was a pleasure. It laid me naked. From that time on no pride was allowed me. And that was a weight off me---the pride that was dead and gone. I was thoroughly dependent on others. I did nothing, could do nothing. So I---was: all I had was myself, and if it went under, so be it; I was delivered up completely and absolutely to the fate that governs the whole span of our state from dust to dust; we can't pay our way, much less earn it, in death; we offer our skulls, delicious sinews and nerves, to the worms, who give no receipt for what they take; if that is earning our way, then we earn it---but they can't sack us; and I had arrived at that state of thorough nudity to the facts, the real and everlasting facts, ~~of life~~ rather prematurely. I had given up the facts of life as they are for the banker, whom

it hurts to owe a cent. I owed everything. Nothing could be more magnificent than that.

I settled myself deep in my chair and let the unfortunate meal digest: Lou had done me good; I felt right for the first time that day. While I was looking at her somebody touched my shoulder and there was the man called Jack leaning over me. 'I've got you a drink, come over and join us, old chap.'

The party had got divided, which I hadn't noticed, and there was a group including Pew and a rather beaten-looking man I hadn't seen before at a table on the far side of the room. I followed Jack and found a whisky waiting for me on that table. Again I found that my body had no objection---I wolfed it in two or three gulps.

'You're Palermo's new acquisition,' he said with a smile. 'He always seems to be getting new men.'

'Does he?' I said, not heartened with <u>this</u> news.

Pew was talking to the other man in an undertone, switching his soft weight from one side to the other while he looked with vague eyes at the ceiling.

'Didn't mean to drag you away from your friends,' Jack said.

'That's all right.'

'You'll be going on to a night spot, lucky people.'

'Oh, I didn't know,' I told him.

The idea formed in my mind that here was the first healthily straightforward person I'd talked to since first clapping eyes on Palermo. He looked at me brightly, not exactly with boyishness but something like it: he seemed to earnestly participate in your life, in a brotherly way---yes, that was it, he was a brother, the world's brother. You could swear that everybody else in the world had wrong lives, and only he with his light hair and curved, slim nose and flushed cheeks and darting, inquisitive glances really knew about good. And his face told you something about yourself: you were decent and clean and sensible, as he was.

'I was with Palermo last night,' he said, 'at this table, as a matter of fact, but you weren't around. You were asleep or something.'

'No, I was at a party.'

'Oh, yes?' His open face made it seem his party, too.

'In Cambridge,' I told him, with relief at talking unguardedly for a change.

'Friends of yours?'

'The Griggs, over there---the couple.'

'Oh, yes, they've taken Charlie Dornelling's place in Cambridge, haven't they?' And he made a smiling glance towards them.

'That's right.'

'Defence brain,' Jack added. 'Best defence brain this country's got, outside the government.' And he smiled again, giving me a slight brotherly nudge as if to deprecate brains among sensible people. 'Never will go for parliament, keeps his influence with both parties that way.'

'Ah, yes?'

'So---' Another very bright smile---'was it a nice party?'

'It went on all night.'

'What could be nicer than that?' A brotherly laugh.

'Have another whisky,' I said. He was doing me good.

'Don't mind if I do. Better tell him you're not a member of the club, he'll chalk it up and you pay at the end.'

I gestured one of the barmen over and when he brought the whiskies he put cardboard discs under the glasses as they do in French cafés, to show how many you'd had.

'You're a member?' I asked him.

'Oh, yes. They have to sweep me out at dawn sometimes.'

'That was the funny thing last night,' I said, 'I didn't get a wink of sleep all night but I felt as right as rain this morning. Depends on the party, I suppose.'

'On the host, too.'

'That's right.'

'I imagine old Grigg knows how to do it?'

'He's said to lace the drinks a bit but he told me himself it's his wife Lou. Mind you, he shoots his mouth off a bit, old Jeff. You know what he's over there for, I suppose?'

'Some lecture tour, isn't it?'

'That's right. He said what Europeans know about thermonuclear war could be got on a postage stamp. He said they'd got 'expendable' written all over their faces.'

'Did he?' His slight wink made this into a joke, and we both laughed.

'He said they had the effrontery to be horrified when he gave a lecture on vaporation, which means vaporisation, when people and even buildings just melt in the heat. He said the Europeans had kept their moral indignation well-fed and well-clothed for a couple of decades and now they had the sauce to turn round and call him a trigger-happy punk---something like that, he's a scream!'

'He sounds it.' And again we laughed.

'There was some general or other there, anyway Jeff said he was a crumb, he reads the English poets and rides a horse and buys his wine direct from the French vineyards, and he said they only use him as an advertisement, they wheel him round the world as a nice white glove over the mailed fist.'

'That wouldn't be General Heeley, would it?' he asked with a smile.

'Yes, that's right. He called him a chocolate soldier.' And we laughed again.

We sipped our drinks, smiled, gazed across at the other group---they also were smiling and chatting, Grigg with Muriel, Lou with Palermo.

'But he went early,' I said.

'Who?'

'General Heeley.'

'Oh, yes.'

'It would have got a bit hot for him, I think.' And I laughed while he looked at me expectantly. 'They've certainly got central heating in that flat. We stewed!'

'You did?'

'Then everybody started taking their clothes off. Believe it or not.'

'No!' His face had just enough surprise and yet genial detachment to make me go on.

'You started with your shoes and he gave everybody a little number tag, and this was the number of your bag in the cloakroom where you put your clothes. Yes, we had a ripe old night!' I laughed, and he laughed too.

'Well,' I went on, 'a sort of dance started up, the idea being that you couldn't join in the dance without being starko. He and his wife started off, and I can't remember who went up then, I think it was that English chap---'

'The defence brain?'

'That's right. But I tell you something, it's very funny, it didn't strike you as lascivious or anything like that, I mean you really got to know people, I

mean you saw them exactly as they were and not as a bag of facial tricks, I mean I can well understand people in ancient times like the Etruscans going naked, climate permitting of course, I reckon this central heating was equivalent to an Egyptian August!'

He was clearly enjoying it.

'Yes,' I went on, 'it was an experience worth having, as the actress said to the bishop. But when he put a saucepan on my head and started dragging me across the floor---'

'No!'

'Yes, you see his wife Lou had the idea that I was always running to the papers and, you know, sort of spilling the beans about their life, it's completely ridiculous as I've never spoken to an editor in my life and apart from Palermo I've never met anybody even mildly connected with the press, but anyway she was convinced that I was out for a story and she was trying to persuade me not to do it any more, well, anyway, there she was sitting naked on my knee, you know everything quite harmless and above-board but who should come in but the old man himself and of course he jumps to the inevitable conclusion.'

'No!'

'The first thing he sights is about the hugest saucepan you've ever seen, one of those jobs they used in Victorian times when Mrs. Beeton was putting sixteen eggs in a soufflé, he puts it over my head and I can tell you if you haven't had that weight of iron on your brain-box it hurts some, then he starts calling me a crumb like General Heeley and drags me across the floor, and---this is nothing yet, wait till you get this---he calls on a friend who's about eight feet tall in his socks to help throw me out, and out they do throw me, saucepan and all, stark naked and a firmly locked door between me and my clothes!'

'No!'

'You think I'm making it up, but I'm not. There I was, stuck outside, I didn't know whether to run up or down and finally I plumped for doing exercises to keep warm, anyway I reckon I was out there for a full ten minutes and I started getting worried by this time as to whether I was in for pneumonia but just then she opens the door and lets me in.'

'Good God!'

'Listen, you haven't heard anything yet---when she lets me in she tells me he took her over to the Madonna, they've got a Madonna in the bedroom, they're Catholics---'

'Oh, yes?'

'That's right. Anyway, he leads her over there and makes her swear on a bible that she's never had anything untoward with me, which she does immediately, and as he knows she wouldn't risk hellfire for the whole of eternity just for a mortal sin, being a Catholic, he believes her and says he's sorry and lets her let me in. Well, of course, in I come blowing and hissing with cold, then they're both as nice as pie and he breaks a bottle of the finest Mouton Rothchild, and we end friends, and I leave feeling as if I've been on a cure at a German spa, apart from an ache in my back and a few scratches round my neck where his blasted saucepan caught me!'

'Well,' he laughed, 'that sounds quite an adventure!'

And we leaned back and enjoyed ourselves, just laughing, while he ordered another whisky all round.

'Yes,' he murmured, 'it sounded quite an evening.'

The dining room was filling up and there were more people at the bar. I was pleasantly hot and there was a constant broad smile on my face, and I had the comfortable impression of having made a friend. We talked on a bit with Pew, who said he wanted to discuss something called 'Massacre 2', which I didn't understand, then Jack got up after a look at his watch and said he must be off, he had a couple of hours' work before him.

'Don't get up,' he told me, putting his hand on my shoulder. 'And thanks. Don't worry about it, by the way---I'll be getting in touch with you.'

I nodded and after shaking hands with him I followed him with my eyes, wondering what his last remark meant. Anyway, I'd made a friend. I finished the last of my whisky and said to Pew and his friend, 'Must be joining the main party over there, if you'll excuse me.'

'Yes, of course.' And he gave me a respectful nod: I must have cut a good figure, causing so much mirth, I thought.

I walked over to the others and put myself in the only vacant seat, next to Palermo. There had been a fresh wave of drinks, and I noticed that he didn't make a point of asking me what I wanted. So I ordered one of my own, and the discs from the other table were brought over to me.

When I thought he was never going to speak to me again he turned and said quietly, with a nod towards the discs, 'You've got quite a collection. They charge night-club prices to non-members, too.'

I nodded and took another sip from my whisky, holding it up ostentatiously. 'I dare say I can run to it.'

He studied me with his eyes, quite still.

'Listen,' he said, with a cautionary glance at Lou, who was talking to Muriel, 'how many times do you sell your soul? You've sold it three times, to my knowledge. Aren't you afraid of going into liquidation?'

'What do you mean?'

'As far as I know, you've sold it to me, to the dear good Lou here, and now to Jack Ryan. Which makes you the coolest bastard under the sun. Now what was the deal?' he hissed.

'Jack Ryan?' My mouth was open with surprise again.

'Jack Ryan?' He imitated me, and I saw from his imitation how ridiculous I looked, with my wide eyes and gaping mouth. 'What was the big laugh? Eh? Well, I'll tell you one thing, stories go through <u>me</u>, I'll see you don't get a direct fee, you bastard, you're not smarming your way through all my contacts and you can take that as final! Boy,' he added with narrow eyes, 'have I had about enough of you. If it wasn't for what you did for me last night I'd kick you out here and now.'

'Was that the editor, Jack Ryan, you mean?'

'No, it was Fred Karno with a troupe of bloody monkeys! Listen, it takes you about two minutes flat to get across there and make a contact, doesn't it? You're about the coolest bastard I've ever seen, and I reckon I'll die saying those words. The only thing,' he said, leaning back and taking out a cigarette, 'is I have to admire you, the way you do it, with that innocent bloody expression that makes everybody think you're mentally deficient.'

'I didn't know he was Jack Ryan, he asked me to come across and have a drink.'

'Da, da, da, da, da,' he sneered, revolving his hand like a man playing a hurdy-gurdy.

'Anyway,' I said, 'that three hundred wasn't yours to give, you call me a bastard!'

This pulled him up a bit, and he glanced carefully at the others before hissing at me, 'Keep office business to office hours!'

'We'd better make that a pact, then,' I said to him with an attempt at a menacing gaze.

'One thing I did learn from Jack Ryan,' I went on, 'is that you change employees like a man changes socks. Well, you don't change <u>me</u>.'

He made another cautionary glance towards Lou, who was still busy with Muriel. 'I'll find out who's behind you, boy, don't worry,' he hissed.

But my remark had made him nervous and he gave his cigarette a fluttering, delicate shake that roused me to pity. The way he looked at me, with a trace of sheepish fear, turned me into a force inside him, so that even as I felt pity I felt sure of my own position. Yet I meant less to him than the cuffs of his shirt.

'And another thing,' he said, 'we've got Percy Klydonhall joining us tonight, so don't go bawling your mouth off again.'

I thought he had stopped but he hadn't. 'Listen,' he went on, 'if you try and backchat old Klydonhall it can look safe all right because he's always got a smile on his clock, but let me tell you this, he's not a decoration in this town, he doesn't just run a line in art books, he's up to his neck in oil shares, he knows a thing or two about weapons and I don't mean just weapons like yours, what I'm trying to say, Glen, is mind your tongue because that man can destroy, at least I think he can.'

Grigg looked across at him. 'Sounds quite a recommendation,' he said. 'Who are you talking about?'

'He's your biggest contact of the year, if not of the decade.'

Grigg nodded and winked at me. 'I like to hear your boss chew your balls off,' he said. 'Does me good. Those your chips?' He pointed to the discs deposited next to my glass.

I nodded. 'Give 'em to me,' he said, and swooped the lot into his hand. And he called over the waiter.

'No, look here,' I said, 'I've got plenty of money---!'

This made him laugh in a hoarse way, and his lines became deep and dark like crayon marks: 'You're telling me! You've got a thousand bucks from me!' And this time he winked at Palermo.

The waiter came, and I watched him pay what looked like an enormous sum of money---I felt happy enough to be let off. And Palermo also watched, with a sullen glower all over his eyes. Muriel and Lou went off to the cloakroom---they must have ladies' matters to discuss, and I wondered what these were. Muriel looked frail and angular at Lou's side. The all-night party seemed to have made no difference to Lou. The lines of her face had deepened, that was all. I heard her deep voice as she leaned slightly towards the girl, and then Muriel's nervous

laugh. The suicide attempt had drained the blood from her face and she had lost weight. Above all, she had lost conviction: her body trusted nothing. Lou put her arm round her shoulder consolingly, just before they disappeared through a doorway.

'Quite a girl,' Grigg said, leaning forward towards Palermo, across me. 'Been telling me her life story.'

'Glad you like her,' Palermo said, withdrawing slightly, with a reserved and fastidious look that surprised me. It made him seem ancient, with a fine skin drawn from the shadows of history, next to Grigg.

Grigg nodded and looked at him briefly, his eyes narrowed for a moment, seeming to take stock of this reaction.

'I didn't say that, old son,' he said. And he watched him in a level way, with some ethical meaning that escaped me. 'I meant just a nice child. Nice ways. Pity she got mixed up in---' He made a gesture across the room. 'This sort of thing.'

'Oh, she enjoys night-life,' Palermo replied, putting another cigarette in his mouth with fluttering fingers, narrowing his eyes too.

'Do girls take an overdose of sleeping pills when they're happy?' Grigg asked, his ethical look still there, supported by a firm chin.

'Sometimes.' And the cigarette was lit, the flame shaking for a moment.

'Sometimes? How do you make that out, Mr. Palermo?'

Palermo shrugged, not facing him. 'Could be she had problems, and needed the problems. That happens, you know.' And he looked at him.

'Didn't I hear she was Percy Klydonhall's girl of the year?' The ethical look was less---because of having been resisted, perhaps.

'She could only have told you that herself,' Palermo said, his eyes turned away again, busy avoiding the smoke from his cigarette. 'She could be keen on Percy, for all I know.' And he added, 'That's the chap you're going to meet, by the way: Lord Klydonhall.'

'The oil man?'

'That's right.'

Grigg thought this over, still looking at Palermo, and then nodded slowly. 'Still, a damn nice girl.' The news had excited him.

'Yes.'

'Does this Klydonhall go in for young girls, on a wide scale, I mean?'

'Well, we're all friends. He might have slept with her.' Palermo looked at him again, with a slight downward, perhaps disdainful, gaze. 'Any law against that?'

'No, I just wondered what it had to do with the taking of sleeping pills.' He spoke much more mildly, not really interested any more.

'Nothing.'

'I see.' And Grigg asked with a perplexed frown, 'You say this guy's American? Then what's he doing being a lord?'

'He gave up the title.'

'Oh, yes.'

The return of the women was a signal for us to leave: I'd forgotten we were off to a night club. As we went out Palermo leaned close to me and said out of the corner of his mouth, 'Boy, did he make me sweat. I can see, he's going to make me work for every inch.'

Grigg walked ahead with the women, one on each arm.

'Neat how he paid for my drinks,' I said with a smile.

'Neat of <u>him</u>?' Palermo gave me a disbelieving look. 'That was neat of <u>you</u>!'

Outside, he tipped the commissionaire two pound notes, pushing them into his hand so that they were crumpled up, without a glance at him: this procedure seemed to have professional meaning, because the man, also without a glance back, said a ringing 'Thank you very much, Mr. Palermo, sir!' that advised everybody in the party on Palermo's secure status. This status was declared firmly and definitely for Grigg. And Grigg understood. As we piled into the taxi, pulling down the spare seats, he gave Palermo a quick gruff look of appreciation: it was the ritual he himself had used a hundred times, in his own places, and knowing it was a ritual made it no less significant for him; Palermo had proved himself just by knowing what the ritual was.

It had started to rain, and the air was warmer. I was sitting next to Lou on the crowded seat, and the warmth from her body reminded me of the previous night, which I now realised had given me the sense of a family connection with her, reinforced by my having taken money from her. In fact, I found myself hoping it would be a regular income. That this income would be due to a form of menace on my part, though the menace didn't exist and was only imagined (but what about tomorrow morning's paper, or would Ryan wait for the evening editions?) did occur to me: and aroused not the slightest twinge of regret. It seemed in the

strangest way right and even lovely to menace people like Lou and Grigg. They almost commanded me to do it. They would have despised me had I not done so---had they not thought me to be doing so. And why be despised? Why not be liked, and paid for it?

But the thought of the morning or evening editions troubled me. But of course Jack Ryan wouldn't use it. You couldn't publish details like that about people. On the other hand, I also began to feel proud. Because after all, it increased my menace, and wasn't that what I was being paid for? Hadn't I, surely, to work for what I got, like other people? And then I advanced to myself the weakest argument ever put forward by the democratic man to his own conscience, which is nevertheless put forward a thousand times a day: that their being disposed to think me a menace made me one.

I looked across at Lou in the darkness, and it seemed to me that she suddenly felt herself under scrutiny---suddenly had an inkling of what was going to happen in tomorrow's newspapers. She seemed almost to start, and looked at me closely, screwing up her eyes, so that her face almost touched mine.

'Enjoying yourself, Glen?' she murmured.

'I'll say. And you?'

'Whale of a time,' she said with a miserable expression, her doubtful gaze continuing.

Then she put her lips close to my ear and whispered, 'He cut up bad about that thousand bucks. But it makes him feel safe.' I nodded with my sheepish expression. 'Me, too.'

I whispered into her ear, 'Palermo told me it was an advance on salary, otherwise I wouldn't have taken it.'

She nodded and whispered back, 'OK, you don't have to rub it in. There's a way of doing everything, I know, only I just didn't cotton on before. I guess we village hicks have less experience.'

Grigg called over cheerfully, 'What's all the whispering in that corner?'

'Making assignations,' Lou called flatly.

Grigg thought this was a joke and nudged Palermo. 'I caught these two sitting together in the middle of the night and it looked mighty suspicious!'

Lou made an embarrassed chuckle, and Palermo looked across at me with a really brutal expression.

'But they were only discussing terms,' Grigg went on, enjoying himself the more

as everybody else was silent. 'Do you really get that for a syndicated article, Glen?'

'Get what?'

'To my mind, no man should be paid for libels,' Palermo said, to my astonishment.

'Oh, come now,' Grigg said, still enjoying himself, 'mighty public outrages get to the ear of the world through people like Glen. That right, Glen? It's all very well for us to call 'em skunks, and I dare say they <u>are</u> skunks, but skunks are a legitimate part of nature.'

'OK, OK, dad,' Lou said quietly.

My eyes were fixed on Palermo. '<u>You</u> put those articles in the paper, why don't you tell him that?'

Palermo's response was extraordinary: he leaped forward in the cab and made a moral jabbing movement at me, shouting, 'I suppose I was laughing my guts out with Jack Ryan tonight too? Oh, come on, get wise to yourself! At least, if you're going to work for me that's the rule.'

I sat there dumbfounded, with everybody's silent criticism on me. It amazed me that Muriel said nothing, but I suppose she took me for just another skunk, nothing out of the usual. But to my surprise I felt no burning sense of injustice. The criticism was so complete that it removed my need for justice, by removing self altogether. I sat back placidly, feeling the drink and bolted food subsiding and then quietly rising and working inside me.

I found myself taking Lou's hand in mine and kissing it: 'Thank you for the thousand bucks, anyway.'

This ease of mine gave them ease too. In a moment the word skunk was forgotten, and Palermo was saying to me, pushing several pound notes into my hand, 'You pay the entrance fee, Glen, and I'll buzz upstairs and find a table.' We had arrived at the <u>1810</u>.

'Isn't this where royalty comes?' Grigg asked with a great smile, stooping his tall body to get out. A man was waiting with a vast umbrella---'Evening, sir, evening, madam,' in a strong voice.

We strolled into the dim, carpeted entrance while Palermo went on upstairs. Everything lay in a luxurious hush, curtained and carpeted as if against not only impetuous noises but desires as well. There were women coming from the powdering room, talking quietly, giggling, before going up the wide staircase which had once been stately and now looked tired and over-gilded, with only nights to remember,

not bright days any more. The air was suffocating, dusty: not an inch of surface that wasn't damasked or covered in some way; a round table stood in the middle of the entrance, draped over with heavy velvet. Waiters bustled round us, taking our coats, looking into our eyes with mocking expectation, their night-experiences making them wiser than us. They all seemed to know Muriel and paid her special attentions, as to an equal, asking her quick questions under their breath, with glances at the rest of us. One of them laid a silver platter on the table in front of me when I mentioned paying the entrance fee. And I thrust a handful of notes down with such a rough movement that the man responded just as the commissionaire had with Palermo: I was one of them. I stood there surprised at myself. Much of my moral position had come from thinking myself different from them, belonging to another world. And in this gesture of my hand pushed roughly down on a silver tray with more pound notes than I ever spent in a month I vindicated my right to be one of them, and thus my obligation to share their---I was going to say guilt but this a poor, insipid little twitch of vanity that doesn't belong to the Afterwards, where strong rushes of feeling are needed if its dead scenery is to be woken at all---the hot blush of shame, momentary, unseen, unexpected, quickly passed, irrelevant, but so hot that it shakes the whole foundations... Grigg took my arm as we walked up the soft stairs, leaving the women behind to spruce themselves again.

'I don't say you have an easy life, Glen,' he murmured, leaning on me slightly. 'Take a lot from your boss, eh?' And he looked at me with an inquisitive frown.

'What's that?'

'Your boss---' He was a little out of breath. 'Not so easy to bear with sometimes, eh?'

'No. He's all right, I suppose.'

'Listen,' he said, 'when did you leave last night, exactly?'

'Just about dawn. Don't you remember?'

'You went on the river with Charles and the rest, on that crazy punting party?'

'No. You don't remember me leaving?'

'Well,' he answered gruffly, 'there were about fifty guests. All I remember is you mauling Lou about in the kitchen.'

'I didn't touch her.'

'More fool you,' he said as we passed into the long room that was all immense chintz curtains to the floor and pillars and tables on different levels, behind wooden carved fencing, under lights so dim that at first we only saw the flash of chintz, and heard the distant band. There were bare shoulders everywhere, and glittering white shirts. A waiter took charge of us at once and led us over to a secluded corner, behind potted plants, where Palermo was waiting. But he was no longer alone. There were roars of laughter and I recognised first the writhing Selsey, sitting in a glitter of evening dress half hidden by a plant; and with him were Klydonhall and, to my astonishment--- because quite absurdly I expected to see him, and really only knew him, in the nude---the man with the fat wine-gills from the night before. Grigg and I shook hands all round, and he said to the man with the gills, 'Well, Charles, boy, how far d'you get this morning?'

'We grounded at Caius!' There was suitable boyish laughter from Klydonhall, though Grigg looked a bit lost.

Palermo jumped up. 'Now, Jeff,' he said to Grigg, 'I want you to meet two very fine people, Michael Harcourt Selsey and---Lord Klydonhall.'

'Pleased to meet you, very pleased,' Grigg murmured, ducking his head at the formality and not liking it very much. And with a heavy movement, after shaking hands, he put himself into an armchair. As he did so he turned to me and said, 'You know Charles, of course?'

To which I said, with a look at Charles, 'Yes, he was at the party last night, wasn't he?' Charles didn't exactly register this, but glanced at the others with a non-committal expression, as if waiting for me to finish something that didn't concern him. I half put out my hand to shake his, but he didn't offer it, while Selsey went on with some story about 'the weapon that never was', addressed only to Percy Klydonhall. But from the way he glanced at Grigg it seemed to be mostly for his benefit. The story was complicated, about a rocket, or it could have been an aeroplane, that never got beyond the drawing-board stage for some very amusing reasons which I didn't understand. Anyway, Grigg sat there nodding and smiling in rather a sheepish way. Then the women came. I watched to see what kind of look Muriel would give Klydonhall, but they hardly seemed to notice each other. The dim lights and the muffled air protected everyone from scrutiny.

Soon Grigg was sitting next to Klydonhall, and they were talking closely, with Klydonhall making his quick, boyish smile every now and then. It was

whisky again, but this time a whole bottle in the centre of the table, accompanied by two soda syphons.

'Help yourself, Glen,' Palermo said to me. He had decided to be polite, as part of our pact, no doubt.

As I looked sideways at Lou with her robust, bare shoulders I found myself hoping again that Ryan would make it the evening edition, as by the evening you were better guarded against surprises. There was a nervous feeling in my belly, because of the conviction that this time I was in for it. The men on the other side of the table looked a formidable collection, comprising a whole range of power from the vast, writhing major-domo Selsey, to the intricate and devious and fine-fingered Palermo, while the brute centre sat between them, jovial and youthful, in the form of Percy Klydonhall. Grigg was like their organiser, grim, not easily put-upon. And Charles was the man who kept the natives quiet: he had recognised me as English.

I watched Charles. His eyes went from one talker to the other, laughing with Selsey---whose main friend he seemed to be---and then bending his head to look pre-occupied when something serious was said. The women were bored. I suddenly remembered that one can always dance at clubs, and I asked Muriel if she'd like to. She got up without a word, rather as if I'd given her an order.

As we turned to begin the dance I looked across at the table and saw Selsey's eyes on me, and Grigg's. Charles was still sitting easily in his chair, listening to this conversation and then the other: so easy that you wanted to force a statement out of him; but he picked and chose from people, waited, listened, dissented, agreed---gave nothing himself. At Calvary he would simply have noted and watched.

'We start work tomorrow, then,' Muriel said, shuffling round after me with tired feet.

'We what?' I asked.

'That's right.'

We danced on for a bit and I asked her again, 'Begin what tomorrow?'

'Eh?'

'Didn't you say we start tomorrow?'

'Yes, on Adam and Eve.'

'You mean, do that poster thing again?'

'What poster?' she said, then pursed her lips impatiently.

'That thing we did for apples or something.'

She looked up at me in the dimness: 'Didn't that nut tell you anything about it?'

'Well, there was a conference this afternoon, he took me along, but I didn't follow it, it sounded technical, there was a lot about printing and as I'm a wine merchant---'

She looked at me with her mouth open. 'Listen, you shouldn't drink so much, I've been watching you tonight. If you're going to hold this job down---' She stopped. 'How long have you been in this trade?'

'What trade?'

She jabbed me with a sudden energy. Apparently it only needed one word from me to raise a convalescent to healthy irritation. 'That's what <u>everybody</u> says!' she scowled at me. 'You're too damn cheeky, too much bloody side, and <u>this</u> one doesn't take it, get that?'

'You said 'trade', didn't you?'

'I'll give you trade,' she said in a menacing undertone. 'Go fuck yourself!'

I tried to puzzle this out and while I was doing so she added, 'Laugh at your own trade and you laugh at yourself. Do that and you end like me, trying to do away with yourself.' Tears came to her eyes---as if I had caused them: or rather, I did actually cause them.

'I wasn't laughing at anything,' I said. 'I just didn't understand.'

'I never chose it,' she said, trying to check her tears. 'You fall into it. You can sneer all right.'

'I wasn't sneering.'

'Anyway, this is just professional, I said I'd do it if I could have you, because you do a clean job, otherwise I wouldn't be doing it, not after what I've been through.'

'Do what?'

Again the menacing undertone, and narrowed eyes: 'Oh, you clever bugger, we're so <u>clever</u>, aren't we?'

'No, I'm just asking what.'

This time she bared her teeth, and silenced me: 'Shut your fat mouth, you streak of piss!'

This caused a dancing couple close to burst out laughing, which caused Muriel to imitate them sourly. The little incident was at once lost in the dimness of the dance floor.

'So we start tomorrow,' I said seriously.

'If you keep it clean---just insist---you know what I mean---he listens to you---'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'll try.'

'Did you write the preface?' she asked.

'What preface?' I could have bitten my tongue out.

She looked the other way, seeming to decide to take me as I was, with my poor jokes.

'No, I didn't,' I added.

'There was a brain behind it, you could see that, all those long words.'

'Was there?'

We danced in silence and at the end she was reluctant to to back to the table.

'And I'm not having strangers in,' she said, when we were dancing again.

'Of course not.'

'Jesus, you don't know what it used to be like before you came in. You know, he'd have a gallery of people, including that sewage-pipe Mike, well, I'm not having that any more.'

'No.'

'He wanted one with a tail and I said, look, that won't go, it just won't, it's not like doing something for stills.'

'That's right.'

'He's that bloody ignorant, yet other times he can surprise you, agree with me?'

'Who are you talking about?'

This time she smiled, and hugged me slightly. 'OK, cussed.'

'In a way,' she went on, 'I can understand you---well, you know, giving yourself airs. You've got something to sell. When Mike showed me the first, or was it the second, I thought, that boy's been in this for ten years, unless my name's Florence Nightingale.'

'That's right.'

'Well, it's something to know your own value. That's how I should have gone at it years ago. But a woman's different. She gets influenced. I wasn't mixed up with Palermo at first.' She gave me a look as if to say that this was an interesting fact.

'Who with, then?'

'Free lance.'

'Oh.'

'One with a tail, he said, and the other in riding boots! Can you imagine that? Well, I know Percy, I know his taste, and I had to tell him, look, Percy doesn't mean that kind of thing, he means real art. Because he is artistic, you know. He's led astray, I mean he's got too much money, but he's got fine taste.'

'You know,' she went on, 'what I found out was I didn't meet Percy like I thought, by accident at the club. It wasn't an accident.'

'Why not?' She was on the verge of tears again.

'Well, I was in this group of friends, and they didn't do things by accident. Palermo was behind it, you know he isn't such big fry---hey, you won't repeat any of this, will you?'

'No.'

'You may as well know who you're dealing with, anyway. Well, there it was. He took me home and---'

'Who did?'

'Percy. And when I did that I wasn't in my own hands any more.' Her eyes were full of tears but her face remained without much expression. 'Isn't that terrible, when it happens? Your life passes out of your own hands and you don't know when it happened, or what you did? But I did do something. It went through my mind, you're doing something big now, you'll never look back after this. I only understood what that was months afterwards, in fact I'd say I only really understood a few days ago.'

'Was that when you took the sleeping pills?'

'That's right, in a way. When I really understood, and saw my own life spread out in front of me, I knew I was no good, somebody else was living my life for me, and I thought to myself it might as well be God, so I wanted to die.'

'You shouldn't do it, Muriel,' I said. 'You don't know all about life. Nobody does. You never know what things might happen, what God can put into your lap.'

'But I'd rather be in his lap, Glen,' she said desperately, clinging to me so that we almost stopped dancing. 'You'll work with me, won't you? You won't let him get me alone?'

'No, of course not!'

'I'd rather be in his lap for ever, so I can get some rest. That's exactly how I feel. I hate their faces. See them over there? Their faces all twisted up? I'll be taking that one home.'

'Which one?'

'The one with the chin.'

'Grigg?'

'His wife's been massaging me for two hours past. Boy, if I don't know her game. She must think I'm a chicken.'

'What is her game?'

Her tears were gone and there was a scowl again: 'OK, OK, you don't have to look innocent! You're fodder, like me.' And when the dance ended, while we drifted back to the table, she said, 'Pat told me to clear out---just make a bunk, she said, never be heard of again!'

'Why don't you?'

'I'll tell you the reason. I thought it all out the night I took the pills. I thought to myself, wherever you go you take your body, and it wouldn't belong to you any more than it does now, even if you do run away, you just won't know what to say to anybody, where to go---that means you're not your own. I wrote that in a letter, but nobody found it. So I leave my life to other people who seem to know what to do with it. Palermo said to me once, there are millions of suicides, he said---successful ones, you meet them every day, they did it so well there was no body, not a mark to be seen.

I wondered, as we arrived back at the table and he was half lying in his armchair nodding to something Lou had said, if he was one himself.

Grigg's brows were so much in a frown as he listened to Selsey at his side that one could no longer see his eyes. And he clenched and unclenched his hands with concentration. When Muriel sat down he gave her a faded and distant smile, People walked past our table slowly, one man with his hands in his pockets, strolling, curious, glancing round him. Then a couple went towards the dance floor talking earnestly as if dancing was a severe objective. The club was deafening, yet there was no precise sound at all. You had to shout to be heard, but your voice thudded heavily against the silks and wools of the room, and fell back into your throat. Percy Klydonhall had disappeared for a moment.

'Of course,' Selsey was saying, bunching his shoulders up so that they made a vast shadow over the table, swaying to and fro, 'you've got the finest exponent of Massacre 2 sitting on the other side of you.' And he leaned forward with a beam and nodded towards Charles, who was still looking non-committal and judicious.

Grigg nodded thoughtfully, scraping his teeth over his lower lip, encrusting his eyes all round with deep lines, and said, 'Yes, Harcourt, and there's a hell of a lot in it, but you don't mind me saying it's redundant.'

'I do! I do!' There was a great laugh at this, and much writhing. 'No, Jeff, I can prove it works, and Charles can give you book, bell and candle on it---I mean, he's the brain, after all.'

'Well,' Grigg went on, 'what Charles has to say is gospel for me as you probably know, but in this case I'm just repeating what I've heard back in Washington.'

'What you've heard in Washington, Jeff,' Charles put in quietly and pleasantly, putting it all on a more intimate level, between him and Grigg, 'was about Massacre 1, unless I'm mistaken. In fact, the Under Secretary said to me about a week ago---I mean, this is off the cuff and the record, incidentally---that Massacre 1 as a weapon stank but it had been damned effective in getting us noticed in the Pentagon!' And he laughed---with soft movements of the shoulders quite unlike Selsey's, so that the ripples seemed to steal across the table discreetly, and lay themselves down on the air in such a way as to be able to change to tears if required. 'I'm not sure he had the ear of the Minister there---' (intimacy with the Minister softly and ripplingly implied)---'but I've a damned good idea they chewed it over about a minute and a half before I came into the room!' (clubby, down-to-earth language, for men only).

'OK,' Grigg said in his plain voice (as if to say, good money needs no bush), 'I know your heart's in this, Charles, and I don't need to tell you I'm looking at it seriously all the time. But there's one thing you can't gainsay and that's that number 2 is a tarty version of number 1, and that's why it don't stand a ghost.'

'Well, Jeff, I don't want to quarrel with you,' (as if he would have dared), 'but that's just what it isn't. And I'll prove it to you tomorrow morning if you've got the time.'

'I've got the time, OK,' Grigg said. 'What about Percy over there, could he give me some of his time too?'

'Of that I'm certain,' Selsey said, 'in fact, he's been waiting for this for some time.'

'Don't tell me he knew my name,' Grigg said with an arch smile.

'Well, not only that,' Selsey said, writhing, 'but he's the one man in this country who's tried to get you taken seriously.'

'What time tomorrow?' Grigg said in a growling voice that announced his complete cooperation. And he took out his notebook.

'As I've been making Percy's appointments for ten years,' Selsey said with a smile that split his face like an orange, 'there's no harm in me fixing just one more. Ten o'clock at his office.'

'Know where that is?' Grigg asked Charles like lightning, suddenly switching his head round.

And Charles answered like a young adjutant, not rushed buton the mark, 'Yes, I'll pick you up about half-past nine.'

'Come to breakfast,' Grigg said, 'at the Northumberland. We can chew this over so I know how to trip young Harcourt up.'

This 'young' went over well, as Selsey looked a good bit older than he did, and there was flattered laughter followed by a fit of writhing. Palermo had been watching and listening, and now that arrangements had been concluded he leaned forward and poured another hefty whisky all round, except that he omitted me and the women. He only pushed the bottle towards me and said quietly, 'Help the girls, will you, Glen?', thus subordinating us subtly to the other three. Klydonhall returned just as they were drinking and said with his never-waning smile, 'This looks festive. And nobody dancing?' He looked at me in his winning way and I murmured something nobody heard.

'Chin-chin, milord,' Grigg said, holding up his glass with a wink that made 'lord' a status and a joke at the same time.

They tapped glasses together, and more laughter followed, in a giddy, rippling unison round the table, borne into the dimness deliriously, mixed with fumes from the bottle and Muriel's washed-out eyes set in a pale and unmoving face, all of it given an idiotic rhythmic justification by the band round the corner, to which people danced as if they were trying to turn it into a dream and it only needed a little less alertness than they had.

There was more Massacre-talk and I only caught snatches of it.

'...yes, take-off but not the actual conventional energy-displacement, I mean, you've got the whole thing already nicely wrapped up in that---what the devil was that hunch of Joe's called, it was beyond the trial stage in six months, clever blighter that, though true enough what he has in elegance he loses in sheer

fussiness, I mean take that fuse-attachment, I ask you---!'

'I'll confess to you boys,' Grigg put in, 'I'm not so interested in the detailed performance side as the overall technical planning, or perhaps I shouldn't call it planning as forecasting.'

'Amounts to the same thing sometimes.'

'That's right,' Selsey said, 'you plan by prophesying eventualities, what else is a plan?'

Charles nodded seriously; this kind of intelligence had him, he wanted that to be clear.

Palermo yawned, and Lou talked to Muriel, who replied without expression, looking at the people dancing, her eyes half closed. Voices were getting louder, Grigg's stares across the room were more and more strong and unflinching, while Selsey spilled his glass once, and touched the backs of his ears with it for luck. The waiter was called over, and drowsily I noticed that Palermo called him Dick. He had a small, very white face and lips so thin that they could hardly be seen.

Palermo suddenly talked across the table to Klydonhall, who was leaning on his elbows and twitching his foot so that his shoulders trembled slightly. 'It's no good, Percy, without the press on his side. Have you seen some of those smears Jack Ryan came out with?'

'Oh, boy, oh, boy, I'm glad you said it, Pal,' Grigg said with such relief that it seemed like a hot wind over us all, inflating his voice and his body, and intimately moving Lou as well. 'Glad you mentioned that, because I'm tired of opening an English paper and getting belly ache.'

'Well, of course,' Selsey said with an ambiguous writhe that could have been humour and could have been menace, 'you know where Jack's sympathies lie. Actually, I've always thought it affectation myself. Couldn't be a nicer chap, in fact.'

'Oh,' Palermo said lazily, 'Jack follows public demand, he's got more noses than fingers.'

'You don't mean there's a public demand for my misery!' Grigg said in a sort of roaring rhetorical way that expected popular applause.

'It might be,' Palermo said, holding his ground: for a moment one could believe that he was the strongest person present. 'I don't believe you set out to be a pin-up boy, not on that subject.' And he gave Grigg one of his scowls, to my surprise: Grigg was only going to win his friendship (now that he'd been made to offer it) on his knees.

'Well,' Grigg said, abashed, 'Lou can support me here---I thought I'd get some recognition, the kind I got in my own country. Recognition just for what I mean to do.'

'Perhaps they don't understand what you mean to do.'

'That's plain enough. I lay it down in every damn lecture, but that's the trouble, I can't get the lectures reported---'

'I'll call Jack tonight,' Palermo said, motionless in his half-lying position, 'and see you get your lectures reported. If possible, in tomorrow evening's paper, too.'

This relieved me so much that I poured myself another whisky and then pulled the soda syphon rudely across the table in front of Charles---just to celebrate.

'You do that,' Grigg replied, growling, 'and I'll be your friend for life.'

I thought I saw the slightest of smiles drift across Palermo's face; and I thought Lou saw this too, and opened her mouth with shock.

'Then we'll see if the public follow the bait,' Palermo said. 'As I said, Grigg---' His use of the surname was almost like bullying--- 'you can take them up to the trough but you can't make the buggers drink. And Jack knows who to smear and who not to. That's all I can say---he'll oblige me, I know that, but the effect might not be the one you predict.'

'Well,' Grigg said, 'if you can take affairs out of the hands of young randy-pants here I'd be glad.' He didn't even look at me, and at first no one quite knew whom he meant.

It was Lou who showed them, by saying, 'Oh, come on, Jeff, I thought you and Glen had a pact last night.'

'There's only one pact I'll have with sewer-rats and that's extermination.' And again he didn't look at me, only stared before him, with half-closed eyes, the scowl deepening like a mask round his mouth.

Selsey was making a soundless whistling movement with his lips, looking down at his cuffs, turning them this way and that. Percy Klydonhall tried to smile, looked from me to Grigg and back again, searched Selsey's face for a solution, and finally looked boyishly sad---even, I was happy to see, annoyed with Grigg.

'Why,' Charles said, with the most perfunctory soft glance at me, his face plump and flushed so that he seemed to talk through a tiny balloon, 'what's <u>he</u> got to do with it?'

'Nothing,' Lou said. Then she quietly but firmly added, 'Glen was responsible for the smears, that's all.'

'That's a damned lie,' I said.

'Is that the way you talk to a lady?' Selsey suddenly said with a threatening look, his whole huge body still for a moment.

'OK, OK, Harcourt,' Palermo said quietly. 'I'll look after my own office. He might have made mistakes but---'

'How long has he been making them?' Selsey went on with the same unpleasant challenge in his face, grilling into me plumply with his eyes.

All I could think of to say was that I was a wine merchant but it didn't seem relevant. I was so thick with whisky that my mind was still, like wine of low degree. And the more silent I was the smaller and more wretched I looked to the others. Only Muriel was unconcerned. She was clipping her finger-nails loudly, looking up now and then with indifference.

'Careful, Harcourt,' Palermo said with a smile, 'he might smear you.'

'I'd like him to damn-well try.'

'Come on, now,' Klydonhall said, 'he has to earn his living like the rest.'

And he leaned across and poured me some more whisky.

'Anyway,' Selsey said, withdrawing his whole vast body from the argument into the back of his chair, 'I thought that's what libel laws were for, to protect people against sewer-rats.'

'I'd like to see you protect yourself against Jack Ryan,' Palermo said with another smile.

Selsey laughed, booming from the dimness of his chair: 'Well, you've got something there!'

For a moment I wanted to vindicate not the reputation I wished to have (if I wished to have any at all) but the false one---I supposed it was false---being given me. I wanted to prove them right almost for aesthetic reasons---for the symmetry and tidiness, so that my body would sit square in my soul, or vice versa. I found I had thought amazingly little in my life about what and who I was: since I could be displaced so easily it meant that the lodgement must have been none too secure, not chosen and deliberated---in a world that chose and deliberated every second of the day.

You couldn't see a blush, it was so dark: only wrinkles and deep lines driven into the flesh by bitter wars against sleep, night after night. I wasn't even resentful of the writhing Selsey, even of his liquid eyes that found their firmness like a vocation, for a moment, by boring into me. For one thing, I could hardly

focus on his face. To see his hatred I had to squint my eyes, getting the image firm. I tried to assemble their verdicts in my mind but it was impossible. And they seemed to have the same difficulty. Selsey was so deep in his armchair that all you saw was knees, and a luminous patch of white skin just above his socks. That so much thought had been given to guilt seemed to me very strange. It had been a very short-term emotion, fitting only a certain class, for a certain tiny course of history.

I had read somewhere that the hangmen of England had no arguments for hanging any more. They said hanging was only any good if the victim felt sorry, if you had to drag him screaming to the chamber. But if he walked there more self-assured than you, with the tranquillity of the tired performer, then Guilt was no more: we were in another world, we lived in the Afterwards. And that new world, the hangman said, had begun about 1950. After that, they said, murderers didn't care any more...

Outside this club the dome of the night hung and couldn't be denied: it worked its way into this room muffled with silks, and sucked out the day-passions indiscriminately, even Selsey's, that glowed so fiercely for a moment.

Klydonhall and Muriel got up to dance---he murmured to her, 'What about a dance, Mouse?' This was her name, apparently. And with my eyes almost quite closed I watched her take his arm, not listlessly as she had done with me: she was suddenly like a girl, talking to him quickly, leaning on him, and he was smiling, all attention. She danced with him quickly, and they were the liveliest couple on the floor. The others were drowsy, bent, shuffling, murmuring to each other, in the dimness of the room.

Grigg patted the seat at his side and I realised after a time that he meant me to sit next to him. Charles Dornelling had drifted off somewhere. I got up with effort, and slumped on to the settee at his side.

'I'm whacked,' I said with a smile.

'Sorry I had to take a slam at you,' he said in a quiet voice. 'It was then or never.'

His voice, as deep as his wrinkles---and to my mind drowsily combined with them---rolled in and out of my awareness, and I could hardly put the words together into a meaning.

He went on, 'With an audience like that, who wouldn't have taken the chance? Kind of blood-sacrifice. Notice the way she---' he nodded towards his own wife---

'came in at the kill? A woman does that. Bitches. A man wouldn't have done that, but he would have meant it just the same, I suppose.'

I blinked and moistened my lips and tried to open my eyes more, to get some sense into what he was saying.

'I reckoned Fleet Street kisses Percy Klydonhall's arse whenever he offers it, and that ain't often.' He chuckled. 'I bet I <u>throw</u> you from now on.' He put his hand on mine for a moment. 'That's it, Glen. I reckon I've shaken you off my trail, you son of one bitch. From tomorrow morning there'll be no smears. This tank of malt beer,' he whispered, indicating Selsey in the corner, 'he did it for me. What I always work for---moral indignation. Are you drunk?'

'Yes.'

'Shouldn't be. Malice has to keep a clean muzzle, pick up anything rotten. But I reckon I've clapped your mouth shut, and how. With that playboy on my side I can do anything.' He nodded, frowning towards the dance floor with his own thoughts. 'I'd like to prepare my lectures, do my research, keep regular hours, that kind of thing. You know, I must have academic blood. Not that she'd let me.' He gazed across at Lou with sour eyes. 'I have to be <u>devious</u>. Fight people like you. Tell you something, Glen,' he said, turning to me with a sudden vigour that roused me with a start, 'you're what I call my enemy. You're in every town I go to. There are millions of you all over the earth. You crawl. I thought you were only in the States but you're everywhere. I don't hate my enemy. I love him as myself. Christian, that. There's only one other person I don't hate round this table and that's your boss.' And he narrowed his eyes towards Palermo, who was sitting curled in his chair, smoking or rather seeming to avoid his own smoke fastidiously, while Lou talked.

'Hate Lou?' I asked.

'Why,' he said, still gazing across the table, 'that's the most fruitful hatred of my life. If that girl knew how much I hated her it'd scorch her knickers off. I hate her so much that nights with her are---' He hesitated. And after giving me a doubtful look he stopped talking.

A great time seemed to pass, and silence sucked every noise into it. Then he spoke again, moving closer to me so that I was leaning on his shoulder. 'Fact is, Glen, you've caught me and Lou not just on the wrong foot, you've found us without a damned foothold at all. Does it surprise you I pay out something in the region of five thousand dollars a year just to keep a foothold?'

'How's that?' I asked.

'Analysts are damned expensive, because they're damned necessary. She did the usual thing, fell in love with him. She said, Let's take the doc with us, Jeff---' (making her sound like a duck) '---I said, Like Hell. We're a professor and his wife, I said. You know, Glen, we went in for this group-therapy stuff at first. And, boy, I was getting more neurotic every day. I was pumping her all the time in the group-knockabouts to see who she was having an affair with. The Doc said, OK, I see your game, Jeff, why don't you take all my damned notes home with you and smell your way through 'em! So I did! I spent the whole week browsing through my wife's soul. And you know what I found? Myself! That's just what I found. The same damned desires, the same everything. The only difference was she thought about men and I thought about women. I reckon I learned more about honesty than I ever did before. So we sat down and talked about half the personality-problems we'd thought were secrets. I came to the conclusion I hated her so much because she was myself.'

'Did you tell her you hated her?'

'It's so damned obvious we don't have to put it into words.' He looked me in the eyes. 'Know what? She gets a kick out of your columns on me.'

'She does?'

'I said to her one day, I said, who the hell's side you on? We live in a state of siege, Glen. Mustn't climb too close else we get boiling lead in our faces. But that protracted discussion of personality-problems---I reckon it lasted a couple of years---it cleared the undergrowth all right, we ploughed through the dirty mess and got throuth to the other end, though I don't know how. Now we just face each other.' He leaned away from me and looked at the grimy, lifeless ceiling. 'If we could come on the earth with all that dirty undergrowth cleared away like that, wouldn't that be marvellous? We could inherit the earth, Glen. We really could.'

'Don't we come on earth like that?' I asked, but he wasn't listening.

Selsey went and sat in Muriel's place, and began talking to Palermo, his flushed, massive face in his hands, so heavy that it seemed beyond the control of any nervous system. He was frowning down at the floor as Palermo said something, and it seemed to me that he was hearing about Grigg, the new contact. It stirred me with excitement dimly, even though I might possibly be mashed between them all, to hear the grinding of these wheels of power and pressure and alliance, in their

tiny revolutions. I heard Selsey murmur the name Percy once or twice; Lou stifled a yawn, glanced stealthily across the table at her husband. I guessed that she had slept all day, because of the clearness of her dark eyes, and the way her shoulders sloped away from her neck, not slumping.

If anything, the club was fuller than before: it must be close on three in the morning. I began to think of the vineyard: sometimes I sat drinking with Luigi after the women had gone to bed, then walked back before the first birds had started, and stood on the hill overlooking our house, waiting for the first traces of light to show and the house to appear below in its humped and sprawling array, with court-yard and pigeon-loft and well and cement platform for compost.

'Seems to me you've wrecked your life, too, Glen,' Grigg said quietly, close to my shoulder again, gazing ahead. 'Your wife's never been seen around. Lou says best not to enquire.'

He waited for a reply, with a little glance at me sideways, then gave me up.

'This Percy guy,' he murmured. 'Quite some man. Your boss has the biggest coup of his life in front of him.'

'How?'

'Wouldn't you like the Percy Klydonhall account---?' He winked at me richly. 'Just supposing you was interested in money?'

'What's that?' I found I could keep him in focus now, and his words made more sense than before, but I was no good for innuendoes, and I wouldn't be for some hours.

'Well, it's common knowledge, so Charles was telling me, that Klydonhall's got his eyes open for the right man to do a kind of J. Walter Thompson job in London.'

'Who's J. Walter Thompson?'

At this he made a hissing kind of chuckle, hunching his shoulders together humourously, and said, 'He paints the gold on angels' wings, didn't you know? How else would the gold get there?' And he gave me a ribald wink that made me no wiser.

'It seems to me I'm damned slow,' he went on. 'I need a guy to look after my personal publicity, too.' He turned and looked at me. 'If I had the money I'd do it.' He added with a stern nod, still looking at me, 'Yes, I would. Doesn't sound like a university man, does it? But it's facing up to the epoch.

If you have to cover as many techniques as I have to, why, to leave the most basic one of all open---your public image---seems just asking for trouble. Listen, my lectures are advertising campaigns for certain ideas---all right, I know that doesn't sound very academic and I've had a few to drink, but, Glen, look, isn't that God's truth? Isn't it true when we try and persuade a man to save his life or for-God's-sake to get wise to what's happening in the world, like I do, that we're trying to sell something? And are you a salesman? Yes, you are, and your boss over there is. That's your job. And I bellyache about you, I even bribe you because you're trying to sell me as a bad man and I want to be sold as a good one. Wouldn't I have done better to walk into your office the first day I arrived in London and say, here's fifty thousand bucks on account, I want a sweet press? But instead I had to take a beating on the head before I got wise. In Chicago, so they say, you get your shop messed up if you don't pay protection money. Well, this is protection money. My lecture fees are the public's protection money to me. After all, they want protecting with knowledge and I give it to them.'

To my astonishment he turned to me and, after a glance across the table at the others, said, 'How much, Glen?'

We sat gazing at each other sideways, until I thought it best to speak.

'How much what?'

He smiled suddenly---a delighted smile that made his face twenty years younger.

'You're not even gentle, are you?' he said. Then he gazed across the table again, thinking. 'Listen, I'm breakfasting with Charles tomorrow morning and then we're going to Klydonhall's office. Lunch I'm afraid to tie up just yet---what about' (facing me again suddenly) 'a drink tomorrow evening at the Northumberland?

'What for?'

'Now listen, Glen,' he said in a softer voice, 'I know you've got to watch the way the boss's lips move but he'll have the Klydonhall account on his plate, in fact I'll do my damned best to see he does.'

I nodded.

'So what do you say?' he asked.

'Well, we'll have a drink if you want one. Talk something over, you mean?'

'That's it,' he said, clutching my forearm briefly, 'that's it! I'll tell you what, here's something to fill your dark and turgid brain till that time

comes---I'll offer you---' But here he stopped. 'It's what I'd liked to offer. But I can't. If I offered you more than ten percent of my lecture fees, Glen, I'd be broke, honestly,' and he turned to me an apathetic expression. 'I suppose you train all your life, people like you, to get us to say this kind of thing, but I'm throwing myself on your mercy, Glen.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't trust your boss. I don't like having my fate in his hands.' He looked at me with alarm. It was that hour of the morning.when a man can alarm himself from nothing. 'Do you think they're cooking something up? I don't like it at all. I'd say OK, natural enough, if it was somebody else introduced me to---Here!' He clutched my arm again, so strongly that I felt like a child under it. 'Tell me what you know about him! He's after Lou, that right?' He whispered his words harshly. 'He got you to bring me down to town, you dirty skunk, is that right?'

When I didn't answer, as I couldn't, he made a scowl not particularly at me but at all God's creatures made like me.

'I get all tied up,' he said, 'I can't stop myself thinking, I can't make out who's my friend and who's not, here I am talking to you but I know you're a skunk, I know you jumped my wife last night in the kitchen, I know you two slimy bastards got me down to London to bribe me with a Percy Klydonhall deal and fix me up with this poor damned whore Muriel for the night, I know you used my own friend Charles Dornelling for the purpose, the best guy I ever knew and the closest friend I ever had---!' He was close on tears, and I wondered if Lou would notice. But instead she got up coolly and went in front of Palermo towards the dancefloor.

This act made Grigg look up with a shocked expression, his mouth gaping. And he came to.

'You're dry, old chap,' Selsey said to him, and poured whisky into his glass. Then, with a chuckle, 'Look at that one,' nodding towards Charles Dornelling, who had fallen asleep and had his legs stretched out, not making a sound, his face in the utmost repose.

'Why don't you pour me some too,' I said to Selsey with a narrow look that made him flinch, 'unless you hate pleasing sewer-rats?'

'No, not at all,' he said in the most matter-of-fact way, 'I'd be delighted. I love all kinds of animals.' And he poured me the last in the bottle.

Grigg took his glass at once and drained it, gasping. 'I needed that,' he said. And then, with a frowning glance round, 'Where's Mouse?'

'Dancing with Percy,' Selsey said, too tired at this hour to writhe any more. And he added to me, 'Why, surely people in your line don't have thin skins, do they?'

'They have brains enough to see through people like you, anyway,' I said, not quite sure what I meant.

'Brains?' he asked with an abashed smile. 'Does showing your arse to a camera need brains?'

At this Grigg laughed and said, 'Is that in his day's work, too?'

It was all I could do as I stared at Selsey to prevent the tears gushing down my face while my expression remained exactly the same, as you see tears at a circus. The sensation was strangely separate from me, as if it was my past that would cry. And again the dome of the night drew in everything we said, our little motives and divisions, into the air far away where morning was being prepared, together with a fresh chance to begin, which we were given every day and for which reason the requiem prayer I had heard so often said, Confutatis maledictis, flammis acribus addictis...

Klydonhall and Muriel separated on the dance floor and I watched her come back to the table alone, while he went towards one of the dark, curtained exits.

As soon as she got to us she called a waiter over and told him to bring another bottle of whisky.

Selsey smiled at her, still leaning all over his arms wearily. 'Making a night of it?' he asked.

'Well, I'm not paying for it,' she said without a glance at him, taking out her powder compact.

'Percy gone to bed, honey?' Grigg asked her with an ambiguous leering sympathy in his face.

'Oh, he'll be back with another party soon,' she said. 'He changes parties three or four times a night. He needs that, to run out of everything he gets himself into.'

'Somebody'd better follow him, hadn't they?' Selsey said.

'I've been doing that for two years,' Muriel told him. 'Didn't bring me any good.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Selsey said with his peculiar look that suggested a threat, 'I wouldn't say that.'

'I've just said it.'

'What, your standard of living didn't go up?'

'Here,' she said, pushing the bottle that arrived in front of him, 'shut your mouth with that.'

He chuckled to himself, softly, and rubbed his face and yawned until his eyes were bloodshot. 'The things I do for Percy,' he said.

She sighed and snapped her powder compact closed, and a sad yet drowsily satisfying tedium drifted over us all, making speech unnecessary, while Charles Dornelling made soft groaning noises in his chair and the bump of the band became a manifestation of accidie, and therefore in a delirious way right and true, as if it were the only sound possible. I no longer nodded, or closed my eyes for long periods. The room and the dimness were so joined to my state that it was the same with my eyes opened or closed. One almost felt the author of everything going on... A first step of decadence, that---the slave's illusion. I remembered long hours of the same tedium at the vineyard, but there it settled for ever over the land, it was never fought, no alternative to it was imagined. It hung on the still leaves and the ancient twining arms of olives like air before a storm, yet there was a difference, you knew you weren't the author of it as you yawned and stretched and wandered outside and talked for a bit and sat on the side of the well and watched the buffaloes being driven to pasture: it was what life was, there was a great deal of waiting to be done... We swept the miserable pieces of our lives together, each month, sometimes more often, and it occurred to us that God preferred the pieces miserable, the awakening afterwards was so marvellous, the tiny pieces of money we got were manna. We always had the same problem: we missed bargains, wonderful chances of a sale or even a permanent contract, because of the lack of ready money. In retrospect, we could have got a better house, renewed the terraces so as to last ten years instead of botching them up at almost equal expense to last barely one. From nothing nothing came. Only the tedium had its chance to slide through our veins and determine our rhthym, so that everything happened at its due season, we rose out of the squalor of anxiety into something ecstatic. We knew when to wait, not to push, not to insist, leave things to time because time wasn't a clock.

Selsey and Muriel left, after murmuring good night to us. As far as I could gather they were going to follow Percy to keep him out of mischief. I had the irritated feeling that he practised this mischief for attention. Muriel looked impatient: a wife with her man on the loose wouldn't have looked less so. She played with her handbag nervously when leaving. Dornelling left too, suddenly waking after Selsey had gone, as if half his own soul was missing.

'You won't forget tomorrow, will you?' Selsey had murmured to Grigg in a professional way. 'I know he's looking forward to seeing you.'

Muriel had said to Grigg when they were moving away, 'I'll be back.'

And he simply growled at her, without raising his voice, 'You'd better be.'

'Yes, Glen,' he said to me when they were gone, 'unless I'm mistaken this is hell itself, and you expect a man to break up, don't you?' I nodded without interest. 'Well, all I try and tell people is, go through it with your eyes open. You're in hell, the whole goddam bunch of you, let's face it!'

'You might be more in it than they are,' I said.

'Could be. But going by the looks on their faces, that's crap.' He spat the word at me in a final way, still looking ahead. 'No, people don't want to have their eyes open, that't the truth. I'll tell you what I'm going to do tonight, Glen---I'm going to sleep with that whore, and my wife's going to sleep with your boss. That's the truth and it's hell all right because I don't even like the girl, I mean she's a nice kid and all that, but she still treats sex like heaven, I can tell that, and that's no good when you're down in hell. At least my wife don't do <u>that</u>. That's why your boss goes for her, by the way. She does things like in hell. No fancy business. I'm being clear, Glen. That's all I talk or write about. If you're walking into hell and there's no other path, well, get to know it. They don't like me for it. They don't like me saying there's ways of making war and find out what they are before you do because you'll do it anyway! If you'll do it anyway, may as well make a good job of it!'

'Why?'

'Want to make a <u>bad</u> job of it? I challenge that, Glen---I challenge any man to sincerely want to do a bad job of anything.'

'I'd want to do a bad job of murder.'

'You'd want to have the screams protracted, through botching it? I don't think so!'

I said nothing, and he persisted: 'No, answer me, Glen---would you like to murder by slow torture?'

'No.'

'Exactly. So I say find out what the techniques are. There are degrees of making war, find out what they are. It's no good enjoying peace and then flopping out into war like they used to, those times are over. Our way of making peace is different. We do it by making war. That may sound funny. But we keep the peace, we keep it better than anybody did before, anyhow!' I gave him a scowl of disbelief. 'No, Glen, we haven't had a third world war yet.'

'Perhaps that's a dead technique too,' I said, 'world wars.'

'Exactly what I'm saying, Glen. We make war now in a slow rhythm, or a fast one, or a medium one, an explosive one, a political one, a conventional man-against-man one. Every political moment has its technique. You use threats, you tell the other guy you will make war if he goes too far. This is the technical age, Glen---in everything, not just air travel and washing machines.'

'All right, then,' I said, 'if you've got a technique for hell why don't you use one for heaven, and take your wife back to Cambridge instead of letting him sleep with her? And why sleep with a whore you despise?'

'I could do that. I could go over on that dance floor and tell her, we're going home, easy as pie. She'd take one look at my face and crumple up. But I'd still be in hell. And more of a hell because it wouldn't be true. I'd have the hell of a night with Lou, and a night of thinking what a hell of a good time I might have had with this whore, and the hell of waking to think that I'd lacked the guts to look the devil in the face, with the result that I'd be looking him in the face just the same but as a slave, more of a slave---' He was confused for a moment. 'I can't explain it exactly, Glen, you're maybe far from these problems, it's difficult living in the twentieth century, and most people prefer another way out. Sometimes I think I'm living it for other people, I'm living the problems so as they can live easy---'

'Like Christ,' I said with a scowl that turned into a look of astonishment when I saw that he took mer seriously.

'That's right! By God, you're right! If you're going to walk through hell you've got to have your eyes open, if you're going to come out the other side. If you're ever going to say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' you've got to know who he is, you've got to understand his techniques.'

'If you understand them too well, you become a devil yourself---isn't that a danger?'

'It's a challenge, not a danger! And a man either takes the challenge of his own time or he doesn't. It's the same in this war-game. You've got to go

in and play it right up to the hilt, otherwise there'll be a mess, which I mean literally---chaos. You've got to know when to stage an attack on a foreign embassy, rouse up artificial indignation, when to worry the enemy in a way that seems legitimate, you've got to know when to run a bombing attack on one of your own ships or depots and then say it was the other side, so as to get public opinion working in the right direction, you've got to fake some enemy movements somewhere so as you can launch an attack your public opinion is going to take as justifiable, you've got to give the crusading speech at the right time so as public opinion gets more scared of the enemy than sceptical of you, you might have to use a bomb, I mean a real one, not TNT. Yes, you might have to do that. It might be necessary to prevent a really big one. Another technique. There are all sorts of ways of making war without resort to the full-scale thing---that's what I'm trying to say, Glen. It's the same as in private life. I can go a hell of a long way with this boss of yours, in bribes and threats, before we're outright enemies. We might become outright enemies. If we do I shall switch to other techniques than the ones I'm using.'

'You're using Lou as a technique?' I said with surprise.

'I'm not using <u>her</u>. She's doing something of her own free will. I might be using the <u>situation</u> once it's developed. My defensive techniques have to come into play, that's what I mean. Just the same as when you make war in a peaceful way, that is, by little provocative acts---diplomatic insults, window-smashing, using foreigners as hostages, that kind of thing---you're not producing the situation, you're just using one already there, you're trying to save your life.'

'But you're destroying your life at the same time, aren't you? Your feelings, I mean?'

'Well, Glen, somebody or other said once, freedom's the only food and drink I need. I want to be free, I don't know whether it's a hunger planted in me generations ago or what it is, but I can't do without it, I won't be under somebody else's sway, I just can't be, I have to say I'll be free, feelings or no feelings, yes, sir!'

'But all your techniques are what Hitler described!'

'Exactly, Glen!' He smiled. 'Think you were going to frighten me with that bogey word? Of course Hitler used them! He brought them into being. He led us into hell. He was the guy who started it all. What does that mean except that we're committed to its habits? Is it going to help us to get out, saying Hitler was the cause of it all?'

'But you've got the same enemy as him,' I said, 'communism! He said the same things, had the same enemy!'

'He started it, yes! Say what you like,' he said, helping me to understand in an even paternal way, 'he started the crusade against communism, or the hell of the crusade started because of him. I don't mind which it is. It's a bit of both, may be. He did start the crusade against communism, but he made a mess of it, he had all sorts of crazy dreams that don't fit the techniques, he described the techniques and damned well too but he didn't go through with them, he weakened and went into all kinds of dreaming, he decided on being the personification of the devil, Glen, but you've got to do it without falling into that trap, you've still got to come out of the other side and I think we will, I think we're going to do it if we hold on and don't give way to hysteria and just stand up against the enemy, I think we'll get through and you'll all be there to thank us for it!'

He nodded to himself abruptly and took a drink from his glass. Then he turned to me and said, 'What do you think---that we should make war like that lunatic wanted us to, with feeling? We're not animals, after all! At least, I hope not!' And he took another drink.

I found myself wondering what my olive trees looked like at this moment, in the growing dawn. And at once I forgot every word he had said. I blinked my eyes and took a deep breath but not a word he had said came back to me, yet his last sentence was still echoing in my mind. I looked at him sideways, at his deep black lines that the club had turned into a permanent static mask of grim thought. I thought of the air that drifted into our bedroom window in the morning, just before I closed it and lit the fire. We had fires till June now, in the very early morning. The old Italian seasons had disappeared---for several years now. At one time after the rains of January and February the first warnings of heat had come, even fierce, but momentary, followed by winds with the smell of the sea on them. A little in April, then certainly in May, came the first steady heat, mitigated by the breeze, so that you wanted to lie in the sun, sit by the well where the heat had collected. In May there was warning, too, of the later drought when the brown earth would split. You would begin to feel the dry, dangerous glow of the sun when it rose in the morning---the dull copper globe that searched everywhere drily and relentlessly: just touches of it, as the heat steadily and generously grew. Then in June the bleaching, dazzling period would

be over, and the mists would start, the heat-steam that made everything shimmer; and then the globe of the sun at dawn would be clement for only a short time, it would peer across the country like a dangerous eye and you would feel breathless, anticipating the later heat of the day, and already the house was like a dark cellar with all the shutters closed and the curtains drawn against that peering, unhaltable fire that buried everything beneath itself as the minutes grew. And this would go on, broken very rarely with a smart and ferocious storm that brought down an avalanche of water, and left the fields dripping and happily tired. You hid from the sun, you yearned for a few days of dark sky, you closed the shutters tight and the blazing light from between its slats was enough for you to read and eat by. Each season came in the same way, with the little variations that are normal like unexpected moods. But now it was different. There would be sudden heats in March, too early and too fierce, followed by rain and chill and violent explosive storms, in a hotpotch of all the seasons together. Sometimes you would glimpse the old Italy---be sure that it had returned again. That would be for an unbroken week. Then there would be the collapse---chill like December, or rain like February: yet not the classical Italian rain that we had always known, mild and steady and straight, with a uniform low sky, dazzling behind with sun. Now there were black individual clouds, breaking unpredictably, forming again, giving way to sudden winds, growing calm and seeming to give place to sun, then forming with an extraordinary suddenness again, to repeat the chill, wet, thunder-clapping process. The plants no longer knew how to grow. It wasn't only that the harvests were ruined at the end, or the flowers blighted with frost at the beginning, or the embryoes---olives or grapes---suddenly blackened with hail. The whole growing process was disarranged. The plants got hardy in the wrong places, at the wrong time. I even began to suspect that the taste of the wine was changing. Nothing was predictable any more. The peasants were strange about it---they went on looking up at the sky and making their predictions which failed to materialise, a thousand times each year. But only ten days of natural warmth were enough to lull them back to the feeling that life was the same as ever. In the end they were right: nature would not be altered; it would remain the same; it had the last word. I only hoped that the old weather would come back in our lifetime. I had heard it said that you could unbalance the earth's weather permanently, perhaps... They weren't quite sure yet.

Would they only be sure afterwards, when it had happened?

I dozed off and woke with a sharp falling movement of my head, not knowing how long I had slept. I could feel his shoulder against mine, and when I turned to look at him again he was taking a sip from his glass, drowsy like me, his eyes opening and closing slowly, in a fight against sleep. The club seemed no less active than before. People continued coming in, their gazes numbed with sleeplessness. But one thing had happened---Lou and Palermo had disappeared. I realised it suddenly, and searched the dance-floor with my eyes.

I managed to get myself to my feet. It was the first time in two hours. My blood seemed to seek a different level for a moment, so that I had to stand still, waiting for it to stabilise. Then I felt better. I stretched my neck up from my shoulders, straightened my back (as perfect a line as possible from the crown of the head to the base of the spine), took a deep breath (expand the ribs sideways) and then walked towards one of the exits, passing by the dance-floor. Yes, they were gone. I glanced back at Grigg, with pity. He was nodding as I had done a minute before. His head fell forward precipitously, seemed about to crash on to the table, then he woke up, blinking and smacking his lips. I went to the lavatory and tipped the attendant, after washing and straightening my tie. I asked him the time and he said quietly with a wink, 'Trams'll be starting soon.' It reminded me of my father, the way he spoke in the early monring, when he was getting ready for work, smelling of fresh shaving soap, rustling the morning paper. He talked softly into the morning silence like that, fulfilling the legendary associations of which his life was composed. His voice included the dim yellow lights of the tram he would take, the sound of sharp steps on the pavement outside, the ting of the ticket-collector's bell, the fog on the river and the blaring of horns, the slow movement of ships out of anchorage, the blowing of breath through hands against the cold, the clang and muffled chatter and hoot of a strange industrial day starting up.

I peeped back into the main room and saw that Muriel had returned. That was a relief---it freed me. Grigg was just getting up to dance with her. No sign of the naughty Klydonhall. Grigg looked suddenly as fresh as a boy, holding her by the arm as they walked towards the floor, bending slightly with a smile. She was still pale but with a suggestion of delicacy that made her look a lady, not even a made-up lady. I watched them dance for a moment---he held her loosely and they talked with the same casual pleasantness as the other couples on the floor.

A slight breath of wind came from the street below, and made me aware of the fetid air within. I hurried down the wide, imperial staircase, my feet soundless on the carpeting. I said good-night to the waiters standing in the foyer, and they said, 'Morning, sir!' The street outside was awake and bustling with taxis, some cars, though the light wasn't yet fully up. There was a dull grey glow in one half of the sky. The commissionaire looked in my direction and, not wanting to let Palermo down, I slipped a note into his hand. He gave me a deep-voiced, professional, 'Good morning, sir!', and I walked away. The city was still silent. Its vast night-hush had not yet broken. There was a faint Victorian shadow of bleakness over the streets, even on the more ancient walls that had lived in innocence of any such possibility. Everything lay in suspense. Palmerston seemed to watch from behind his windows. He had just come back from the House after talking on foreign despots. And now he was wondering where it had all led, or rather whether it had led anywhere, whether it---himself---had come to an absurd end, not one of death which is the inherited act of surrender, but that of oblivion. Had history itself come to an end? All those names---Palmerston, the Hanoverian king who said 'what, what, what, what,' the treaties, factory acts, the palaces of St. James's, hadn't really fallen into ruin. They were simply cut off: in suspense. Even the events that should belong to us---the first railway in 1830, Faraday's electro-magnetic current in 1831, Fox Talbot's first photograph in 1834, negro emancipation 1838, the first smoke abatement committee in 1843, the first use of chloroform in 1847, antiseptic surgery in 1865, the first typewriter in 1873, the microphone, the Maxim gun, trade unions, Freud's book on dreams, rising and clattering to the death by violence of fifty million people---even these things lay insensate and dumb before us, though they brought us into being, were our voices and even claimed to be our souls. They, too, were history. It hadn't come to ruin. It had all grown and grown. We had few alternatives to the life they had made for us a century and more ago: only more speed, more thoughts in the same direction. None of it had fallen in ruin. It had only come to a full stop. We couldn't connect up again with the past. These faces were no longer ours. I had read about these things, I had learned the dates carefully for the only big examination of my life which I had failed, and they had been real to me then, they had been the story of my world. But now something had happened to send it all shooting back to a time not simply far away, because that is all history, but which had never happened. And we were like

people who believed that of all the generations only we existed, the present was the only time, and in that was our suicide because present time is empty time, it must have the blood of the past and the hope of the future to be itself, and thus we have no time at all, we are the waifs of time, we watch and try to pray, we peer and investigate but we are in suspense like these streets as I stood in them under the dawn sky, waiting, waiting for an adventure to end.

12.

The light was fully up when I turned into the familiar dark doorway, listening on the stairs for a moment. The sky was low and still, so thick with clouds that it seemed to suffocate the city. No movement of air. When I had turned into the street a few moments before I had seen Palermo with Lou on his arm, disappearing round the far corner. The street was deserted, in an early-morning hush: they didn't see me. They swayed slightly, she against him. And I noticed that she was hatless. Yet when I was on the staircase I had forgotten this and listened for an intruder, though Palermo must have been in this same spot a moment before. There was even the smell of Lou's scent on the air, but this remained unconnected in my mind. I realised I knew her scent well, from her having sat on my knees. That had only been the morning before, but it now seemed not simply long ago but an event in somebody else's life.

The pain on my shoulders was suddenly acute, where the saucepan had grazed. And there was a dull ache at the base of my spine where they had dragged me. I yawned and yawned again. I thought of the sun on my vineyard, in the old days, when it used to come as surely as birth in the morning, glowing behind the leaves so that they burst with copper light at the edges.

I was about to slump down on my bed when I saw that it had had a second dose of tumbling from Palermo, this time---I supposed---with Lou. No blood, at least. The pillow which I had improvised with underwear tied together was in the middle of the bed---for leverage, I imagined. The blankets looked as if gods had been fighting in them. A cigarette was stubbed into the floorboards: a mercy he hadn't used the carpet. I saw all this dimly, in one or two seconds, as I lowered

myself on to the bed, pulling what remained of the blankets roughly over me. I was asleep as I did so, in a numbness that seemed to drag my flesh in all directions. My mind was clear. When I heard a sound downstairs I knew it was Pat opening one of the cupboards. I slept on. Then I heard someone come to my door and stand there for a few moments, and leave again, after watching me.

The sound of traffic reached my ears sometimes. There were voices below. And there was silence. It was this long silence that woke me up, made me turn suddenly, jump into a sitting position. I went downstairs and there was no one in the office. Pat had left a sheet of paper in the typewriter but it was uninteresting, just figures. There were newspapers on Palermo's desk, and again no stubs in his ashtray.

I walked to the Strand and took a stand-up coffee. It was eleven o'clock. Then I had a shave at a tiny place near Mr. Parson's, with very hot towels. I found I didn't care if I saw Parsons or not. I was aware now only of mechanical actions, over which I had little power of decision, and which didn't spring in any way from my will, least of all my values. The skin of my face, especially after the shave, seemed to corroborate this---tight, dry, protective. Blushes were not so much unlikely to visit such a face as to be downright impossible, under the greatest provocation of shame. I yearned for feminine smells, in bed, at table, a sight of the utterly simple. My face, thought, actions were set on a definite course. I was without doubts---that last mark of ignorance---about what I should do next. I hurried back to the office: there was work to do, of that I was sure.

Palermo was there, sitting in Pat's tiny swivel chair.

'Christ, you were flat out this morning,' he murmured.

'Weren't you?'

'It was the tops, Glen.' He gazed at me with silverly intense eyes, narrowed, as I had seen eyes in Sicily, in sallow faces. 'She gave me the whole works.'

'Good for you.'

'She pulled out all the stops. I thought she was going to have my blood as well, I've never had a woman like it, Glen!'

'On my bed, too.'

'Where else do you think I'm going? Hell, it's my property. Don't lay yourself on too much, Glen. I might not cover your mistakes like I do.'

'I didn't notice you did that.'

'You don't want the reputation of blabbermouth.' And he made a great smile.

'Anyway,' he added, 'thanks. I wouldn't have the guts to stand up for you like I do if you hadn't done me a damned good turn.'

'I'm not your procurer,' I said in a dangerous tone.

'That's just what you are. And you'll procure me every damn woman in town if you want me to cover for your mistakes.'

'I don't.'

'Like hell you don't!' And he nodded with such a confident scowl that I took notice.

'Seen the morning paper?' he asked after a silence.

'Here, you haven't done the dirty again, have you---?'

He looked at me quietly. 'I did the opposite. I called Jack Ryan one hour before he went to press and asked him to cover Grigg's lectures. That was a promise, after all. I promised Grigg. And Ryan cleared a whole damned page for me. One hour before going to press. Never been heard of before. That's the power of the name Klydonhall, Glen. It moves mountains, which is why you don't want to offend its councils.'

'What are its councils?' I asked, blinking.

'You should be able to smell dead meat when it's hanging under your nostrils, Glen. For God's sake concentrate on your real job.'

'What <u>is</u> my real job?' I asked him frantically.

'Well, Muriel says you've been hanging round photographers' studios for at least five years. At any rate, she says, you're damned good at it for a novice.'

'I grow wine, in Italy.'

'Yes,' he said with a smile, 'and I grow toenails.'

I sighed and looked out of the window again.

'Listen, Glen, I don't know where the hell you come from and who you are, but you're here as long as I'm scared of you and not a second longer. I may as well be honest about that.' He waited for me to speak, but I didn't oblige. 'There's a letter for you, by the way.'

'Where?'

'On my desk.'

I knew it couldn't be my wife as she wrote to me post restante, but I hurried next door and rustled about under his pile of newspapers until I found it. There was a cheque inside for fifty pounds, made out in my real name, and a badly type-

written note: ' I laughed like a drain over your story, Glen, and I'm only sorry we couldn't use more of it but I'm sure you understand we have to watch the libel laws. Keep in touch, Yours, Jack Ryan.' I found myself putting the cheque quickly away in a wallet before Palermo saw it.

'It's a letter from Jack Ryan, eh?' Palermo called out from next door. 'Bad typewriters are an affectation of his.'

'All right, Sherlock Holmes!' I growled at him. And I snatched up Ryan's morning paper.

It was open at the sports news, and Palermo had underlined some of the Probables and Jockeys for the 3.15 at Doncaster.

A whole page had been devoted to Grigg. On one side there were the headlines QUESTION TIME AT CAMBRIDGE, with a caption, Visiting Professor Talks About Blast. That was harmless enough but to the right of this there was a firm black line straight down the page looking strangely like the black edge of mourning, and to the right of this a blacker headline which read, NAKED TRUTH AT PROFESSOR'S PARTY. 'Here it is,' I thought with my whole body trembling. And I read the column with my mouth open: 'The guests at Professor Grigg's party (the Cambridge apartment belongs to defence-brain Charles Dornelling) heard some naked truth talked last night. I was one of them, so I know. Listening to the professor's naked talking is quite an experience. What we over here know about thermonuclear war could be put on a postage stamp, he said. 'Expendable,' he added with that naked look, 'is written all over your faces.' And he has a grievance. About the Germans, this time. He said they had the effrontery to be horrified when he lectured them on vaporation, which is the professor's slang for vaporisation or the melting of human creatures and buildings at nuclear-blast temperatures. One of the guests at the professor's party was General Heeley, who as a brigadier made himself famous in the last war for smooth liaison between British and American headquarters in France. The professor, I noticed, waited for the General to leave before he turned the heat on. And it certainly would have been a bit hot for any army man, as the professor's views on the conventional 'chocolate soldier' have to be heard to be believed. He thinks them just unnecessary. The great number of guests last night presented, in the professor's language, a problem of identification, and it was wise to issue them all with number tags for their clothes. But I enjoyed it. The central heating was at the proverbial American boiling point, or should I say vaporation point. At the end---close on

dawn---I felt like a man with his head in a saucepan, being boiled. One thing I can say, the professor has a cellar as well stocked as his lectures. I tasted his Mouton-Rothchild, so I know.'

'Here, listen,' I mumbled helplessly.

'How much did Jack give you, by the way?' Palermo called out.

I turned to the left side of the page, dreading worse. But it was only mildly ironical. This, apparently, was coverage for one of his lectures. 'Some of the audience at Question Time were confused by the simplest and most basic terms of thermonuclear vocabulary. Asked what a megaton was, the professor explained that it meant a million tons of TNT, and was simply a way of measuring thermonuclear blast. Thus, he said, the Bravo shot at Bikini in 1954 (the victims of that shot are dying slowly of cancer now), was 15 megatons, that is, more than the blast of all the bombs---including the atom bombs---released throughout the Second World War. Professor Grigg also explained the difference between the terms 'limited war' and 'full-scale war': a limited war would be, he said, a nuclear collison (say, in Europe) where the two enemies acted under a kind of tacit agreement not to touch each other's territories; 'full-scale war' was thermonuclear war carried into the heart of the enemy's territory. Full-scale war, he said, was what we must all try to prevent. Professor Grigg also remarked in the course of his inaugural lecture that the European governments had for one reason or another drawn a veil of secrecy over the facts of nuclear disaster, unlike the American government. He put it down to fear of widespread panic. (Are we so panicky? And <u>is</u> Professor Grigg in command of the facts of political alliances since the war? Does he know that if the European peoples had known that their role in a nuclear war was more or less total extermination, those alliances would not have seemed so indispensable to them?) The professor put the whole matter succinctly when he said at the end, 'We have substituted the obsolete European expression <u>balance of power</u> with the far more effective <u>balance of terror</u>. In this day and age that is the only way to preserve peace.'

I wandered back into the other room and threw the newspaper down sulkily. He watched me with a slight smile, his mouth open, nodding with irony.

'I suppose that's all my fault,' I said.

'Well, the smear in it's your fault, the lecture's my work. It's a bit critical but we can't expect a change overnight.'

'Anyway, I don't give a damn any more,' I said, slumping into a chair.

'You never did. I could see that on your face the first day.'

I gave him a questioning look but his face was in repose, as after a simple statement of fact. I wondered if he was right, and if not-caring had given me the power to get this job. For I did have a job: I had a cheque for fifty quid in my pocket, making an intact three hundred again. It was paying well.

'I haven't done a damn stroke today,' he murmured, casting a tired side-glance through to the other office. 'Who would after a night like that?'

'I'm supposed to have a drink with him tonight. Shall I go?' I asked.

'With who?'

'Grigg.'

'You know which side your bread is buttered, I believe.'

'I don't know anything,' I said.

'How much did he give you?'

'Who?'

'Jack Ryan.'

'Fifty,' I said.

'I could have got you double. That's a damned good story, by the way.' I noticed the admiration in his eyes for a moment.

'No phone-calls?' I said. 'I mean, no threats on my life and all that?'

'No.'

'Not from Lou?'

'Lou! She won't be alive till this evening, not after that!'

A change had happened in my feelings, which I realised only now, as I sat by the window gazing down at the street: I was glad the story had appeared. War against Grigg was something after my heart, I found. So---as I watched a filthy van loading up with empty crates---I found a purpose in this life after all. At least, in my tired state it seemed a purpose: it cleared me of shame and made me feel I would know what I was doing for the rest of the day.

'Know something?' he said. 'That husband of Jean de Lisle Swiburne's got out of prison last night.'

'He did?'

'I was reminded by your asking me were there any phone-calls threatening your life. Because anybody who tries to stuff his wife is in for trouble, I can promise you that.' And he laughed so that a flush appeared through his pallor.

It began raining outside.

'Women are certainly the ruin of men,' Palermo added with his eyes on me, sitting there like one of those noblemen in their orders of the garter, with one hand dangling, pale and fine. 'I learned that last night.'

'Well,' I said, not in agreeing mood, 'no woman ever ruined me unless I wanted her to.'

'I didn't say we don't want them to.'

He eyed me sympathetically for a moment and added, 'Did you get a lay?'

'I was holding Grigg's hand most of the night.'

'He got his dish, like I did. The Mouse knows her greens.'

'How do you know he got it?'

'I'm judging by his face this morning. She scarred it.'

'You've seen him?' I asked with my mouth open.

'Yes. He had this conference.'

'But what did he say about this column?'

'Nothing.'

'Had he seen it?'

'Yes, it was on his breakfast table. Charles Dornelling read it too.'

'Did he say anything about me?'

'No.'

'Because I'm supposed to be seeing him tonight?'

Palermo smiled: 'Well, go to your death.' And he added, 'Once upon a time it was all right, Glen, you got straight love between people, they had kids and all that, but now it's a free-for-all like living in a camp, you've got to chuck all that because most likely your wife is a whore, and she's going to farm your kids out or something awful, it just isn't the epoch for that kind of thing. What do you think?' he asked.

'People do have families. At least, so you would think from the population figures.'

'But I mean people on the move like us. My wife was one of those whores who believe in falling in love and that kind of thing, and sex was all full of deep feeling and very respectable. She turned my bed into a kind of sanitary home. I say she was a whore---which she proved to be---by what she left out of her sex. It was nearly everything you could think. Everything you had a little dream about. Which only meant that she was having little dreams about it too. Which meant she would satisfy them one day if she had anything in her at all. And she

did. Then I got jealous and threatened to shoot her, which gave her the chance to be frightened and throw herself under a rich man's protection. He used to glower at me in the club, so I had to change clubs. I belonged to one of the most respectable clubs in London. My marriage, honeymoon---everything was in style. I went into partnership with Chandler-Williams. The gentry of England were in such a poor damned state that they let me in, Glen. They had everything a man needed fifty years ago, except that it wasn't fifty years ago. I had always been interested in rackets, deals and frauds of any kind, perhaps through the mixed blood that courses through my veins, and here I was going to an office at ten in the morning from a flat near St. James's Park, and lunching at the club, and going to the races once a week. It would have gone one But we made no money. Chandler-Williams belongs to that class of idiot who believes that business is pursuing the respectable, though he can play dirtier than me when he's in a corner, even if he does need me to do it for him. Anyway, he made no money. He sent away clients who could have made thousands for him, on the grounds that they stank of garlic or talked too much, and I had the firm on my hands. Now I had always been interested in advertising, especially self-advertising, without wanting to go into the business and do opinion-researches and solicit accounts and that kind of thing. There was still room in London for the amateur, thank God. And I set to it. I refused to expand my office beyond myself: I even think I've made a mistake taking the Orangery on---'

'You've taken him on?'

'Oh, yes. And that may lead to other departments. Whereas I've always wanted to remain creative, and a lonely genius. Well, I made money. I did it by talking to people and then about them to others. I made contacts. I ran my own advertising bureau without more than a phone and my powers of persuasion. It can be done, if you have the powers of persuasion. Of course I farmed work out on established firms. But I stayed alone. And I paid for it. Once we nearly lost our capital. Chandler-Williams looked green for a week. He would have had to live on his annuity, with his wife growing vegetables at their country place. But I always managed to rescue matters with a deal of some kind. I did it, as you know, Glen, by facing the realities of our time.'

'What,' I said, 'another one? That's all Grigg talks about!'

'To hell with Grigg! I've had him in my hair ever since he stepped off the boat at Liverpool. Of course he looks realities in the face, with me running his personal account.'

'What?' I said. 'Has he offered it to you? He offered it to me as well!'

'What do you mean, 'as well'? You're going to run it. You don't think I've got time for professors, do you---I've got Percy Klydonhall to keep me warm!'

'Oh, by the way,' he went on, 'the Mouse tells me you haven't read the preface. She wouldn't believe I wrote it but I did.'

'What preface?'

'To Adam and Eve. The book you're starring in this afternoon at four o'clock sharp.'

'Me?'

'I'm nervous,' he said, jumping up and clapping his hands on his pockets as if he'd lost something. 'As who wouldn't with George Swinburne on the loose?' He looked at me fixedly. 'By the way, she's throw ing fits.'

'Who is?'

'The wife. She needs to worry all right, with him on her trail.'

He left the office, still making the clapping motion over his pockets and added from the staircase, 'Don't forget, four o'clock sharp, I'm off to see my quack. She's killing me.'

'What about that preface?' I said.

'Oh, it's in one of Pat's drawers.'

I heard his steps on the wooden boards. It was so dark now that I had to switch Pat's desk-light on to see in her drawers. There was muck everywhere---curlers, grips, used powder compacts, carbon paper creased and torn. Then I found photographs---Muriel and Klydonhall together, he in ducks as if they were in the Bahamas, and the two of them with Palermo who looked shy and out of place, then a picture of Muriel with a man I hadn't seen, clear-eyed and dapper, with a thin moustache, the kind of man who owns a stable. He had a check suit on and was peering into the camera with a resolute, thin smile, his hands in his pockets.

I stared at the one of Muriel and Klydonhall. His presence seemed to steady and brighten her, so that there was no longer the strained look in her eyes of someone being misused. With the other man it was quite opposite: there you could see the huddled and crushed look; she held his arm nervously; her eyes were screwed up in timid retirement.

The 'preface' was there, forty or so typewritten pages. Palermo had scrawled Adam and Eve across the title page. I decided to eat at The Bologna and took the folder round with me. I ordered the simplest Italian meal I could think of---

fettucine, followed by salted cod cooked with tomato conserve, with a bottle of Sicilian white wine that I'd once had faith in. I lingered over the preface while the place cleared of customers and the smell of coffee drifted from the kitchen. It was mostly sentences like these: 'The camera blinks at life: offers a 250th-of-a-second poem... Those who sneer at the Art of the Photograph have failed to realise the new concept of the Instant. We in our time have captured the Instant---indeed, invented it---as no other epochs have. The Instant represents time frozen. The Instant is neither time present, nor time past, nor time future, but a glimpse beyond time at possibilities inherent in eternity, like a poem... The Instant is an eye turned so quickly and minutely on to the raging phantasmagoria of sensation that we are presented with a new aspect of life which was not open to past epochs and yet summarises a basic experience which was always there... In this astonishing book we present haunches, bellies, arms, bodies prone or sitting, in such a way as to reveal for the first time the moment of intimacy as no words or paint or bronze or note of music could... We present the male in juxtaposition to the female, in such a way that we have hitherto called intimacy seems only a furtive glimpse at privacy... That is why our book is called Adam and Eve... Our book offers that first moment of intimate recognition such as we never experience in our daily lives because of the fine barriers built up round us... This intimate recognition is nakedness. Nakedness is not an act of divestment, taking off clothes, but a state in itself productive of a whole range of emotions more or less unknown to us in our present state. This is why our book presents a new experience... Only the camera can show us directly what this discovery is, without the interpolation of an individual ('artist) whose voice or brushstrokes or harmonies interfere and intimidate our intimacy while trying to evoke it... This is Art, finally and explicitly, without the individual. It is Art where at last it is rendered so much Life Itself as to bring about its own destruction... Books of photographs are the last Art necessary in the world, they are witnesses of a state beyond which no Art is thinkable or necessary. That Art is, in a word, total nakedness... It will be seen from these photographs that in our long journey from nakedness we have clothed and hidden an essential truth, and we are now in a state of hopeless ignorance concerning this truth... It will be seen that the only real freedom lies in what is offered, without pride or forethought, by nakedness... That is why many of our photographs appear not to be bodies at all, except on close

inspection, because nakedness takes us close to the nakedness of the world which is dying and growing all the time, the nakedness of stones, trees, hills. Our nakedness has the same roundness, firmness and softness... There is no beauty or ugliness in nakedness seen at this level of truth, it is simply a dimension of experience which we have been denied, because we have been taught to turn our eyes away from it. These photographs have one teaching, and that is to look. The camera looks coolly and openly. It has none of our fears, or pleasures (which arise from the fears)... The success (one might say the artistic success) of nakedness lies in its ability to evoke the act of looking and not devouring, knowing and not seeking, touching and not feeling for... Only nakedness-covered evokes devouring, seeking, feeling-for. Just as the partially naked excites partial pleasure. The people in these photographs are Anyone, as they are going to be looked at by Anyone, but also these people in their nakedness are Inimitable: they are at one and the same time completely original and completely universal. Only the camera can achieve such a definitive realisation of Art. Only the camera has no axe to grind. Only the camera can offer the view that might be taken of the world by Eternity as it passes, seeing the human form not as belonging to someone but as a marvellous part of the moving débris of creation... That is why there is no obscenity in this book. Obscenity arises from a concern with clothing. In this book there is no clothing. The glimpses in this book are not snatched (between moments of being clothed). They do not show what clothing would most hide. They dispense with clothing utterly, as if it had never existed. That is the beauty of this book. There are no poses. You could as well ask a stone or flower to pose... The act of peeping, that is the timid glance of the inveterate dreamer, is banished from these pages. The human form faces itself in fullness and therefore wonder. We hope, at least, that the wonder has been captured in this book...'

I flicked the pages through, finishing my wine, awed by the clever Palermo, half disbelieving that he was the writer. I ordered a coffee, then a kümmel with a coffee bean in it. Then I tucked the preface under my arm and walked back to the office feeling as if I'd had a sound night's rest.

One thing I began to find as I walked along---I was looking forward to the evening, when I would meet Grigg. In fact, I realised it had become the principal excitement of the day. The most absurd thought occurred to me, that I had found a

real job at last. There was no doubt in my mind that I would be there at the Northumberland. More than this, Grigg was perhaps the only man in this city I really wanted to see. I felt at ease with him. I didn't feel wholly myself, that was true. But it was a realer self than that presented to Muriel, even to Palermo. With Lou too I felt all right. Yet neither of them knew me. Perhaps it was only that they didn't inhibit me with my own past, as Selsey and Klydonhall and Pat and Charles Dornelling did. I didn't know what this past was. Perhaps I had the same effect on them? I made Selsey feel as I saw him. I made Cornelling feel he had an ancient face---which he did. Under my eyes Percy Klydonhall felt a lord and nothing else. Then was that why we all converged on Grigg? Was that what gave this callow philistine, restlessly tinkering with nature because he was cut off from it, hiw power? Was this the freedom we all in our very different ways found in him, while he floundered in half-baked ideas with a half-baked mind, a captive who made himself the more so as he thought he captured us? Was that what gave him a strange sympathetic thrill for me--- that he was captive and yet power was attributed to him? Perhaps. But it had something to do with us, not him at all. Was he the means we had found of escaping each other? Selsey would go a mile rather than face my eyes which he knew so well... So would Dornelling. They preferred almost any foreigners, but these foreigners who spoke their language and their interests were naturally the best. My face shone with the Before for them, like a mediaeval face hooded with cloth... And in Grigg all that could be abandoned. So Grigg was allowed to be the moving spirit, though he had no spirit to speak of at all. He growled his dangerous banalities, and everybody listened. He couldn't be blamed if he thought they made sense. That was the sympathetic element in him---he had power without the slightest credit for having created it, or the slightest intuitive gift for keeping it.

That afternoon 'shooting' began just before dark, at Mike's filthy studio off Gerrard Street, with an oil-stove to heat us. We insisted on Mike leaving before we, in the words of the preface, divested. Palermo had raced me there in a taxi, swearing and giving me his little silver glances of anger, smoking hurriedly, with puffs that sounded like dry kisses.

'What's the hurry?'

'This has got to be on the market in three weeks flat,' he said. 'That's the hurry. Selsey's orders.'

'What did your doctor say?' I asked him, watching him smoke.

'He said the ticker was facing up to all the demands being made on it. And he said he bet he could guess what they were, too. Nice old bugger, my quack...' And he smiled to himself, looking out of the window.

'How did you like my preface?' he asked me suddenly, with a modest blink, 'You thought it was wonderful, I expect?'

'Yes, I did.'

'I'll get some poor devil with a name to sign it. Give him a hundred quid.'

'We were thinking of an obscenity trial,' he went on, 'you make a hell of a packet that way. But we decided on this preface. Also Percy Klydonhall wants me to give his reputation a face-lift, which I must say it needs. He's make love to drainpipes if his cronies let him.'

'I'm Adam, am I?'

'That's right, your old role. And if you don't mind me saying so, you look like him too. To the life,' he added as we got out of the cab.

As we walked towards the studio he said in a low voice, 'By the way, if you're going to take on this Grigg-account you'd better know more about Massacre 2. That's Charlie Dornelling's baby, he's been nursing it for years. And I with my personal magic produce the man to wean it for him. Massacre 2 is one of those joint projects if it works out, and Dornelling gets a nice commission, for which he'll always want to thank me. No chicken feed, either.'

'Wheels within wheels,' I said.

'That's right. But people like me make them go round.'

'Does that make you feel good or bad?' I asked him.

'I didn't come on this earth to be either. I came to survive.' He added as we went down the basement stairs, 'Yes, an obscenity trial would have sold us about a million copies---and afterwards you can feel self-righteous about it too. But there's the lawyers, and months of briefs, and then I'd have to be stood bail or something romantic like that. There just wasn't the time, Glen.'

'I thought there wasn't going to be any obscenity in it?'

He gave me an impatient look and said, 'Oh, yeah?'

As far as Muriel and I were concerned there wasn't, for one thing it was too cold. We shivered with blankets roundus, huddling together over the smelly stove while Palermo focussed and sucked his teeth and took measurements with his tape.

He wanted a close-up of Muriel's bare rump, and got it after posing her for nearly an hour. Then he did several shots with both of us, she sitting on a tiny easy chair, me standing with one leg forward slightly between hers, my back turned to the camera. She was looking at my middle with a lost expression and her mouth open, her hair combed out so that it reached below her shoulders. Palermo kept grumbling about the lights, and pushing Mike's photographic debris out of the way---damp prints that had been rejected before fixing, rolls of discarded film, broken slides, tweezers he had lost. There were several deep-mauve marks on Muriel's shoulders and chest, presumably Grigg's work, and Palermo without a word applied a powder puff to them. She looked quite serene, pale and mute: she said nothing to anyone.

'Dress,' Palermo suddenly said. And he began packing up not only the two cameras but the lamps and cables as well.

'Have we finished?' Muriel asked, pulling on a pair of knickers.

'Like hell you have. This isn't intimate enough. I want room shots. So I'm going to a room.'

'Where?'

'The floor above my office, there's a nice room with a carpet and a chest of drawers in it.'

'What?' I said, but he only gave me an irritated look and murmured, 'Hurry up.'

Then there was the job of finding Mike and his boy-assistant to move all the material. They were dragged out of a cafe in Greek Street and pushed and shooed along the road by Palermo. It needed two taxis.

'There aren't any curtains in my room,' I said.

'What? I thought Pat had some measured up for you.'

'They aren't ready yet.'

There was the problem of how much power the wiring in the house would stand, but by using transformers and bringing up a cable from the basement the lamps were got to work, making a shattering and pleasant light in which my chest-of-drawers glittered proudly and the carpet looked like fur. The heat was tremendous now, without the oil stove, it being such a small room. Curtains suddenly arrived. They were from Palermo's flat, which was apparently near by: he had sent the boy round for them. They stretched to the floor and looked magnificent. It was a neat way of acquiring curtains, I thought.

I disliked the idea of Mike stamping all over my room and watched him like a hawk as he rucked up the carpet and pushed the bed further in the corner to point the lamp properly.

'You look as shagged as hell, mate,' he said to Palermo with one of his dirty glances. 'Been burning the midnight oil?'

We drew the curtains and put all the lights up together---there was no explosion. Mike and the boy were sent away, and we were back at the same poses--- showing rumps, elbows, the backs of legs, protruding stomachs. We had three shots taken seated stomach to stomach, just the area of our belly-buttons in the picture.

'Now the remarkable thing about <u>that</u> shot is you'll be able to see which which is Adam and which is Eve, just from the line of the tum,' Palermo said, preparing the lens for another shot.

There were pictures of Muriel pulling out a drawer of the chest with one hand, lightly, her gaze centred on the wall in front of her, absently. I began to see an expertness in Palermo, reminding me of quick Italians when they had a job to do. They went swiftly and directly to the essence: northerners took months of schools and apprenticeship to do the same.

He touched Muriel lightly on the face to alter her gaze, moved one leg delicately in front of the other, looked underneath her, sideways, his eyes like a child's. He induced a sense of stillness into us, so that we worked quickly, without a sound: he would make her look into the camera with a slight questioning look, with one hand on her breast as if to squirt milk, like in a renaissance painting. Pat must have taken the afternoon off because there was no sound from below. He took one of the blankets and spread it over the chest-of-drawers like a tablecloth, then made us sit on my empty suitcases at either end, while he put a single empty glass between us: Muriel was to have her hand delicately on my shoulder, while I looked ahead; only our busts were visible, and the table with the glass, not our faces. For another shot he stood me with my back to the camera while Muriel sat facing it, and my right hand he laid just inside her right leg; for this she had to put on a pair of specially tight studio pants, the colour of skin, so that no hair might be visible.

'One follicle, Glen,' he said to me as he focussed, 'and I could be put inside. Now that was my plan, to disregard the fig-leaf and get a trial.

We shall never throw off the Adam and Eve legend, Glen, because it's so likely. Truth doesn't really interest people, but likelihood does. That's why this book is going to sell, because of the endless fascination.'

'Your big Wonder Apple ad sold nothing,' Muriel said.

'Well,' Palermo said, 'you can't try and sell the apple of temptation to people who've been eating it for thousands of years. Their research was wrong there. But the picture was good. It put me on the market for this commission, anyway.'

Muriel yawned. 'I've got a pain in my back. I'll call it a day.'

It was after dark now. I realised with a bounce of excitement that I was due at the Northumberland, in fact overdue. I had meant to phone Grigg beforehand, to confirm that he wanted me. But I'd make him want me: that was how I felt. We kept the lamps on while we were dressing, for the warmth. I got into a dark suit, and wore turquoise cufflinks.

'OK, Glen,' Palermo said when everything had been put in a corner, 'keep him about two hours, will you?'

'Keep who?'

'The old man. I'm taking her out to dinner.'

'I'm seeing him on my account, not yours.'

'Like hell you are. He'd have been round here and set light to your bed if it hadn't been for Lou.'

I looked at him with surprise as he walked out, then called after him: 'He was angry, then?'

'Look,' he said irritably, 'Just say yes to everything, that's all he needs. As I say, do it for at least two hours. And we kick off early tomorrow, Glen. At least you won't have far to go to work, will you?'

Muriel sang out, 'Good night!' and went off in a cloud of scent. Then she called up to me, 'See you later!'

'Me?' But she was already gone.

I found Grigg in a corner of the Northumberland lounge with the ginger-haired young man called Nelson. He had the same jersey shirt on, clashing in the same way with his jacket and trousers, and somehow he had managed to slip into the hotel without a tie on. He gave me a quick look and a nod, as Grigg made a non-committal gesture towards me, then returned to gazing at the table, leaning forward on the arms of his chair. Grigg looked calm and not at all tired.

'Your boss looked green at breakfast this morning,' Grigg said quietly. I didn't know he suffered that way.'

He was dressed with special care: an amazingly white shirt with a tie-pin, and a dark suit with black suede shoes. He had a thick gold ring which I hadn't noticed before, and he'd been to the hairdresser. There were no signs that he nursed any grievances, even against me. I found I was sane enough to ask for a squeezed lemon when the waiter came.

'How was the conference this morning?' I asked.

'Top secret,' he said with a wink. And this time he also looked across at Nelson. 'Fact is, we've got a spy here.' He chuckled while the young man went on gazing seriously at the table, his thoughts uninterrupted.

'I gave up thinking you were a <u>double</u> spy long ago, son,' Grigg told him with a trace of menace, frowning across the table, remarkably tall, heavy and lined, compared with the young man whose eyes seemed even smaller this evening, in a pale, flat face. 'You're damned fool enough, but not clever enough. To be a spy, especially a double one, it takes an equal portion of both.' His words came crisply and firmly, supporting his dark gaze that was so direct. 'What the hell did you come to the party for if we all make you puke?'

'Oh,' Nelson said in an abashed way, 'you fascinate me all right, I've never denied that.'

'So take the medicine. Anyway, you get free drinks, son. And I found you a damn easy job. Leastways, you get down to London pretty often.'

We all sipped our drinks, and Nelson said, 'I suppose I <u>am</u> a spy in a way. I'm learning all the time, like a fly on the wall?'

'We've got a lot to teach,' Grigg said quietly.

'Of course the trouble with Americans is they're scared of being looked down on,' Nelson said. 'That's why they've tried to squash everybody's independence.'

'I always thought they'd poured out millions of dollars to <u>help</u> people's independence,' Grigg said. 'You come over here and pick up a lot of pacifist talk, but the pacifists are free to talk because of those dollars, and you could afford the fare over, because of those dollars. I'm not materialist, mind, but those are the facts. Too simple, if you like, but so was your premise.'

'All I'm saying is you're scared of other people being on equal terms with yourself. You think you might be looked down on. It's an American complex,'

the young man said. 'My generation's different, that's all. We just love to be on equal terms with other people. Power stinks.'

'Until you haven't got it. We grew up in a world where the <u>others</u> had it,' Grigg said. 'And they made a hell of a mess of it.'

'Seems to me it's what everybody with power makes, because you've certainly made it too.'

'There was no one else to do it, Nelson.' Grigg sighed with the first trace of impatience, and looked at me. 'I've had young Nelson on my shoulders ever since I touched dock.'

And he added, 'He was the only guest I couldn't get to put his clothes on again.' He chuckled.

'I was drunk,' Nelson said without smiling.

'Still,' Grigg went on quietly, 'you might remember that the double bed in a household is for the man and wife to make love in, not for casual visitors.'

'Other people were doing the same, I think,' the young man said.

'Not in my bed.' Grigg looked at him with a frown, and I was astonished at the sober, ethical depth in his voice.

We sipped again all round, while more people came in. I noticed that Grigg took care to speak softly. Nelson could have been a son of his, for the tone of concerned yet moral familiarity Grigg took to him.

'Another thing I don't understand,' Grigg said, 'is why you can't mix up with the common people of this land. You get what I mean, don't you? You're always with embassy people or at one of Nancy's parties or refusing to dine at the Ritz. That's no rebellion, Nelson.'

'I told you, I'm fascinated,' Nelson said. 'I don't <u>want</u> to be.'

'You're fascinated because you're the same as they are. And in ten years from now you're going to close a lid on your past and spend the rest of your life hoping nobody prises it open.'

'Like Jeff did over being a Hollywood gag-writer,' I said to Nelson.

To my surprise Grigg laughed huskily. 'That's damn right! We <u>all</u> do it. That's why I take you seriously, Nelson, why I get you jobs. Because I can see myself there, like I was fifteen or twenty years ago.'

Nelson took no notice of my remark. He gave me the briefest of glances, as if I were irrelevant to the issues between them, even perhaps to the issues of the day.

'I'll tell you why you don't go out among the people,' Grigg went on with an increase of relentlessness. 'It's because the word American means warmonger, and that's how they'd see you too, and you can't face it. You want to run away from it, that's what. And blame it on to me. You need an alibi.'

'Perhaps I do.' And he gave Grigg a sad smile.

'Well, I'll tell you something,' Grigg said. 'You're fascinated by people like me because we can face reality. You're burning your wings at the candle all the time. You come fluttering round my apartment in Cambridge, you can't keep away. You want the power-talk. You need it, Nelson. And you live on it. You live by it. You've been to India, you've had a year at two German universities, you've danced with Greek peasants, steamed up the Nile, taught maths on a Pacific island, all you have to do in any town is go to the embassy and say, Find me a job quick. It was how you got to me, after all!'

'So what?' the young man said quietly.

'That's all power. At least, it's power to the native wherever you go. And they're right. You've trotted three-quarters round the globe before the age of twenty-five, and that's because of the power you despise, make no mistake about that. You live on the network of international power built up by the States. It's the world we live in. It's the world you live in and on, you couldn't breathe a minute without it, and that's what takes the conviction out of everything you say. You're a damn fine generation for talk, but it's drawing room stuff, Nelson. And my generation wasn't that, at least.'

Nelson said, 'I'm finding out about the network, methodically. Because I might have to do some explaining one day.'

'You could see the network without using it. You could even leave America for good,' Grigg said to him with a very straight look.

'I can't, because I'm American like you said,' Nelson murmured in his meek yet coolly persistent way. 'It might fall to me to make a better world.'

I was closed out of their conversation, and Grigg seemed to realise this. 'Listen, Nelson, Glen and I have to cover some business.' And he lowered his gaze, leaving the young man to take his cue.

'By the way,' Grigg went on, turning to me with a smile, 'Nelson liked your column this morning. He'd like to see that kind of thing in all the papers.'

'Oh,' I said with a glance at the young man, who was rising, apparently without interest. 'I'm glad.'

We shook hands and he and Grigg gave each other a final straight glance. Then Nelson left, gazing round him, his hands in his pockets, as if he had nowhere to go.

'Yes, that was a clever bit of reporting, Glen,' Grigg said quietly, 'but you could have gone deeper on the personal level.'

'In what way?' I asked.

'Well, I talked this over with Palermo this morning---'

'He said you were steamed up about the article,' I said. 'Not impressed at all.'

'I was impressed all the time, Glen,' he said with a slight blink. 'Of course, I was human enough to want to drive red-hot needles through your eyeballs, kick you in the pants until steam came off, and throw you out of top-floor windows. By God, I was so mad only Lou could hold me. I nearly burned this hotel down. It made me give Palermo my personal account right away, without even talking it over.'

'Yes, so he said.'

'Did he explain the work?'

'No,' I said. 'We've been at the studio all day.'

'Oh, that,' he said with a scowl. 'Showing your arse. Some work for a gentleman, eh?'

'It's still work.'

'Oh, don't let me seem to demean your profession. Only your boss said you'd be covering the personal stories, and I suppose his word goes.'

'What stories?'

'Listen,' he said, 'why don't you come off the pedestal and name your price and be damned for it? You got a thousand bucks out of Lou. That was payment for procuring. Well, you made two people very happy. She came back this morning looking like a Roman empress when the old man's been away at the wars---knocked to hell. She rattled when she sat down. And she gave me a chronicle of the whole thing. There was nothing she didn't do to that man! Think I'm brave, don't you? Yes, well, I can live in this epoch.'

'Anyway, what are these terms?'

'As you've got to name them, Glen, you'd better do the talking.'

'Well, I don't know really.'

'Here, have another drink, to help you do something really dirty.' And with another scowl at me he ordered two whiskies, not asking my permission.

'As a matter of fact,' I said, 'I don't know what work's expected of me.'

'All right, play it that way if you want to. I'll tell you what the work is. I want a story once a week, and I don't mean the provincial press either.'

'What kind of a story?'

'Well, hell, not the kind you let off this morning!'

'And how do I guarantee the papers will be interested?'

'You don't. Palermo does. And if I know anything about it Jack Ryan does too. You try and get a smear on me in any newspaper with a circulation above a thousand, Glen, and you're finished as from yesterday. The situation's changed,' he said with a smile.

When the waiter came with the drinks Grigg took his straight off the tray and gulped down most of it, before the soda syphon had been used. He smacked his lips and murmured to the boy, 'Thanks, Fred. Now drown the rest with fizz.'

'So what do you say, Glen?' he went on, leaning back and smacking his lips again. 'I mean, the price. You'll do the work all right. Palermo says so.'

Being asked for my price thrilled me, I found. I looked at him with a slight smile, while he blinked in my direction.

'Every story goes through your own office, Glen,' he added. 'Mind that. Nothing direct with the papers. Be careful of that, now. You've been going over Palermo's head, so he told me this morning.'

'He was afraid you'd kill him too, that's why.'

'Kill him? He's giving my wife so much enjoyment I'd like two of him!'

'Well,' I said after a pause, 'I'd like the usual newspaper rates. That makes both sides happy.'

'OK, Glen,' he said, taking out a tiny notebook. 'You a member of the National Union of Journalists?' I didn't answer at once and he looked up. 'You are, of course?'

'Well, no.'

'Boy,' he murmured, making a note, 'are you a rat!'

'I'm not really a journalist,' I said.

'You just take their fees, eh?'

'Palermo's my boss, that's all I know.'

'In that case,' he said, putting his notebook away, 'why go over his head to do your dirty work? Seems to me you've got ten people's brains on your shoulders---all ten of 'em damned shady. Now that's why I'm not taking Michael Harcourt Selsey's advice and insisting, as part of my account with Palermo, on

your removal instantly. I respect brains, even dirty ones.'

This made me feel desolate, and I gave the window a look as if I wanted to escape. He seemed to see this.

'Well,' he went on, 'I suppose I like you quite a bit too. In a funny sort of way you represent something. What do you make of Nelson, by the way?'

'Very tied up in himself.'

'You know what he says? He says we want to be in the news all the time. That's why we make the bombs, try and get to the moon, to Mars, to Venus, set ourselves up all over the damn universe, so people can't get us out of their minds for a damn minute, so they never go back to a life of their own, to their own theatres and fun and places in the country and that kind of thing, every time they think they can call their souls their own something big happens and America's in the news again and breathing down their necks with a new war or a new bomb or a new rocket. And do you know what I think of that? He's damn right! I didn't tell him so, because I didn't think so when he was talking. I mean, he's a heel, there are millions of him in the States, they have sit-down strikes in the campus where nobody gives a cuss and there's no traffic anyway, they sell pamphlets and sometimes are daring enough to grow a beard. Then they're hitched by a female heel, and the rest is silence. But he's right. We don't like being looked down, in the sense that we feel we always <u>have</u> been looked down, even before America came into being.'

'How's that?' I asked him.

'Because America's always been there. It was there in Italy in the renaissance, in Columbus and Galileo and Giordano Bruno. It was here in England when the steam engine and the spinning jenny and railways came in. It was wherever people tried to get forward, free of their nationalities, free of their class, free of their families, free of their superstitions and religions, to something with the sound of reason in it. Yes, we don't want to be looked down on, just because we love the sound of reason.

We finished our drink and he ordered another, refusing to let me do it. 'No,' he said, 'I like to think of myself as your boss. Now what I want, Glen, is a story once a week and by God if that don't appear I'll throw you to the wolves.'

Fred the waiter appeared again, and this time Grigg allowed him to put his glass down on the table and flush it with soda himself.

'What about this Massacre 2 business?' I said. 'Did you clinch anything this morning?'

He looked at me and smiled. 'I bet you'd give your own soul and mine to know.'

I shrugged. 'I don't want any secrets.'

'You won't get any. I deal in facts. Secrets are for the mass of the people, Glen, the mass of the hicks. Nothing's a secret for me.'

He looked for all the world as if he was talking family matters, his face serious, the frown digging into his eyes.

'Glen,' he went on, clearly enjoying himself now, 'people live on secrets. Americans the same as everybody else. They actually think they elect a president every year. I can tell you, the president's lucky if he knows what's going on himself. It's all changed, Glen. A president who goes beyond his mandate, shall I tell you what happens to him?'

'Yes.'

He made a quick slitting motion across his throat. 'That president ceases to exist. Now, OK,' he said, pulling his chair closer, 'you say to me, oh, you mean he has to go along with his party? I say no! The party don't know what's going on either! If his party goes beyond its mandate, too bad, it finds it's out of funds all of a sudden. They only know they've gone beyond their mandate when they've actually gone. The president gets elected like he always was, he reads nice speeches that somebody else wrote, like always. The people choose this man or that man. It makes no odds what they choose. One man is just as good as another man. Everybody knows that. But people don't draw the right conclusion. They're scared to. They know it's the truth but they're scared to see it. So they let it happen. Because that's how they want it. Now that's a damn lazy and it's damn selfish. But it's what most people want. They give up their life to other people. So a minority takes over.'

'And who are this minority?' I asked.

He smiled again and moved his chair away as if talking was over. He drank some more whisky, looked round the lounge and seemed to have lost all interest in the matter. Then he said casually, 'Glen, all I'll say is we recognise each other. We don't know who we are, but we come together as if by fate.'

'A hidden military dictatorship?' I said with interest.

'Wrong again,' he said, still smiling. 'No. The army and the vast revenues it gives to research are a part of it, and perhaps the biggest part. But not all. I like to think of that inner conclave as consisting of a conjunction of interests. You might think of a way of putting that in one of your stories. And these interests can be described as interests of action. I don't know what the word should be. That's your job. A larger life, perhaps. Anyway, something more than just sitting ans spitting.'

'Do you want all that to go in the stories?' I said with surprise.

'It could be worked into a picture of me, some image or other, not necessarily a cosy one, but one that sticks.'

'Well,' he said, getting up and looking at his watch, 'your room should be free now.'

'My room?' I asked.

He winked. 'Your room.' And he took my arm as I got up too. 'That was only the first instalment, Glen,' he said as we walked across the lounge. 'Palermo hasn't the time to sit and listen to my gas, I can understand that. He's got to kiss Percy Klydonhall's arse. But you're free to get my gas.'

'Thanks.'

'And I'll pay you more than you ever got for a story in your life. If it's good. And regular.' He held out his hand. 'Goodnight, Glen. I'm dining with Klydonhall. Now there's a man could listen to my gas till the roosters get dry in the throat.'

He stood in the foyer seeing my off. He looked extraordinarily like the boss, and I certainly felt the employeed Yet I was a high-class employer---like Michael Harcourt Selsey.

I walked into the dazzling night air: the street lamps seemed brighter tonight. I wasn't hungry and walked straight back to the office. I felt not nervous but strangely in abeyance. Inwardly I expected someone to come andtell me what to do. Like a new habit. Perhaps I should find a message in my room. The telephone downstairs might ring. I walked through the dry, cold streets, past the theatre-going crowds, between walls I had known since childhood but which were now only scenery for me, not my birthplace any more. I thought with a little twinge of pleasure that 'work' would begin again tomorrow morning, under the glaring lamps.

When I got to my room I understood what Grigg meant by it being free. There were stains all over the carpet. I bent down and smelled them and thought they

were whisky, but they could equally have been perfume. And Lou's perfume, too. There was hair in my bed. The mattress was half off. The lights had been left on. One of the studio lamps had been used: probably needed for warmth. There was a vague smell of bodies, excitement. Love so exciting that it appalled itself... The curtains were drawn. I opened my cupboard to hang my jacket up and saw they had even used my towel. It was crumpled in a dark corner, wet, with that pungent smell of love.

I was reluctant to get into a bed still warm from others, but then this seemed to me a comfort and I pulled the mattress back into place and lay down without switching off the light. I didn't like the silence of the house, and slight tears of bewilderment and fear came to my eyes when it occurred to me that I had enemies. The matter-of-fact side of my mind said that this was absurd, but all my life I'd rejected the matter-of-fact side, and on looking back I thought I was usually right. I listened with my eyes closed, felt that peculiar tingling rustle down the spine which reminds us we are animals still. A car passed outside and I found myself fearing that it would stop, like the strange car from which the man in the rear seat had peered up at our windows. I was thankful for Palermo's curtains. I thought of going out for a walk, but I was tired, though without wanting to sleep. The sound of traffic from the Strand became less. There was even a touch of silence. I dozed, still with the smell of their bodies in my nose.

There was a sound from below which in my half-sleep I couldn't recognise. I leapt to my feet before I was really awake and realised it was the telephone. It was ringing with special urgency, but as I ran down the wooden stairs, I realised a phone couldn't do this. The rings, when I reached Pat's desk without switching on the light, were quite usual and regular.

To my relief---so great that I nearly burst out laughing---it was Palermo.

'I've been trying to get you at the Northumberland,' he said. 'Where is he, by the way?'

'Who?'

'The old man. Did he say he was dining with Klydonhall?'

'Yes.'

'Good.'

'You certainly used my room, didn't you?' I said.

'Listen,' he said, disregarding this, you're wanted at Seymour's right away. That's why I called you up.'

'Seymour's?' I asked with alarm.

'She's waiting in her room for you.'

'What?'

'Yes.'

'What for?'

'Oh, for Christ's sake stop asking questions and get there! One thing you'll learn in my service and that's to adapt yourself to contingencies.'

'Yes, but she's mad.'

'Anyway, I said you'd be there by ten and it's nearly eleven. And I don't know where her bloody husband is. You can tell her that. Tell her the police may know, as he probably bribed them to let him make a break. She's in a state of terror, Glen, and I haven't got time to look after all mad mice at once, Muriel's bad enough.'

'But I hardly know her,' I said. 'And she doesn't like me. She makes me turn my back an her and then look at her through my fingers.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I have to sit there looking at her with my eyes closed.'

'Sounds to me you two belong together,' he said, and slammed down the phone.

I ran upstairs and changed quickly---into my dark suit again, with a fresh shirt, a midnight-blue tie and, this time, cufflinks of tiny yellow buttons which belonged once to a Regency waistcoat. That I was seeing a woman, however mad, was a relief. I made my bed carefully, so that I could throw myself straight into it when I returned. I wanted to lock my door from the outside but couldn't find the key. It was exciting to know that somebody wanted my presence. Well, it was said that we are fascinated by those we hate: perhaps she was fascinated by me. I hurried down to the Strand, through the biting, dry air again, and found a taxi at once. I had over twenty pounds in my pocket. It had refused to diminish, that sum I'd got from the bank. Nobody seemed to want me to pay for anything. And I'd be getting at least fifty a week from Grigg. Should I take a story in to Ryan tonight, for the early edition? It made me feel professional, and the lights outside, at the Vaudeville and the Adelphi, and then the dark hump of Charing Cross station and the broad hushed Trafalgar Square, seemed united in one professional unit just for people like me as they sped along in their taxis, steadying themselves with the strap while their minds fertilised plans for the

nourishment of the city, which gratefully and greedily gnawed them and spewed them out in the form of lights and carpeted foyers and meetings by indoor plants. I walked into the foyer of the hotel and straight up the stairs, since I remembered the number of her room.

I knocked on the door. A man yelled 'What?' harshly and I thought of George Swinburne with a knife.

'Well, come in!' he shouted.

I opened the door. He was vast, dressed in evening clothes with a silk scarf thrown carelessly round his shoulders as if he'd just come in from the theatre. He looked at me with such a frown that my sense of being professional collapsed at once, and I was convinced it was George. But he didn't look like a prisonbreaker,

'I thought I told you people I didn't want to be disturbed,' he said.

'Not me you didn't,' I said with relief.

'Well, are you coming in or not? And what do you want?'

'I was looking for Miss de Lisle Swiburne.'

'Who the hell's she?---well, anyway,' as I started to speak, 'it doesn't matter because she isn't here.'

He took a newspaper and began reading with a scowl, then, since I went on standing by the door, said, 'Would you leave me alone, please?'

'I'm sorry,' I told him and closed the door quietly again. This was strange. I stood in the corridor wondering if I could risk asking him if she wasn't perhaps in that bedroom with her own pictures still on the wall and a teddy bear leaning against the pillows. Or was he George, and I'd just had a narrow escape?

It reminded me of my last visit, when only my body had left the hotel, and I had wondered if the rest of me would unite up with it again. This time she wasn't even here! I walked down to the desk and asked the clerk if she'd changed rooms.

'No, sir, she left the hotel some time ago.' I remembered his searchlight collar, its inquisitorial gleam across the plumed entrance.

'But I had an appointment with her here for ten o'clock.'

He looked at me firmly, without saying anything, and repeated, 'She left some days ago.'

'Oh, well, thanks.' I was about to move away when he said quietly, 'Are you Mr. Glen?'

'Yes.'

'She's in a room on the top floor under the name of Newman, don't ask me why. Number 115.'

'Newman?'

He winked, destroying all trace of the inquisitorial: 'We have to oblige all sorts, don't we?'

I took the lift up and found her door. This clearly wasn't a suite. I tapped and at once her voice, like a medley of a hundred all knocked together, said, 'Who's that?'

'Glen.'

There was silence, and I waited. Nothing. I tapped again. Still nothing. I tapped a third time and heard her voice very close to the door: 'Walk to the other wall.'

'Which wall?'

'On the other side of the corridor.'

'Why?'

'Just do it.'

It occurred to me that she was about to shoot me, and at first I didn't move. But of course you don't shoot people through closed doors. If she opened it suddenly I would have time to duck, I thought. I looked towards the lift for an avenue of escape. Then I went to the other wall.

'OK, you can come in.'

And she opened the door slowly, after unlocking it. To my astonishment she was wearing no tweed or heavy material, nor did her small head with its fiery curls peep out from expanses of dress. This time it was an impression of flushed face: then a neck so white that the sun could never have touched it, and a tight green dress with vast patterns of flowers and a pencilled skirt, and high heeled shoes. It wasn't right at all. She was too heavy in the shoes. But it made her dazzling---without any jewellery at all. She had hardly combed her hair. She gave a startled glance up and down the corridor, then hurried me inside and locked the door. It was a simple double room, with wide, low windows overlooking Park Lane. The only light was a tassled, silk-covered lamp at the side of the bed. I found that the unnatural green of her dress was becoming and natural, for her alone, the more I saw it. And I'd forgotten all my irritation towards her.

'Your name's Newman, now,' I said with a smile.

'OK, don't start on the undermining the minute you get in,' she said with a quick look from under her eyebrows, with that strange sag of her chin.

'No, I was only saying...'

She disregarded this and, frowning, put another light on. And she cast me another little glance under her eyebrows, with the faint smile I remembered so well, like an Etruscan gone wrong.

'Well, sit down. Would you remember please that you come here as a Chaise Longue man, I mean an employee?'

'I'm being paid?' I asked, again with asmile.

'Please sit down and stop barracking me,' she said with her imploring look. 'God knows if I haven't got enough on my hands. You know he got out, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'You know him, Mr. Glen? Don't you think he's wonderful, yet I expect you understand why I'm scared?'

'No, I don't know him.'

This too she appeared not to hear. She went to the window and looked out, then turned and asked, 'Can I give you a drink? Don't you like cider or something, some fizzy stuff?'

'Listen, let me offer you something,' I said, still standing. I had the peculiar impression that this room was toppling over, perhaps because it was so high: and her fear filled it like a feathery irritant.

'I thought we agreed on you being hired?' And she went to the phone.

'Yes, all right, well, I had a bottle of Mosel before.'

'A bottle of what?' she asked with her face screwed up and the receiver in her hand.

'Let me do it.' I took the phone from her and ordered my Shwanen Riesling.

I stood near the door with my hands in my pockets, while she pretended to potter about on her dressing table. Suddenly she turned round.

'If you don't sit down I shall scream,' she said quietly.

And remembering her screams I sat down at once, in one of the arm-chairs.

She sighed. Only the faintest of hums came from Park Lane. She walked up and down the room, sat on the edge of the bed, got up again, glanced at me in her peculiar guarded way, the slight smile trembling on her fat cheeks.

'You see,' she said, 'I didn't know John Palermo was mixed up in Chaise Longue.'

'Oh.'

She gave me her imploring look again, flushed, with dark eyes, reflecting passions she simply didn't seem to have: just as if she were the wreckage of a person, like a monument when the marble has been taken away to manufacture lime, leaving the bare brick face which gives you the outlines and glow of the original ancient idea but is spent for future use.

Feeling a sudden, admittedly mental, sympathy for her I started, 'Listen, Jean, I'll tell you my part in the whole---'

'Shut your mouth,' she said quietly. 'I forgot to say: while sitting in that chair just nod and say yes, while I'm talking. Can you do that? Please, Mr. Glen, I want to get my thoughts straight!' And this time she gave me such an imploring look that I shut my mouth firmly and kept it like that.

'You see, Palermo and George---'

'Who's George?'

She closed her eyes with irritation and was about to go on when she seemed to understand my question for the first time. 'Oh,' she said, 'that's my husband. A nice guy. But he got mixed up with your boss, I'm afraid, and that started a downhill trend.'

'I thought your husband broke into banks?'

'Oh, now, Mr. Glen, come on, come on.' And she smiled at me in a most peculiar way.

'Why, doesn't he?'

'Sure he does. But he wouldn't have gone back to that if these people hadn't made him feel he was cock of the walk. There's a man who always laughs at me, I can't stand to be in his company, name of Percy Klydonhall, now George picked up with him, and, hell, I didn't like that. That's why I put him inside again. I saw photographs of his girls, and, boy, was I mad.'

'What girls do you mean?'

'Well, your boss was part of it, so you should know, which I'm sure you do. Chaise Longue isn't such a far stretch from the same thing, only the other way round, that's all, I mean he was finding people to chaperon Mr. Klydonhall and I call that unnecessary, a man can look after his own friends, otherwise he's not worth much, of course I guess he's lonely sometimes, being a rich man. Hell, what I've got myself mixed up in. I pick up the phone and hire a guy, all innocent, and who answers me but John Palermo, my second-best enemy? Isn't that fate?'

'It could be.'

'You know, George brought off that last big tickle in Toulouse just to let Percy read about him in the papers. Oh, he often dreamed about that particular tickle, Mr. Glen. He had maps and routes lined up, for an escape route through Spain and Lisbon. And on to Tangiers where he has contacts.'

A knock came at the door and she made a jump, putting her hands up to her mouth. She motioned me to silence and went to the door on tiptoe.

'Who is that?' she asked, trembling.

'The wine you ordered, madam.'

'Go over to the other wall.'

'I beg your pardon, madam?' came the voice from the other side, in an Italian accent.

'Go and stand over by the other wall. Go on, quick.'

She then bent down and looked through the keyhole. 'It's the waiter, OK,' she said, and unlocked.

'Oh,' I said with a laugh, 'I wondered why you did that!'

She gave me an impatient look and hurried the waiter with his ice-bucket trolley into the room, locking the door again for the short interval that he was with us. He gave her one or two gingerly looks, and stared at me too.

Suddenly she asked him, standing close behind him so that he gave a start, 'What's my name?'

'Eh?' He turned and looked at her in an alarmed way. 'Mrs. Newman.'

'That's right. What I'm paying out to sweeten these people is quite something,' she said to me, sitting on the bed again.

'You could change hotels, couldn't you?' I said.

'Didn't I ask you to keep your mouth shut?' she answered in a queerly polite voice, at which the waiter nearly dropped the bottle. And he gave me a very peculiar look.

He had two glasses and in a most professional way swilled the top of the wine into one of them and set it aside for throwing away, as I'd seen it done in Italy. Then he poured a drop in my glass and handed it to me.

'I've only seen that done once before,' I told him. 'It was in the north of Italy, I think, in a small place near---'

'Here, listen,' Jean said, getting up and almost pushing him out of the room, 'This isn't a smoking lounge.'

I heard him say something that I thought was Neapolitan on the other side of the door, and there was silence again.

'Aren't you having any of this?' I asked her, taking a sip of the delicious mountain stream.

She shook her head without saying anything, and I added, 'Not even a cake, either?'

She didn't explode, simply looked at me levelly from under her eyebrows and murmured, 'I'll tell you something, wise guy. If that goes on I'll throw you to the wolves.'

'Who are they?'

'All I'll say is there's one man George is after in London and that's you.'

'Me?'

'There's one crime, one capital crime, a man can commit in George's eyes, one only, and that's trying to seduce his wife.'

'I never tried to seduce you!'

'You came here that Saturday night as a hired man, and you abused your position. You went beyond your contract, Glen, and I know what your contract said.'

'Funny I never signed it.'

'You got money for it. That's as fine as a signature. It was my money. And, look, that mustn't go any further. If you let that out, that I had you here, I'll really weave a story round you, I can be really hard when I want to be. Listen, Glen,' she said with her eyes closed, 'I'll tell you everything in due time, you don't have to ask questions, I want you to say yes and no and leave it at that, and the pay is good. As Mrs. Grigg said the other night, you haven't got a heart, it's an organ mashed down from bank notes.'

'Oh, you've been talking to Lou, have you?' I said with an angry flush.

'Please, <u>please</u>, Glen,' she said. 'Give your hired services just for one night, out of humanity. If you can manage to abide by the terms I'll double your fee.'

'Oh, all right.'

She nodded as if to confirm this and said, 'She was certainly right, too--- your eyes look like ten-cent pieces.'

'You're not being paid to break my relation with George, are you?' And she gave me an unexpectedly penetrating look.

'Not that I know of. How could I do that, by the way?'

'You could sell the story that I came to Chaise Longue. You're not telling me you don't sell stories? Lou's been to this hotel twice with tears running down her face!'

I was aware of her looking at me, the smile coming and going, her eyes flickering, her chin seeming fat and then pointed.

'Why should I want to break up your marriage?' I asked.

'Well, come to that, why smear a well-meaning professor who comes over here to earn his living?'

'What,' I said with astonishment, 'you call Grigg well-meaning?'

'He's got a job, he earns his way in the world, he has a professional status. When you can qualify for those three you won't feel like smearing anybody. I'll tell you something, Glen, the minute we sat down in that terrible sweaty place where they hand out sherry I knew the kind of man you were. You're right in with these people and may be they've changed you like they did George. They make you feel that smearing people and holding out on them is big fun, but comes a day of reckoning, Glen. It came for George and it might come for you.'

'And look at you there, not giving a damn...' she added, almost in tears--- or what seemed like tears.

I shrugged: 'None of it's true, that's why.'

'Do you know what George said to me once,' she asked with her limp smile, 'He said, Jean, he said, you're the most moral kid in the world and I'm not going to let anybody touch you. Now I want you to understand something else, Glen, he's the only person in the world I respect. He's a real man and I trust his character. And I'm going to fight for him. I don't care how many men-about-town want us separated, so as to keep themselves fed with what he can provide--- oh, sure, he can provide people with almost anything they ask for, he can move mountains, they trust his character, they start leaning on him and...' She sighed again. 'But I'll fight, I just want to know your price, that's all.'

'What price?'

'Listen, I'm right, aren't I? Percy Klydonhall's got it in for me. I can tell by his face, every time he smiles like that when I walk in the club, it's so obvious I wonder he troubles. I took his Number One away! Now, am I right he's going to use you to do it?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'If George finds out I came to you for your services he'll never forgive me, even though I can swear they're your normal professional services. He thinks I'm the most moral person in the world, and that'd be the end of my marriage, Glen. My marriage means everything to me. It's all I have. I wonder if people like you can understand that. Will you tell me once and for all---I know it sounds silly and perhaps I'm all mixed up this evening---but has Percy been talking to you?'

'I've only met him once. And then I didn't speak to him.'

'OK,' she said with exhaustion. 'You win.'

I sat there without a word, wanting to take another drink but afraid that it would look too cool.

'Do you want to ruffle my hair?' she asked suddenly.

'What's that?' I said.

'George said it's the most intimate thing he's seen in his life.' And she began ruffling her hair with quick little movements of her fingers.

'Let's call it a day,' I said, getting up. 'I won't interfere in your matters, and you don't interfere in mine.'

Without listening to this she kicked off her shoes. 'What about feet?' she said.

'What about them?'

She twinkled her stockinged toes in front of me. 'How's that?'

I shrugged yet again, and this time felt reluctant to leave a nearly full bottle.

There was a long pause during which, tussled and shoeless, she stared at me disconsolately with her mouth open.

'I'd better be going,' I said.

'OK,' she said quietly. 'I've never been touched before in my life and I may scream, but you can do it, I'll try to be brave. I screamed for George once and he promised not to try again because the screams were so unearthly, he said, but go on, you just test my courage. I'm determined to keep my husband and if it's your price I'll bite a hole in my tongue rather than cry out.' And after this she lowered her head and showed her back to me, still sitting on the bed. I stood puzzling out what she meant me to do.

'Go on,' she said with a muffled voice, 'get it over.'

'What?' I asked.

'I told you, I agree. You can touch. There's a zip.'

'I'm going,' I said. And I went to the door.

'Where?' she said with infinite sadness.

'Home, to sleep,' I said. And I turned the key in the lock.

'Come back tomorrow,' she said with the same quietness. 'I want to hire you again. That's an order. You'll come, won't you?' If you don't I'll go to the police and charge you with rape.'

I looked at her for a time, fear kindling in me, and said, 'I'll try.'

As soon as I was out of the room she locked the door. My last view of her was tussled hair and a flush so bright that it seemed painted on.

I walked heavily down the stairs, past tired guests coming back from supper, and I didn't notice the 'Good night, sir' that came from the desk. The commissionaire asked me if I needed a taxi and I simply shook my head, unable to say anything. The air did me good. I walked and walked, until the last buses were gone. I spent an hour staring into the Thames, my collar turned up. The trains rumbled over Hungerford bridge, less and less frequently. The tiny harmless waves washed against the stone banks. I walked up to the Strand, past the closed and shuttered Vaudeville and then the Adelphi which I had seen in their evening glory not long before. There was almost no traffic, a few straggling people who seemed sad. I walked to Fleet Street and back again, and peeped in at the lighted offices of Ryan's tabloid. When the first tentative fingers of light appeared I walked quickly to the office. The light was on in my room though I could have sworn I had switched it off. I saw it from the street, gleaming between the curtains. I walked up cautiously. No one in the office. My door was ajar, with light streaming into the corridor, showing the bannisters in silhouette. I tiptoed, not making a sound. The brightening sky gave me courage. I stood outside, waiting. But there wasn't a sound. I pushed it openly suddenly. It was as empty as I had left it. But to my astonishment the bed was exactly as it had been before I slept on it. The mattress was half on the floor again, there were more hairs, more stains. The room was warm. The cupboard door was open, and the wet towel was there in a corner as before, only wetter. The rascal, I thought, the rascal! And I recognised Lou's scent. I heaved the mattress straight and blung myself down. The door was wide open and the light was still on, but I was asleep in a couple of seconds, my overcoat still on.

14.

In a moment---but really some hours---I was pulled and shaken and dragged from one side of the bed to the other while a new light flooded through the room, making me squeeze up my eyes. I lay sunk dead on the mattress, unable to help these hands wake me. And they only had to desist for a moment for me to be asleep again, in a giddy, buzzing, unpleasant delirium. But they started at once. I heard voices, but they connected with nothing I knew. I wondered, falling into the sickening delirium of sleep again, if I was ill. And there was a short space of silence which seemed endless like a summer day, during which I slept peacefully, though it could only have been a moment. Suddenly I woke as if no struggle had taken place at all, and through eyes that seemed scorched when I tried to open them, so that slight tears were needed to quench the flames, I saw Palermo, in his dirty white studio coat. That meant nothing to me, and I was about to sleep again when something struck me roughly in the side. Fear of a second blow made me lean up with a terrific effort and blink myself into a state of drowsy, nodding, wasted half-consciousness. He was still there, and this time I noticed that he had his legs astride and was looking down at me, very close to the bed. My upper half swayed on my elbows and I was about to fall into a sleeping position when he jumped forward and caught me, and I heard muttered words, 'Oh, no, you don't'. I realised why my eyes seemed to scorch, and where the flood of light came from. He had set an arc lamp immediately in front of me, and it was full on. I turned away with a disgusted sound. My throat was clogged with squalid juices. I had no headache but my face throbbed as if I'd just been to the dentist.

'Switch that thing off,' I whispered, surprising myself with the dry sound of my voice.

'Are you awake?'

'Yes.'

'Who am I?'

'Palermo, as if I didn't know.'

The light was switched off at once, and at once I swayed towards the bed gratefully but got another blow, which I realised was from his foot.

'Wake up, Glen,' I heard Muriel say.

This worked at once, and I sat up yawning. She was on the other side of the room painting her lips, naked except for the kimono she

(Over ...)

used in the studio.

'There,' Palermo said, moving away from the bed, 'I should have known a woman's voice'd do it.'

I yawned again, rubbed my face with my hands, said good morning to Muriel. He set about arranging the lights and focussing. The curtains had been opened, and I saw with an unwilling effort that there was mild sunshine outside. It made me feel pale and bent, a stranger to the life I'd once led. And thinking this I slumped slowly towards the bed again with my eyes closed, and was in a kind of sleep before Palermo had even turned round.

'Oh, Christ...' I heard him murmur as he moved towards the bed again.

But he stopped, and this suspended action woke me more than a blow would have. I was thankful to be lying down again, and waited.

'Look at this,' I heard him say. 'Mouse, look.'

There was silence during which I dozed without falling into the numbed delirium of sleep again. And I heard Muriel move too.

'What about it?' I heard her say.

Curiosity woke me further, though it gave me no energy to sit up.

'Just that line, there,' he said. 'Here, pull this way...'

I felt myself being dragged---by Muriel as well, because I could smell her scent---to the edge of the mattress, which itself was half on the floor. It was a gentle movement, unlike the previous ones. And there I was left for a moment. Lamps were moved, and there was silence. The position of my right arm was changed, my head was shifted gently to one side. It dawned on me slowly that I was being posed for a photograph, my head hanging down the side of the mattress, my arms splayed out, in what must have looked an attitude of forlorn dissipated power.

'Look, Glen,' Palermo said quietly in my ear, 'I want you to hold that while I focus. Then you can undress, but I want you exactly as you are now. In fact, Muriel had better undress you.'

'No, that's all right,' I said hoarsely, keeping my position carefully.

'It's an absolute wow,' he said.

I heard him focussing, and he altered the lights again. Then he gave me the signal to strip, which I did cleverly, hardly moving from my position and still enjoying the half-sleep. I threw trousers, vest, shirt, in a heap at the side of the bed, and Muriel---it seemed to be her, from the softness of her touch---took off my socks.

'Hold that,' he said.

I breathed out heavily, and this seemed to improve the pose even more, because he made a sigh of approval. He came forward and tussled my hair slightly, returned to focus again, asked Muriel to shift my hanging arm a little to the right, then to alter ever so slightly the position of my legs. Several shots were then taken.

Then I heard him say, 'Look, Mouse, suppose you sit by the bed?'

She did so, and I could feel the warmth from her skin, the intimate smell reminding me of the first time I had posed with her, downstairs, with Pat looking on.

He moved her closer to me, and laid her hand on my bare shoulder. It was going to be one of those still, questioning shots. He focussed and set the lights, used the measuring tape, refocussed. Then she took her kimono off and all was ready. I almost fell asleep, due to her closeness, reminding me of the drug of my wife's body, that acted on me at once when I was tired, as if we were never intended to be single creatures. Her arm, stretched over my head, might have been there to comfort me; in any case, that is how my body eagerly took it, snatching at the intimacy like a tortured beast. Not that there was torture here: the warmth of the lamps was like sunshine on my back and I began to feel remarkably better, just from the exposure. I opened my eyes and yawned carefully so as not to destroy my pose. I was staring into Muriel's young chest, with its line of weathered skin, the untouched white of a girl's body. She looked remarkably uncovered---in want of clothes: therefore the opposite of what Palermo claimed to want. And the warm smell of her skin belonged to herself alone: yet a woman's.

That accounted for at least the first hour of work, so I had the chance to wake up slowly, feeling spuriously soothed by Muriel's arm. When it was over and the lights went down like an explosion to darkness, I sat up and stretched while she coolly pulled her kimono on again.

'Where did you get to all night?' Palermo asked me.

'Not in somebody else's bed, anyway,' I growled at him.

He said nothing to this, only glanced at Muriel.

'Christ,' I went on, going to the cold tap in the other room, 'I don't mind once but you don't have to make a meal of it.'

'O.K., Glen,' he said pacifically. 'Go down and seize a coffee.'

'And I'm going to take my time,' I said, putting my head under the tap and rubbing my eyes.

'You'll need a shave. I don't think I can use an unshaved chin.'

With the wakefulness that came with cold water I realised I was walking about in the nude without the slightest reserve. The odd idea formed in my mind that the northern peoples were practising nudity for when the Flash came, in preparation for their great exodus south to the African continent where fall-out and climatic devastations weren't as strong. Perhaps it would be the flash of a bomb, I said drowsily to myself, but a Flash of thought would do it too: we were rehearsing for the new Garden of Eden.

In that Garden we would have to repair the Dark Years 1945-1965, undoing the blackest crimes of all history, hospitalising the monster children and the sterile mothers, healing the soil, cleaning the sky, in such a deliberate (because inevitable) return to nature that the words Garden of Eden would apply.

I looked at Muriel's body between the folds of her kimono and saw her for a moment as simply a victim of the Twenty Years Darkness. No disease had struck, but there was a wasting-away just the same.

My dark suit was a mess, I suddenly noticed. I would have to take it round for express cleaning. She was sitting on my jacket and murmured 'Sorry' when I lifted it from under her. I dressed in front of them, a clean shirt and a light 'pepper-and-salt' suit, as the Italians called it. All the time Palermo was arranging his slides, and Muriel was filing her toenails, which were painted a bright crimson.

'I'll come with you,' Palermo said as I went out. He followed me quickly, throwing off his studio coat, leaving Muriel without a word.

'Here,' he said when we were outside, 'you needn't publicise how I use your bed.'

The mild sunshine made my eyes water and though I tried rib-expanding and spine-straightening I could hardly walk.

'She left you dead, all right,' he added, glancing at me curiously, as I didn't answer him.

We went to a stand-up cafe and I drank down two very hot coffees, while Palermo went on looking at me.

'And how about the old man?' he asked. 'He seems to have expected a story this morning and there wasn't one.'

'I haven't got time for stories if you send me crawling round after crazy women,' I said.

'It was either you or me, and I've got two personal accounts on my hands.'

'What, all night as well?' I said. 'You didn't even take my towel to the laundry!'

'As a matter of fact we had to get out quick. Sometimes she thinks the old man's on the trail, and then I think I hear Muriel. Then there was somebody downstairs. I thought it was you. Was it?' he asked in a gingerly way, not quite serious.

'No.'

'Then it might have been George de Lisle Swiburne. Thank God I wasn't in my own flat.'

I felt no tremor of fear when I heard this, and put it down to being exhausted. 'Listen,' I said, 'what's wrong with your own flat - I mean, to have your own affairs in?'

'The fact that the Mouse lives there.'

'What, she lives with you?'

'Well, clings to me.'

'I thought she was in love with Klydonhall?'

'So she is.'

I looked at him impatiently and ate an enormous sandwich. He was leaning on the bar, still looking at me with interest.

'You know why Jean got him put inside, don't you?' he asked suddenly.

'She thought Percy Klydonhall laughed at her,' I grumbled. 'At least, that's what she told me.'

'She found a set of pictures, Glen, and she found them on George's person. And I took 'em.'

'What sort of pictures?'

'Of all his girls. With the Mouse as number one.'

'His girls?'

He looked round the bar carefully. 'Listen, you'd better be careful of that fellow. I'm a friend of his, in fact he thinks he's the best friend I have, but if a chap marries a girl like the de Lisle and even adds his name to hers, without sleeping with her, and then resents anybody like you who tries her on, well, I ask you, he must have something wrong in the top storey, eh?'

'He thought I tried once, which I did, and he nearly killed me for it.'

'Anyway, you'd better watch out for yourself. I'm watching out for me.'

'What have I got to do with it?' I asked, feeling a dim fear at last, behind layers of fatigue.

'If George asks me too many questions I'm not going to let him corner me like he did last time,' he went on, disregarding my question, 'I'm going to tell him I wasn't even in town, because I don't like the look of his knife.'

'What knife?'

'George is a funny man with a knife. One or two people in town have got smilers on his account.'

'What's a smiler?'

'A nice smiling wound from ear to ear. Oh, it's all right, you remain alive.'

'Here, I didn't come to England to get mixed up in a bunch of crooks,' I said.

'Well, listen to me, then. There should have been a Grigg story in this morning's paper and there wasn't. Which is why I want you to see him again for tea this afternoon. I'll get you off in time, don't worry.'

'That's all right but what about the knife?'

'Just get a lock for that downstairs door,' he said with a smile.

'I certainly have walked into something,' I said desperately. 'God knows what's going to happen to me.'

'Well,' he said, 'we don't get our bank accounts filled for nothing.'

'I've certainly earned it. I've worked a damned sight harder than I do in the vineyards, leastways it's taken more out of me.'

'Your vineyards, they really make Lou wild.'

'Why?'

He dug me familiarly in the side as we left the cafe: 'As a matter of fact, I don't believe in them either.'

As we were walking along I said to him, 'Is that true about the knife? I'm not anxious to widow my wife in a hurry.'

'Your wife?' he asked, 'She's used to doing without you, isn't she? Anyway, the police'll give him ten days of freedom, not more. If he doesn't cut your throat inside those ten days you're safe.' And he laughed.

The day's work got into its stride early. Muriel and I leaned over each other, drawing apart to powder our sweat dry, we showed our legs planted in proximity, our buttocks and thighs, our necks in repose, the top of our heads which Palermo shot from above so that an unfocussed view of our private places

was offered as well; we sat back to back, held hands and laid them in front of the camera, we took time off while Pat made us tea. There was no lunch-break, only rolls brought in from the pub.

Soon after three he released me and I took a taxi to the Northumberland, where Grigg was waiting in the tea lounge reading an evening paper. He was dressed casually---the first time I'd seen him in a tweed jacket and a coloured shirt.

'Well, sit down, Glen, this is nice.' We shook hands and with a charming gesture he called over a waitress, in the dim hush of carpets and armchairs and tiny lights set in the walls. Then he faced me with a rigid frown, his chin pushed forward, and said, 'No morning story. Why?' And making a scowl that reminded me of a lion he looked downwards at the table.

'I didn't know you wanted one.'

'I'll tell you what I like in people who work for me, Glen, I like them to love it. You're too damned casual, Glen.'

'You said a story a week.'

'I said at least a story a week. You might listen to me, if it's no bother.'

'You'll have to let me work in my own time and my own way, otherwise I can't do it,' I said, trying to sound authentic. 'They say in the trade, don't employ a dog to bark and then do the barking yourself.' That phrase came into my mouth from nowhere, and the effect was extraordinary.

'OK, do it your own way, Glen,' he said mildly. 'But I have to follow Palermo's advice, and that is to keep on your tail otherwise you'll sell your soul all over again to about the eighteenth buyer.'

'Oh, he said that?'

Grigg nodded without looking at me.

'But once you've lost your soul, Glen, it don't matter how many times you sell it. That's the rule I follow. A soul's a played-out luxury. There's just the facts of survival nowadays. That's what I appreciate in you, Glen, your sheer damned ability to survive. We don't like it but we've got to live with it. So we may as well buckle down---help yourself to tea, Glen, and if you ever want to make notes just go ahead---to the idea that it's going to happen somewhere, some time. Let's hope it stays this way, we can go on enjoying the good things of life, we can sit and spit. But suppose it doesn't? Then there comes a question of who survives. Am I making myself clear? I'm a phenomena at present struggling

between jealousy over my wife and the urge on my side not only to have a damned good time myself but make her jealous as well. I'm juggling with those possibilities. And I'm working the problem out in order to SURVIVE. That is, I don't want to go mad, to lose my wife, to murder anybody. I want my job, my home, my satisfactions. So I juggle with the possibilities: I'm a survivor. Now I'm talking to you about this, Glen, because I've given a whole lecture called The Survivor. In a way,' he said with a modest glance at me while I poured myself a cup of tea, 'that's a sort of visionary concept, it's an idea of the whole man, a new man. I mean, what the hell have we got at present that we'd like to keep? Our wives are unfaithful, we're unfaithful, we feel damned insecure all the time and this makes us do insecure things, we're slipping and hanging on to each other and pushing each other down, we wake up in the morning like dead men and we go to sleep at night wanting to kill ourselves, and just as your clever boss says we do succeed, we kill ourselves all right every day, and some people are brave enough to go the whole hog and cut their wrists or something, like the Mouse. By the way,' he said, stopping suddenly, 'how's she making out today?'

'Oh, all right.'

'I hear you're working on some great art together. I had it all from Percy Klydonhall. Some person, that. We rolled home at two o'clock this morning.'

With a reminiscing smile he poured himself a cup of tea. 'We rolled home delirious with new ideas,' he went on. 'I don't think we touched hard liquor all night. At dinner it was Vichy water. We certainly populated the universe with new thoughts. It made me feel that we live in great times, at the threshold of a new world nobody even ten years ago could have visualised, and that's saying something, don't you think so? Percy and I were up in the stars last night. We put a human colony on every star within easy reach of the earth, we had stations up there for the study of space-philosophy, for stellar agriculture, a communications-system that would make a ring round the earth so as when you look up in the sky you don't look your own death in the face any more like you do now, just damn darkness and your whole drab and dirty history in front of you like that. No, you look into a bright lighted arena bustling with human affairs, let's compare it to a vast forum---I don't know if I'm making myself clear---you get the feeling like you get when you look across a great plain now, only the plain is millions of miles of sky instead, you see the universe won't be a lonely place any more. As for raising an army on the earth, that's going to be a joke!---nobody'd dare, their

guns might be radioactive inside thirty seconds. Nobody seems to have thought of it before, Glen, but we're going to make security on this earth, have the whole thing watched night and day, we've got to live with the fact that we're alone, there's nobody up there looking after us, we've got to do our own security---'

'But I thought you believed in God?' I asked him in a surprised voice.

'What's God got to do with it, Glen?' he asked, drinking off half his tea and smacking his lips. 'He's there to look after the universe, not our interests. He's been trying to drum that into us for thousands of years: 'Look after yourselves,' he says, 'see to your own security, that's what I gave you a mind for!' No, Glen, what you're talking about is the old notion of fate and that has nothing to do with religion. While we're in this life we've got to look after ourselves, we're alone, so damned alone we could kill ourselves quietly one day and nobody'd notice, out of sheer damned misery and hating all the smells and the sweat.'

'Yes,' he said, leaning back heavily in the soft chair, 'Klydonhall's quite a kid. You know, he's a great adherent of this thing called abandonment.'

'What's that?'

'Well, it spells the end of countries, for one thing. It means abandoning yourself to a bigger concept---abandoning maybe your language, your sense of home, all the little things that give you a sort of mean pride. At the beginning it arouses resentment, Glen, as Percy was saying last night. But life's too vast nowadays to permit what I might call <u>little freedoms</u>. When you have watchers, or better still guardians, in the sky, what does a little freedom mean, what are the deliberations of a chamber of deputies or house of congress in the reality of such vast events? Glen!' he said, presumably because of my look of innocence, 'Glen! No wonder you've been smearing me since the day I touched dock! You don't know what the hell I'm talking about! We'll have the freedom of the skies. Our little freedoms won't be needed any more. Laboratories, whole lecture-rooms, TV units, research-groups---they'll be circling round the universe!'

'Won't that interfere with the weather?' I asked him. 'I've noticed in Italy---'

'Terrestrial weather, you mean?' he asked with a clever look.

'Well, that's the weather we have,' I said.

'Why, yes, it could be. It seems that just about anything you do two hundred miles up, even a mild fart, has some effect the earth is going to feel

sooner or later. These are problems, they mean changes---mostly in people's concepts, and that's what I've chosen as my job, to help do the changing. If you can mess up terrestrial weather, you can make it good too! These things come slowly, Glen, but not so damn slowly as all that, seeing what we've done in the last twenty years.'

'What's the point of getting to the moon?' I said to him.

'The MOON?' he said. 'I ought to charge you tuition fees! What you don't know is wonderful. You sound as if you read the papers! Listen, when you put all those smears in the paper about me and mine, do you believe 'em? Of course you don't! Do I? Of course I don't! Yet you believe any crap they put out to keep you dazed. About heroes getting to the moon and dancing about in space and wondering if Dante was right and there are white souls up there, whiter than the white of the moon!' He laughed. 'Yes, I should think not! Oh, you could send someone there. A station maybe, in time. But damned expensive. A radio-telescope can tell you more or less all you need to know. At least, so I should guess. No, Glen, the REAL THING is a laboratory with a panel of men inside who can see every aspect of the earth from the military point of view, who can prevent nuclear explosions wherever somebody's mad enough to try, and make them too, if it's a case of do-or-die! THAT'S the security I was talking about! That's your 'moon'! Moonshine, more like it! You've got to moonshine for the millions of crumbs all over the earth sitting on their lazy arses watching television. Apparently, they need moon stories. Well, you can't blame me if they believe 'em!'

'You mean these flying laboratories are going to have nuclear bombs in them, too?'

'What else would I mean?'

'But what's that got to do with being on the stars talking philosophy and things like that?' I asked him.

'A hell of a lot, Glen---why don't you tackle that cake there? - it looks good,' he said as if the lounge was a college common-room. Enjoyment was written all over his face and he was bobbing backwards and forwards, his smile making those deep black crayon-marks across his face. 'It's the same thing. Like you have drugs and splints and transfusions and tests and sterilised air to keep the body going, so you've got a system of surveillance in the skies, to keep the earth going. You must imagine stellar research-groups working and analysing and talking, throwing out their ideas in a kind of a glorious mess that brings out an absolute sinch of an

idea every now and then, so that we land the whole of the universe, or at least our part of it, in a re-think of its whole position. That's science. You can't have science without security. You've got to make things safe for research, Glen. If you're lax about these things you'll have all these people from the Arabs to the Indonesians coming out of their caves and using their spears again and scrapping like they used to over some damned boundary or oilfield or piece of dried-up desert that should have been irrigated a century ago. It's a kind of Greek age all over again, Glen, with Socrates and those boyfriends of his sitting around and talking things out, and DOING something about it this time!'

'Socrates committed suicide, don't forget.'

'Because the State was scared of ideas, that's why. They had no security. They thought, if he's allowed to go swinging around with these new ideas, what's going to happen to the people, there'll be revolution! But with security that's no danger. You see what I mean? In a way, Glen, we've finished with the earth. It was too small for us. Instead of talking about Ideals and Absolutes sort of trailing about in the sky (except you couldn't damn-well see 'em!), we'll actually be there, we'll be SITTING there, we'll be able to see it all, the whole damned universe laid out in front of us. Now if that doesn't excite you, Glen, what I suggest is you don't fit up to the measurements of present-day life.'

'Oh, well,' I said, aware of the sadness in my voice, 'we'll see.'

'Are you sure you can retain all this?' he asked with an anxious look.

'Yes, I think so.'

'It's only a beginning, Glen, but I hope you get the gist.' And he leaned back with a trace of exhaustion, looking round the lounge for the first time.

Funny he should have mentioned Dante, I thought. I kept on remembering Dante's words---those he heard in the lower heaven, the moon!: <u>E la sua voluntate è nostra pace</u>. His will is our peace. For Dante and St. Augustine and all those who invented us Love was what turned the stars round and brought the sun out every day, and made the vast stillness...

He smiled at me and said in a quiet voice, 'OK, Glen, I know what you're thinking. They give me that look back home. They say I'm too emotional, which is true. But my answer is the same every time: nothing new ever came about without it. The first stuttering accents of the babe are speech in embryo, that's what I always say.'

We sat there for a time in silence, sipping our tea and gazing round.

'Well,' he said, 'I reckon that's enough for one day.' And after a pause he added, 'Glen, do you mind if we talk about my personal affairs? I think it'd help me.'

'Go ahead,' I said.

'I can see by Lou's face, she's having the greatest time of her life. I thought it was a game at first, but she's up in her room all day waiting for dark, they're at it all night, Glen---what the hell do they do? Does he talk to you about it?' he asked, facing me with a wildly imploring look.

'No, not really.'

'I'm so damned scared I can't speak---I mean, she did it once before in the States, she bunked. But that time was chicken-feed to this. She's EATING that man, Glen, she sits and thinks about it. When I try and get some sex on my own account she wrenches it out of me, if you know what I mean---she's enough for ten women---she treats me like I was anyone, and that excites me, Glen, and the more I'm excited the more I think about her---it's getting so as I don't sleep at nights. When she comes in round six in the morning I'm red hot and it seems she can go on where she just left off, she don't need the sleep, she gets up at two in the afternoon as fresh as a girl---what would you do?'

'Let her have her fill,' I said, 'and get back to Cambridge yourself. At least you can sleep there and do some work and have a few friends in.'

'All I've got is the Mouse,' he went on. 'Playing around with a kid who don't interest me enough to get a stand! That's all the revenge dad's capable of,' he said gloomily. 'I pray sometimes, so fervently, Glen, I wonder there can be a God, because he doesn't answer me. How long will it go on, can you tell me that?' He stared into my eyes. 'I mean, what's usual with him? How long does he run an affair?'

'I don't know. But he gets tired of things.'

'He does?'

'Why don't you go back to Cambridge?'

The repetition of this advice seemed to waken him. To my surprise he got up and waited for me to do so too. 'OK, Glen, I'll give you a call.' Half turning from me he added, 'Thanks for listening to my junk. Oh, and look after the Mouse, won't you? She gets some funny ideas, you know. She's been having some routine

visits from the police, that's all. Your boss likes to keep out of his own flat for that reason.' He whispered to me, putting his face close to mine for a moment, 'I've stood outside in the street looking up at your window for hours on end, Glen, knowing they're inside---.' And they make a noise too. It seems heaven is taking place up there!'

'But what are these police visits?'

'Oh,' he shrugged. 'It's their job. Good night, Glen.' And he held out a strong hand.

'Good night.'

He went swiftly up the main staircase, looking distinguished. The words E la sua voluntate è nostra pace kept turning in my head. I hurried home through the side streets. Tonight I would lease my body to God by taking a good night's rest, so that he would work on the glands and veins and tissues and bring them back to sanity. I was determined not to have Palermo in my bed tonight.

15.

There was no light at my window, and the offices were empty. I hurried up the dark staircase, still determined to get an early night's rest. I pushed my door open and saw gratefully that no one was there: Muriel's scent lingered, and there were the sad remnants of the day's work---her kimono, cables, a broken arc-lamp, my bed exactly as I'd left it.

It wasn't much after six o'clock but I jumped into my pyjamas and lay down with a satisfied groan. I would even do a bit of reading. I rummaged in my case and found the little red notebook that I called my missile diary, with its chronicle of the weather. 'April: premature heat, suddenly interrupted by storms, and a return to winter weather. May: prolonged rain, high winds approaching hurricane force, dangerous storm on the Adriatic coast. June: normal June-heat interrupted almost daily by dangerous thunder-storms. 4 people killed working in fields near by, with scythes in their hands. Rain most of the month, following the same pattern as

last year---bright periods, especially in the morning, followed by cloudbursts and thunder-storms. On the 15th a colossal cloudburst in the next town, which luckily misses us here. Much cooler now. The typical thunder-storms of last year, with their incessant flickering lightning that illuminates the countryside like strange moonlight, began last week but then gave way to cloudburst weather again. The grain is intact: no hail yet, touch-wood. 25th: a sudden violent cloudburst which floods the cellars in next town. 26th and 27th: rain in continual avalanches. July: some warm weather. Soon broken by torrential rain---streets knee-deep. Daily mild rain with intermittent strong sunshine. Hail suddenly ruins all my wine facing east, that is, nearly half my yield. Olive crop depleted by half. All over in three minutes...'

Then, 'The wet has begun to endanger the wheat which now lies harvested in sheafs: it may begin to sprout inside the sheaf, due to the damp, and that is the end of the crop. Another hailstorm: the rest of my wine is pockmarked with hail but not ruined; a weak, vinegary wine inevitable. Olives further damaged. Violent rain and bright sunshine, the worst thing for my grapes. Three of our geranium vases full of earth, standing in the courtyard, swept clean away, smashed against the wall. Tiles broken. Thunderstorms come in the evening now. It rains all night, although the sky gives no sign of this during the day. In between these disasters, July has been serenely hot. August: a renewal of the afternoon storms---sudden explosive claps of thunder. Light earthquakes in Umbria. September: the thunderstorms are shorter and less explosive than before, but of the same type. October: storms of the greatest violence; terrible winds, hail-storms, avalanches of rain, fierce lightning; we are flooded in the house day after day, slosh about in water, hang out carpets, drag chairs into the courtyard. Luigi says this has never happened to the house before, not in his memory or his grandfather's. Sudden winds like hurricanes; damage along the Mediterranean coast; boats damaged in Naple's harbour. The violent weather spreads all over Europe. November: great damage in Sicily from seastorms. Houses and whole streets wrecked. Papers talk of a flood warning in England. 8th: very violent winds. Flooding in Rome. Sardinia badly hit. Floods reported in Venice.

Could I dare to hope that Italy would ever have her classical weather again, and again would be visibly and patently the womb of our life, and the blue sea would stretch out to the gods in the sky, to Greece and ancient voyages, and the

mystery outside us would spread itself safely round again and produce its balanced world whose intricate adjustments we could never even in the smallest miniature reproduce except by destruction?

In the margins of the little book I had recorded the dates of spatial experiments, as they'd been published: 'Ranger rocket launched from US to hit moon; Russians launch satellite with two men on board; military missile from US; Russian rocket to encircle moon.'

I lay there with my eyes closed, the little red book still in my hand. It seemed absurd being frightened of small things such as the unlocked door downstairs or George Swinburne, or Mr. Parsons. If the door had been pushed open and Swinburne had stood there with his smiling knife, I think I could have fought him off with a glance. What importance did these pleasant little dramas have now? It was like reading in a book from the Before---from only twenty, thirty years ago: where serious things had happened to single people, and they had talked about them, crooned with grief and argued and busied themselves in exciting or moving or consoling or shocking stories, which the writer wrote in the peace of the Before, when the land was what would always be in front of you, to support your feet, and one day could be relied on to follow another, and what men did and thought and the way they moved their lips in a smile or a snarl was still important, that is to say, had effects on the world. I was reminded of that little book of Tennyson I'd picked up in Cambridge, I hadn't realised at the time of browsing through it, with the thundering rain outside, just where its exquisite consolation lay: that just the sound of the lines and the rhymes, even the tortured grief of <u>In Memoriam</u>, were like the perfumes and tastes and melodies of the Before wafting back, from the times when the wine of life had not been quite drawn. The bitterest tragedies from the Before were consolations to us, quickening our blood.

I went to sleep with the lights still on.

My body was aware of a long time passing: this I realised when I suddenly woke. Someone touched me. I was wide awake, looking into the eyes of Muriel as she sat at my side, gazing down at me, dressed in her overcoat. The little red book was still there, between us, open where I had left off reading. I realised she was pale, her hair dishevelled. I tried to focus my eyes on her, shielding them against the light.

'Hullo,' I whispered.

She nodded slightly, without saying anything.

'What's the time?' I asked her.

'About four.' I felt refreshed and calm.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'Oh.' She made a pout and looked down. Her ear-rings shook as she did so, giving her the old-fashioned look I had noticed often before, with its hint of graciousness badly used. 'I didn't like the flat any more.'

'Palermo's?'

'Yes.'

'Have you been with Grigg?'

She nodded, and I went on, 'Where is he?'

'All I did was cry, so he went.'

'He said something about police visits,' I said. 'Is that true?'

'They've been every day for a week,' she said with tears in her eyes. 'They didn't ask about George, even.'

'Why should they?'

'I thought they wanted information, but they keep on asking about Grigg.'

I sat up: 'What for?'

'I'm frightened, Glen! Tell me what they want!'

She began crying, and leaned her head on my shoulder, wetting my pyjamas, in one of the poses we had tried so often that morning.

'I know they're trying to frame me,' she said. 'They want to know why I'm a friend of his. What can I tell them?'

I saw how unsuited I was to help her, because I had so far only read the words 'frame me' in books, not heard them spoken with tears in the eyes, while a trembling hand held mine.

'Glen, they came and talked to you once, didn't they?'

'Yes. About Jean de Lisle Swiburne, that's all.'

'And they didn't ask about Grigg?'

'No.'

'How do you know it wasn't really about Grigg all the time?' she said.

'They didn't mention him.'

'They wanted to know what we talked about one night,' she told me. 'That's what they're always asking questions about, when Percy was there---that night, when

we were at the club---they were talking about Massacre.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Well, I couldn't help knowing what they said.' She spoke in a whisper, while the house lay silent like a listener. 'They're never satisfied. And I mustn't talk to anybody. I can't stop Grigg talking to me, can I?'

'What, he talks about Massacre 2?'

'Yes.'

'About stars and laboratories?'

'All that kind of thing, and I don't want to understand it. It can get you into trouble. They ask me what he said. To find out how much I know. I told him they came---'

'Told who?'

'Grigg. And he wasn't bothered. He said it was routine visits.'

'What <u>is</u> Massacre really?' I whispered.

'You know as much as I do. You're in it too. I told the police all I could--- I can't block it out of my mind, can I? I said it was a small bomb fired from the orbit. Guided on to any target. You see how clear I can be about it? Well, the police see that. I can't force the words out of my mind after I've heard so much about it. But they aren't satisfied with that. They think I know more. Sometimes I think they're trying to get Palermo.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. You never know with him. He's got his fingers in so many pies.'

She went on looking at me with tears in her eyes and I took her hand. 'What do you live in his flat for?' I asked.

'Because I was broke, he couldn't pay me, and George went in prison. That was after Percy stopped seeing me. I thought Percy was going to marry me, I was that much of a fool. It happened all at once, I had to give up my digs, then Palermo started messing about with me, but I didn't like his way. He wants you to go down on all fours and sit down in funny ways and do things I don't think are hygienic. I thank God for Mrs. Grigg. She pulled me out of that one.' She looked at the curtains mildly, her fears passing for a moment.

'Aren't you going to sleep?'

'I'm not going back there. I heard of a girl who was framed up once, she got in with the wrong people, they made her hang herself. Anyway, she was found hanging.

She went to lawyers and they always referred her back to the police, it was something hush-hush, and she hanged herself.'

'Shall I get you a hotel?' I asked.

'I won't be alone, no!'

'Stay here, then.'

'They said I went to an embassy once, for a reception, and it's true, Palermo took me. They ask me questions about that. All I did was get tiddled. I don't know why I do things and what they mean,' she said with the tears pouring down her face again. 'I saw Percy last night, he knows I'm with Grigg now, he doesn't seem to mind, he smiled at Grigg, you know the way men have. Sometimes I look at Pat and think how lucky she is, she stands up to Palermo, she never got into all this, there are people who get into it and people who don't, it's your fate, which is what Palermo is always telling me. I told Percy about the police, but he shrugged too.'

'Is Palermo worried?' I asked her.

'Well, he won't stay in his own flat. And he won't hear about the police. When I start to talk he clears out.'

We sat wondering together in the silence.

'When you took those sleeping pills, was that because of the police?'

'No, no, no,' she said quickly with a frown, as if she didn't like it even mentioned. 'That was Percy. George introduced me to him, I was in a group of people, you know we were having fun, but they were the kind of people who don't do anything by accident, George was one of them, I liked him, he used to have me in for a drink, he never laid a finger on me, which is one of the things I liked about him. George was a kind of adventurer, he likes to get mixed up in things, he's in it for the kicks, and a man like that, according to Palermo, always makes a mistake in the end. That was terrible, Glen, thinking I was going to marry Percy and then finding out I was only another name on George's list. Yet George isn't hard-hearted. It's just how his life has worked out, and according to Palermo you only get mixed up with George if you're meant to, if fate inclines you that way...'

'Have you got parents?' I said.

'Yes, I suppose I could go and sit at home. But you can't cut off your own life like that...'

'Why not?' I asked her, at which she only looked at me and shook her head.

'What's that writing?' she said, nodding towards my little red book. 'I looked at it before you woke up. You're in with them really, aren't you, Glen?'

she said, looking at me with infinite cool sadness.

'In with them?'

'Don't tell me about it---'

'About what?'

'Whatever it's about. I don't want to know. You're all funny.' She went on looking towards the red book. 'The police don't question YOU, do they?'

'They did that once, about George Swinburne's wife.'

'Men are cowards, all of them. I read the beginning of that,' she said, nodding at the diary.

'You did?'

'When I saw the word 'missile' I nearly screamed, because I came over here for help, I thought you were the only person in the world who could help me, as we'd worked together. You never have tantrums like other male models, but when I saw that word I knew I'd walked into a spider's web, but it doesn't matter, I don't care any more. When you know everything's up there's nothing to do, you don't care, you just wait, and at least I feel calm now.'

'But that's a diary I keep in Italy,' I said. 'I've been losing money on my wine, I thought these rockets and things to the moon had something to do with the funny weather, it was only a hunch, I was probably wrong...'

She took no notice of this, only looked at me sadly.

'No, honestly,' I said. 'Really.'

I squeezed her hand to regain her attention but the tears came to her eyes, only slowly, so that her expression didn't change.

'You don't believe me, do you?' I asked her.

She said quietly, 'Anyway, you haven't tried to mess about with me. You're not my boss, and all the others are in some way. So I was right to come. You might have pity on me, in a little way. The only thing I can't understand is why you got mixed up in it. A man like you hasn't any need, has he?' She looked at me closely. 'I'll never know men, I suppose. You do things for money. Pat said you had a cheque for three hundred nickers from Grigg's wife. You're all so funny, I don't know why you can't be yourselves, because you're not like that in yourself, you're nice and gentle. But then I suppose you could say the same about me. I'm nice too, but I got myself mixed up with funny people. I didn't do it for money, not the actual notes, but I suppose money's behind it, I liked the clubs and sometimes Percy took me to the Riviera, I liked the dresses and coming down to breakfast in the sunshine.'

'Anyway, get some sleep,' I said. 'You can have my bed. I've slept enough. I went to bed at six.'

I was about to get up when she pushed me gently with her hand and said, 'No, you can stay there. I'll just lie down at the edge. I won't disturb you. I don't suppose I'll sleep.' She picked the little red book up: 'What shall I do with this?'

'Put it on the chest of drawers.'

'We've been in our nature suits together all day,' she said, 'so I don't see why I should keep my skirt on.' She took off her coat, then her blouse and skirt, yawning. After turning off the light she got into bed with only her petticoat on, and kept to the side of the bed, pulling only one of the blankets over her, so that we were actually separated.

'You may as well get right in,' I said, and pulled the blanket over her properly so that we were lying in bed together.

She lay with her hand on my shoulder, and I had my arm round her neck. She slept at once.

The rest of the night seemed endless, and was ended by the shattering arc-lamps being switched on. I blinked myself awake and squinted towards them, without surprise. I had slept so long and well that nothing surprised me. Palermo was standing by there, his hands on his hips: only one lamp had been lit, and it shone straight into Muriel's face. The curtains were still drawn. And the door was open.

'Well, well,' he said, 'This <u>is</u> cosy.'

'Yes,' I said, 'she came at four, talking about the police.'

'She looks happy enough here.' He smiled at me in a surprisingly gentle way and said under his breath, 'What's your secret?'

And he sat down at the end of the bed, carefully so as not to disturb her.

I realised that my arm was still round Muriel's neck.

'I'd take a shot of you both like that,' he said, getting up to draw the curtains softly and switch off the lamp. 'But there are things we shouldn't see. Even me.' He sat down again on the bed, pale, so much so that his eyes were given a darting and penetrating darkness.

'I haven't slept with her, if that's what you mean,' I said.

He made a rippling laugh and looked at me with real enjoyment.

'You'll go down in history with that serious face,' he said. 'As Lou says, you've got a mask for everything.' He smiled. 'But her husband won't hear a word against you. He says you're contemporary.'

'Oh, God---all that stuff he talks!'

'In fact, Glen, you're a survivor. So much so that you're dining with him this evening in conclave. Selsey and Charlie Dornelling are going to be there, so you can imagine how much of a compliment he's paying you. Now work your mask as hard as you can, Glen,' he said seriously, 'get Selsey on your side, you've been doing fine so far.'

I lay there with Muriel's head still on my shoulder, and he gazed at her, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

'Glen,' he whispered, 'before she wakes up, I need this bed tonight.'

'What?'

'Just once. There are police watching my place. She's going back to Cambridge tomorrow, it won't happen again. Be a good chap, eh? The whole night...'

I shrugged, not looking at him. 'It's your house.'

We sat in silence while Muriel slept on like a child, her breathing deep.

'I'm fond of that girl,' he said, looking at her. 'Mouse has had a bad deal. I sacrificed her for Lou. I had to have Grigg occupied. That was a rotten trick, Glen.' He sat quite still, looking at her with faintly pleading eyes.

After a time he added, 'And, by God, if you harm her, Glen, I'll settle you, boy. I really will.'

This mild yet threatening tone, in a whisper, woke Muriel like a bomb and she blinked against the light, with a groan, looking blindly from Palermo to me and then back again. It was a long time before she was really awake. She gazed at long at the window, then said quietly, 'Well, are we starting work?'

'You ran out on Grigg last night, honey,' Palermo said to her with a smile.

'He prowls around all night spying on <u>you</u>,' she said, scowling. 'It gives him a kick. Apparently, I don't.'

'Both of you, go down and grab some coffee,' Palermo murmured, getting up. 'Half a day should see us through.'

He turned his back to us, fixing the cables, while Muriel stretched and yawned and sat up, then crawled heavily out of bed.

'Well,' she said to me with a yawn, 'you gave Mouse a good night's rest. The first man to do that since my dad had me in his arms.'

We went down to the Strand for coffee, and found we were ravenously hungry, so we sat down at a table and ordered a full breakfast.

'Did you see his face?' she said. 'It's bad when he gets those patches under his eyes.'

She looked across the few tables at the window where the dismal sky was visible, and said without looking at me, 'There isn't much hope in life, is there? Nobody to believe in, nothing to happen. You know, Percy makes you feel full of hope, especially just before he does the shit on you. He bounces. Whereas I don't bounce, I go down with a dull thump.'

'Palermo cares for you,' I said. 'I do know that. He said when you were asleep if I harmed you he'd get me for it sooner or later.'

'That's what he always says, and I hate being his favourite because you come off bad, it's better to be hated by another man than liked by him, he got me into this, I'd never have stayed with him if it hadn't been for him treating me like a human being. At least George treated me like dirt. That's why Lou gets up close to me with that bloody great handbag she carries round, and offers me cigarettes and calls me honey, because of him. You shouldn't be treated like a human being if you're not one, and after what I've done you're not one.'

'Why not?'

'The girls with a regular beat don't get treated like human creatures, and they puke when they do, but I want to be, I used to come home from Percy dreaming about a big house in the country and summers on the Riviera. He gave me a little bit of each, he had me down to his place in the country, he took me to the Riviera for a couple of weeks, and all that made me think I was a human creature but I'm not. I don't deserve to be, I mean you have to start on the bottom rung and work your way up to be a human creature, but I didn't, I made a big jump because I despised the people round me, they weren't good enough for me I suppose, that was when I was working for Chandler-Williams---'

'You worked for <u>him</u>?'

'Well, in the office, a kind of typist. I used to make the tea mostly. Then I typed for Palermo. I was no virgin but I had a quiet life. Money started coming my way, and the typing I did for Palermo became a kind of cover, for me as well. Then I did less and less typing. I didn't see Chandler-Williams any more. He's a nice man.'

'You began to get cheques?' I said, interested in this particular point.

'Yes. Ten or twenty at first. Then one day fifty. I didn't have to think of tax rebate and insurance and picking up my wage packet every week. I was floating. I didn't see my mother any more, not more than once in six months. The

first few cheques were from Percy, to help me with my shopping or something damned silly, you know he wrote a note with it saying, 'Get yourself a hat, darling'. Then as the cheques got bigger they came through Palermo. He said they were my fees for studio work. I told him they were pretty high rates for a model, and he said no, you're getting a reputation. I took the money without believing. At least, I forced myself to believe him until the money was spent.'

I gazed at her with thoughts of my own.

We hurried back and found Palermo impatient. He eyed us as if we were a couple of lovers and snapped at Muriel, 'Into your nature suit, Mouse---you're rarely out of it these days, anyway, it seems.'

She swung round on him at once, her eyes furious: 'Shut your mouth or I'll quit!'

'Why, you got something sacred on?' he shouted back, his eyes meeting hers. It wasthe first time I'd heard him scream in this way, uncurbed, so that his fingers trembled and he went deathly pale.

They stood staring at each other, bent forward slightly like beasts.

He took a deep breath and returned to the lights. And he said quietly, his back towards us, 'Well, we either work or we don't.'

The day's work was quiet but hard, and went on until dusk, with the usual break for sandwiches and beer. Prints came in from Mike's dark-room, a great packet full of damp proofs, showing our naked limbs from all sorts of angles, and, sometimes, Muriel and I sitting close together in an unworldly stillness. On each print where he found my face clear he crossed it with a crayon.

'I don't want you recognised,' he said, giving me a smile.

Much of the time, while he worked with his camera, he was grumbling about Chandler-Williams.

'He spends his time hanging on the phone talking about a one-guinea fee or whether the stamp duty should have been paid, and collecting a fourteen shilling rent,' he said. 'I'd give him the push if I dared, I've got the money. But I don't dare. There's something about those men. They're useless but there's a reason why they're there. I'm superstitious about that. He keeps us respectable. He knows his value, Glen,' he murmured, focussing on my bare rump, 'don't think he doesn't. He never asks where the money comes from. Now that's wise when you come to look at it because in that way he can go on thinking himself respectable, which helps me too. If there's anything you want cleared with the police, go to him.

All his relatives are magistrates. They owe me a lot. Well, I owe them a lot too. They found me my wife. Now she gave me status, I don't deny that. I moved among the people who count, and they put me on to the people who don't count, and who make the wheels go round. Well, I made the wheels go round for them, it was a bargain. Everything he touches is small and mean and careful and damn dull. That right, Muriel? She took no notice, only went on paring her finger-nails, sitting on the floor in her kimono. The girls there never get a raise, nothing unusual happens, so naturally when one of them has a chance to be a high-class whore like the Mouse here they snatch at it.'

To my surprise Muriel laughed, a quick rush of breath, then her face was serious again as if she regretted it.

The room was stifling and by the time the last picture was taken sweat ran down our bodies. With sighs of relief we pulled the curtains aside and switched off the lamps, and let the chill, damp air stream in. We grabbed the last of my clean towels and wiped ourselves down.

'When's my date?' I asked him---and I added to Muriel, 'I don't even choose my own dates!'

'Seven at the club.'

I decided to dress ready for the evening and while I was doing so, glancing now and then at Muriel as she combed her hair, I felt a quiet rebellion take place in me, and then a decision of action. I was going to refuse to be a victim any more. I'd had a good night's rest, my mind was clear, I felt strong. I was going to upset Grigg's little plans. What power I had I was going to use. I was going to sign something, but not with the devil. It was going to be a story after Jack Ryan's heart.

I left before the other two and drank a quick cup of tea at the Strand Palace, buying two evening papers. No reports about Grigg. Well, there would be tomorrow! Plenty. He would see if he'd bought me. I had feathers in my tummy, and looked at my watch. Ryan couldn't be expected in his office before evening. I might even tell Grigg what I'd done. I was a victim perhaps like the Mouse, but I was going to prove myself no whore at least.

It was dark and a dull rain had started when I walked round to Ryan's office. He was there, and my name worked like a charm: I was shown straight in---an untidy office with three or four other tables, and girls coming in and out the whole time with galley proofs.

'Well, Glen,' Ryan said with hardly a glance at me, marking a proof with a soft pencil, though he gave me his brotherly smile, 'spit it out quick and I might have room for it.'

'I haven't had time to get a real story together,' I said, 'I've been doing studio work all day, but I'll just give you the gist of a couple of conversations.'

He nodded quickly and pulled a large blank pad in front of him, ready to take notes.

'There's just one thing,' he said, looking up suddenly, 'fees go through your own office now.' Again his brotherly smile: 'I settle accounts with Capitol Holdings.'

'Yes, I understand that.'

Another batch of girls came in and laid down galleys but he took no notice of these, so I began: 'He said there was an invisible government nowadays. It wasn't the president or parties and it had nothing to do with the electorate. It was a minority who lived for the sound of reason, and that meant occupying the nearest stars and sending satellites round the earth day and night fitted out with nuclear weapons and manned like in a laboratory---'

'Yes, we know about that,' Ryan said quietly, without looking up.

'He said ours was a world governed by secrets, it had nothing to do with the people who lived in it any more, they were just there to watch because that was what they wanted, they preferred letting someone do the thinking for them and having the secrets so that they could follow their own selfish interests, which were all electoral campaigns looked after anyway. He said you couldn't specify who this minority was, you couldn't even say it was military, although military was necessarily the biggest part of it. He said this minority controlled all life invisibly, they would one day surround the whole earth and keep track of every activity on the earth so that nothing old-fashioned like fighting could happen again without the minority knowing. He said a president who went beyond his mandate, given to him by this invisible minority, was got rid of, just as the party that went beyond its mandate lost its funds without knowing why. He said the president knew no more about facts than anybody else. He said secrets are for hicks, the mass of the people. The facts can only be faced by this minority. He said there was a risk that the world would be destroyed but that was the point of the whole thing. He said these times were hell, the future lay with men who could walk through hell without flinching. He also seemed to be saying that this minority was one of what he calls survivors---'

'Yes,' Ryan said, again without looking up, though I thought I could see a kind of astonished puzzlement on his face, 'he's given a whole lecture called The Survivor. We know that too.'

'He said that individuals were finished,' I said, desperately searching for a surprise-line, 'he said the sould was dead, that was old thinking, he said the survivors weren't individuals they were people with ideas like his, he said it would be the end of insecurity, with labs floating round the earth all day or night. He said Percy Klydonhall---'

'This is a story about Grigg, mind.'

'Yes, but he said Klydonhall believed in abandonment, that people shouldn't have c-countries any more of their own but should be under his minority. He said life was too vast nowadays to permit of little freedoms. He said that meant the end of houses of deputies and parliaments and that sort of thing. He said this to this m-moon talk was one of the sops handed out to the lazy apes all over the world sitting in front of their TV screens, he said it was just a way of giving these orbiting labs a cover story. He said people needed moon stories. He said you've got to make life safe for science, like putting the universe under sort of medical care.'

I stopped.

He waited, having not taken a single note. Then he looked up slowly, with his smile. 'Did he talk about Massacre 11?'

'I don't think he did but Muriel said it was something to do with a special weapon for these labs, where you hit a very confined t-target with a nuclear bomb and you therefore prevented what he called total war, he said that was what you had to avoid, a limited war seemed all right from his point of view, he meant w-war in Europe---'

'But, Glen,' he said, 'that was in my paper, I wrote the thing up myself.'

'Oh, well,' I said, 'that was what he said...'

'You say MURIEL told you about Massacre?'

'Well, not exactly her,' I said with a horrified recollection that this was why the police were after her. 'No, that's how they all talk. I mean, Dornelling and company.'

'Dornelling told you, then?'

'No, but I mean they don't trouble to hide anything.'

'Still, one talks about a weapon when it's finished. Hardly before. Before, they consider it a secret, a red-hot one.'

'Well, why don't they keep quiet about it?'

'Exactly,' he said with a genial nod. 'But perhaps only ONE of them is indiscreet.'

More girls came in and left again. He gave me a sign that he had urgent work on his hands and, after I'd made a panic-stricken effort to find more to say, I got up, the sweat pouring down my face and my mouth sagging.

'Well,' I said, holding out my hand. 'Cheerio.'

'Cheerio, Glen,' he said, taking my hand lightly and smiling, 'and thanks.' And he was at once back at work again, his eyes hidden.

I left the room giddy, and ran down the stairs of five storeys, seeing nothing. I walked through the sluggish rain and found myself returning to the office, though it was time to go to the Northumberland. My room was empty, and the lights had been turned off. I had made a fool of myself but that wasn't what was troubling me. It was something deeper which I didn't understand. I seized the bottle of whisky on the little chest of drawers and poured myself a drop, and as I did so I realised with a blank horror that made the whole of my back cold in an instant, that my little red book was no longer there. I began searching the room. I went through all my pockets, every drawer, my cases, I looked under the bed, under the carpet. I dashed downstairs and went through all the drawers there---Pat's, Muriel's, Palermo's. And I repeated the process. I started upstairs again, and downstairs again. The book was gone. But why should that worry me? But it did. I stood in the middle of my room trembling, all the strength I thought I had accumulated in a good night's rest withered in a moment. It was now past nine. I must go to Grigg, at least. I must see what damage I had done. I thought I would take the precaution of packing, in case I had to get away quickly. I threw my things into the suitcases, even my toilet things, so that everything was packed. I washed my face in cold water to get back a little calm, drank off the whisky in one gulp and left the building. I found a taxi in the Strand and was at the club, feeling cooler because resigned, in a few minutes, as there was so little traffic. It was half-past nine when I crossed the foyer and ran up the wide staircase, my steps luxuriously muffled. This wasn't the place to run. I made myself stop, then walked up slowly, to get into the rhythm of the place. The bar was almost empty but the first person I saw was Pat, sitting alone at a table, with two glasses in front of her. We smiled and she beckoned me over.

'I'm on a date with his lordship,' she said with a wink. The sound of her voice was such a relief to me that I sat down.

'Who's his lordship?' I asked.

'Percy Klydonhall.'

'Good God,' I said, 'do you go out with him as well?'

'As from last night,' she said, and a trace of doubt crossed her childish face, making it flabby, before she covered it with a smile. She had put on a dark, shining dress that clung to her, with imitation pearls round her neck and a handbag that glittered in her right hand.

'I'm looking for the professor,' I told her.

'He went through there,' and she pointed to the dining room.

'Alone?'

'No, there were two others. Men, unluckily for you,' she added with a wink.

I got up and forced myself to walk into the dining room. Things were so bad I had no need to be afraid any more. I was aware of some writhing in one of the dim corners. The three of them were just laughing about something, Selsey throwing himself about in his chair with his head bent backwards so that he continually looked at the ceiling, and Grigg making his juvenilely distinguished laugh, gruff and quiet, gazing at his plate. They were on their second course. Dornelling was the first to see me, silently referring me to Grigg with a little glance. Then Grigg looked up and made an 'Oh!', before beckoning me to the other chair and saying to the others quietly, 'All know each other, I take it?'

Selsey nodded silently, unceremonious without being exactly rude---he nodded in a way that you could have taken for an involuntary movement of the head, while he went on laughing at what had been said. He was biding his time, as far as I was concerned. Dornelling gave me little glances, curious despite himself, and these glances he corrected, so to speak, by turning them to Grigg.

Grigg handed me the menu without a word, and seemed to imply with this movement that we were on an intimate footing, which made me feel better. There were few other diners. I chose veal and a green salad, and he poured me a glass of claret while they went on talking. All this reassured me, and I realised that perhaps I was proud of myself for what I'd done in Ryan's office, even though I'd botched it. I'd done SOMETHING at least. And so I looked at the Englishmen boldly, sat up straight and found myself gazing round the room as if I owned it.

Grigg turned to me: 'Working late at the office?'

I nodded. ' This ADAM AND EVE book.'

'I saw some of the proofs today,' Selsey put in, but to Grigg, not to me. 'At Percy's office. Superb. This Palermo can really do anything, before he married Chandler-Williams's cousin he wasn't on the map at all, he told me so himself. Funny how a man comes into his own like that.' He then turned to me with a smile, not hostile at all, and said, 'I suppose the best compliment I can give you is to say you have a beautiful rump.'

'Oh, yes?' I said inanely.

The other two laughed, and there was more writhing just as my veal came. I laughed too.

'Tuck in,' Grigg said, relieved to see me taking Selsey in good humour.

'As I was saying,' Dornelling murmured, shifting things away from the human again, 'I don't want the Dirty Trick department getting hold of it. Eugene was over at my place last night, he had his ears hanging open but I wasn't saying anything.'

'Dirty Trick department is what we call intelligence on the other side of the water,' Grigg explained to me intimately.

'He thinks you mean human intelligence,' Selsey said, seeing my blank face.

'No,' Grigg said with a lined smile, his face dark and sleepy, gazing at me through half-closed eyes, 'military intelligence.'

'I think Eugene mentioned Massacre I sixteen times if he mentioned it once,' Dornelling went on, 'and I knew damned well he was leaving for Washington in the morning. He even tried to mix my drinks.'

'Eugene's OK,' Grigg said with the trace of a snarl, 'but he theorises too damn much. I wish to hell they'd learn not to employ these college boys.'

'Overhaul your educational system,' Selsey said, 'and you'll get a better service.'

'You're telling me,' Grigg said. 'The home of the pseudo-intellectual, that's the States. Know there are about a million of them, Harcourt?'

'I can imagine!' Selsey said with an ambiguous writhe. 'And I'm one of 'em,' Grigg went on. 'I didn't even have the patience to take my Ph.D!'

'Still, that was a damned good speech you made this morning,' Dornelling said.

'We were back in Cambridge for the day,' Grigg told me. 'I tried to get you there but your boss said no, not until your rump had been fully exposed.'

'By the way,' Selsey said to me with a momentary real inquisitiveness, 'is it true you work in with Muriel, I mean you have the photos done together?'

'Yes, how else?'

'Oh, I thought they were sort of mounted up afterwards, and he did the shots separately.' He writhed in an odd way, and gave me a quick smile.

'Why should he?'

'No, I mean, isn't it rather uncomfortable, I mean aren't you in danger of being sort of interested in her, and that kind of thing, if you're both naked?' he asked.

'No,' I said, 'sex doesn't come that way. Nothing to do with nakedness.'

'Oh!' Selsey said with a laugh, looking at the others. 'That's news!'

Dornelling seemed to know what I meant---after all, he'd had experiences of the same kind---but he wasn't going to commit himself in a mere human matter. But I suddenly turned on him and said, 'Don't you agree?'

He fluttered and looked away, then murmured towards the empty part of the room with a smile, 'I wouldn't know.'

'Anyway, from what I hear Percy's mad keen on it, eh, Harcourt?' Grigg said.

'Oh, he's setting up ten thousand copies---I don't know what could be a better sign of confidence,' Selsey told him.

'Yes,' Grigg said solemnly, without the slightest interest, 'I think it's going to be a great book.'

'I remember old Admiral Kott, in the Sixth Fleet, in the Mediterranean,' Dornelling said, 'he used to be mad on any kind of photograph, spend hours in his dark room, produced some marvellous shots of the sea.'

'Oh, I know Lincoln well,' Grigg said in a way that showed he probably didn't. 'They still talk about him at Harvard, from thirty years back. One of the finest antique collections in the States.'

'What's his news now?' Dornelling asked, silver memories dancing in his eyes like the sea.

'Oh, chewing the fat with other retired personnel,' Grigg said. 'Think he got himself a ranch and a new wife.'

'Hey-ho for a life in the open,' Selsey said with a mock sigh. 'I retired to overwork when I was forty, nobody sees me beyond the confines of the West End any more.'

'What, with all these estates Percy has?'

'My job's administering him in London,' Selsey said with a slight wink that all but intimated disloyalty to Klydonhall. 'Sometimes I think I'm being made use of.'

'Tell him,' Grigg said. 'I would.'

'I wonder if you would,' Selsey said, sitting quite still, his plump tummy hard against the table. 'It doesn't do to speak one's mind to Percy. Not unless you agree with him. One tries to speak HIS mind all the time. It took me years to learn.'

'Percy's a great kid,' Grigg said, 'only he has too much power. It bristles in his scalp.'

'You can trust him,' Selsey said confidentially. 'You needn't fear he'll back out, having given his word. In fact, he was all over me today. Mind you, he has some pretty fishy notions, as I've always told you. I mean, quite frankly I don't think he'll make much of a deal out of this.'

'Percy's in the money all right if he bats from the same wicket all the time,' Selsey said.

'Oh, he'll do that,' Dornelling told him.

'He must have had SOME reassurances from the other side of the water,' Grigg said, blinking hesitantly.

'Oh, Percy doesn't move off on one leg, EVER,' Selsey said.

'He didn't move at all until you came along,' Dornelling said to Grigg. 'He said to me only this morning, before we left, he said I'm depending on Jeff for the talking side. I said he could trust you with that.'

'Oh,' Grigg said, 'you can rely on me for my side of the bargain. But I'm not a military man, I've never even been in the army. I hate to be blunt about that.'

'The point is,' Dornelling said, 'it'll have to be developed, so it might as well be done through OUR persuasions as anybody else's.'

Grigg sighed and leaned back. 'The first stages are always the worst, you fret like an old woman.'

'I don't think I've had a decent night's rest for a fortnight,' Dornelling said with a smile.

Selsey laughed, thinking something over. 'You know what Percy wanted me to do, get Nigel's face dragged through the mud over this soliciting thing.'

'What was that?' Dornelling asked, while Grigg gazed round the room, aware that the talk was momentarily parochial.

'Didn't you know?' Selsey said. 'Nigel was picked up soliciting in the National Gallery, you know it's the second time. Well, naturally the cops want to keep it out of the papers, but Percy thought it was a good way of getting rid of

a lot of shares on his hands. I had to argue it out of him for three solid bloody hours the night before last. First of all I told him I wasn't going to cause a cabinet resignation unnecessarily, and second Nigel's an old school-friend of mine. Well, in the end he went out with Pat.' They all laughed.

We went into the lounge for an after-dinner drink and I recognised some faces from the time before, including Tan's, though his face was less terrible now: he was standing by the bar in the same corner, looking nervous, his eyes less subtle-looking. I was glad to think that my fear of his face, so sudden and unfounded, could pass as quickly, and that he had no special interest in me. His gaze went round the room indifferently, and didn't even settle on Selsey, whom I knew he knew. On the other side of the room there was Mr. Pew, talking with a young couple, smiling occasionally, his hair tussled as if he slept in an office. We made no effort to talk, sitting back in our armchairs, Grigg swirling the brandy round his glass in an unconscious way, staring before him so that his eyes seemed to bore through his lined face, forcing their way out of hard skin.

'Well,' Selsey said with a long yawn, 'Percy's safe for a few hours, she's rather sweet, this one, have you seen her?' he asked Grigg.

'To hell,' Grigg growled, 'one mouse is as good as another.'

'I started off in Threadneedle Street,' Selsey said with a silent laugh that shook his belly, 'I never thought I'd end as a peer's nanny. Still, I get more money than a nanny.'

He winked at Dornelling who again demurred, only smiling, letting the remark fade.

'You're a survivor,' Grigg told Selsey. 'That's what counts. Threadneedle Street went a little down the hill after the war but you didn't.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' Selsey said, smiling his split-orange smile. 'I used to have ideals.'

'They <u>never</u> did a man any good,' Grigg said, and there was laughter.

'I used to go to bed early, play fives twice a week and belong to a polo club. My father was an India army man,' Selsey went on. 'I used to dream about getting a place in the country and a hundred acres. Yes, I don't think!' He rippled again. 'I stood still but life didn't. When I finally woke up I found myself only just tolerated at somebody else's country place, on somebody else's hundred acres. Actually, Percy's got about three hundred, hasn't he, when you include the lake and the dairy farm?' he asked Dornelling.

'I wouldn't know'---with a frank smile.

'Weren't you down there this week-end?'

'Yes,' Dornelling said while looking at Grigg, as if to put the question under mutual restriction, 'but I didn't count the acreage.'

'Damn me,' said Grigg, 'he has more like three thousand in the States. Is that right, Harcourt?'

'Not counting woodland and ranch. That's an estate I wouldn't mind. I should have emigrated. God knows what kept me in this damp country, it certainly wasn't love.'

'Habit,' Grigg said.

'Cowardice, more likely,' Selsey said. 'And damn bad sea-legs. Couldn't have taken the journey.'

He winked and we all smiled politely.

'And then I had my club where they'd known me dad, and I couldn't have done without the annual dinners the office gave. Them was real orgies! There were a sticky couple of years after the war when I thought England was going to become a land of Opportunity and everybody working together and that sort of jolly rubbish, but it didn't so I felt I could stay.' He added, gazing at the ceiling, 'Actually I've only been with Percy a decade. And I've spent most of it in night clubs, following him in and out of lavatories. He always uses the lav as an escape route to a new party!'

'He does some work occasionally, I take it,' Grigg said.

'Well, he comes in sometimes, yes. I don't like him to work too much. He throws off ideas, you know. Well, some of them are all right, in fact a hunch of his brought us a couple of thousand quid in one afternoon, but he gets wild. When the idea of a tunnel across the Channel came up he started dreaming about a tunnel to the States. He said the whole thing was perfectly feasible if you really got down to it, and he was probably right. But think of the expense!' The others laughed---a professional sound, making the club authentic. 'He even consulted some of his backroom boys about a plastic sort of worm that you could thread along the sea bed.'

'I reckon three tons of water-pressure would buckle plastic a bit, wouldn't it?' Grigg asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and jigging his right foot incessantly, his face dark and frowning.

'He had some scheme of air-jets that would counter that. All perfectly feasible, as I told him, but the two benefiting countries would have to devote themselves to nothing else for about half a century!' Again the mature chuckling laugh.

'Well, I'll push off on my mission of mercy,' Selsey said, getting up with a sigh and stretching. He called out to the bar, 'Arthur, chalk this one up to me, will you?' The white-coated boy nodded and smiled.

Grigg held on to my arm gently, to indicate that I should stay. The other two left together, giving me as little attention as when I'd arrived, their glances only touching me and then sweeping back to Grigg, making me his property. They walked away together, Dornelling with his hands in his pockets, in a subtle avoidance of responsibility.

'Boy, does he talk' Grigg muttered, looking after them through his eyebrows.

'Who?'

'Harcourt, who else?' He didn't sit down again and I waited. 'Come on, we're on night duty.'

'I'd like an early night,' I said, 'if it's all the same to you.'

'Like hell it is. Where would you sleep to start with?'

He guided me down the soft staircase and called for a taxi, pressing a pound note into the commissionaire's hand. It was still raining, with slight gusts of muggy air.

'Yes, Glen,' he said to me in the darkness of the taxi, yawning again, 'we have our orders for tonight.'

He gazed out of the window---there were the trees of Leicester Square, and then the quiet lamps of the Pall Mall. He peered all the time, ducked forward, his heavy shoulders bunched, the momentary lights making his eyes deep round sockets; his long hands seemed oddly divided from his person as they played with his face, touching his nose, pulling at an ear, stroking his chin. All the way he said nothing, and the moment we arrived at the tall white columns of the 1810 he pulled himself out of his seat by the strap with a long groan, crouching past me and thrusting another note into the cabby's hand without waiting for change. We huddled under the commissionaire's umbrella, and then in the foyer we waited while a party in evening clothes paid their entrance fee. Grigg must have become a member in the last few days, because an entrance fee was only necessary for me.

We found the old table free, mounted in its dim corner behind gilt-painted fencework and miniature gate. There was the same thump of the same band---apparently they didn't change their tunes. The waiters rang out their good-evenings to Grigg, and the head waiter followed us over immediately, his attention giving Grigg an extra tall distinction as he sat down and leaned on the table coolly, looking round the room. A bottle of whisky, and two glasses. I could see my

early night was finished, even though it would have been spent in a hotel room. But I was enjoying the relief of there being no repercussions from my visit to Ryan. This showed how ineffectual my little visit to Fleet Street had been. That was the relief. So I drank down the first whisky with relish, and he poured me another right away. But I knew also that this was what had troubled me underneath: my ineffectuality - my failure even to make a botch felt.

'See Muriel?' he asked without looking at me.

'She was working today, yes.'

He nudged me: 'Boy, when I said the other day that the soul is a charnel house, I was certainly on to something, wasn't I?' And he gave me a knowing wink.

'You didn't say it.'

'Well, did she do any better for you than she did for ME? To my mind, Glen,' he said as he settled into the settee and leaned his shoulder confidentially against mine, 'she's got no more sex than a doctored cat.'

'Who?'

'Why, the Mouse.'

'I wouldn't know.'

'I don't even admire you any more,' he said with a smile. 'I'm so damned used to you I take you for granted. No, Glen, my wife had it very secret from her soulmate, and having as good a lavatory-mind as he has she broke the secret to me almost at once. You slept with the Mouse last night.'

'No, I didn't. She woke me up, she was in tears. The police are getting her down. She slept in my bed all right, but she only came for the comfort.'

'Is that true?' he asked to my surprise.

'Yes.'

'Well, I can believe that, since she did the same to me.' He scratched his face, eyeing people, sighing. 'I thought it was me, I mean I couldn't give her a thing---you know, Glen,' he said intimately, 'I was as limp as a rag. She didn't like it when I pulled out the whisky because a girl even if she doesn't want it doesn't want YOU not to want it. I tell you, Glen, my head was somewhere else, on another pillow with your boss. And so it is tonight.'

He went on, 'Glen, if you're going to work for me you'll have to face some pretty nasty facts. The world's been running on those nasty facts for quite a time. I think you're getting to understand my philosophy, but just in case that isn't true I'll tell you this---I don't waste my pity on those who don't come through. Your

value in my eyes rests on the fact that you started a fight with me in the papers and you won through. This is, you made yourself indispensable to me. That was cleverly done. Palermo tells me you don't calculate your moves, you just move, with the whole of yourself, before your mind knows about it. And I think that's the best cleverness of all.'

He let a silence fall between us, and took a sip from his glass.

'But,' he added, looking straight ahead, 'if you didn't get through at any time, too bad. Listen,' he asked, turning his face towards me, 'would you expect quarter from a man you'd given none to?'

'I might.'

'You might, but you wouldn't get it. Not from this one, anyway. I'll tell you an even nastier human fact: even if you'd given me quarter, even if I owed you my life, you couldn't expect any from me if you went down.'

'How do you mean by go down?' I asked him.

'Well, I mean fail,' he said, blinking as if he feared the word, let alone the concept. 'Get pushed off the bus. Fall out. Run of bad luck, whatever you like.'

'A man could fail in your eyes, but he might have something else.'

'You hit it, Glen. That's why he <u>needs</u> no quarter. His experiences are all new. He's on the rubbish heap of humanity, but that's OK, he might be happier that way.'

'But Christ failed, didn't he?' I said.

'Christ won, old son. It was the biggest victory of all time!'

'But he wasn't on the bus,' I said.

'Exactly, so he was despised! He was crucified. He'd be crucified today, maybe. And I'll tell you something that might hit you between the eyes, Glen--- I'd be among the people yowling and screaming at him, and putting vinegar in his wound.'

'You would?'

'I dare say I would. I've no very great picture of my own virtues. I'm human. That's why I go to God, why I confess, take communion---less than I should, maybe, but I need it. Perhaps you don't need it as much. Listen, Glen---' he said with his hand laid on mine persuasively, 'this is a human set-up, OK? Well, that's the human treadmill or circus or fair, whatever you like to call it. People who get through, well, they get through! Those who don't, they fall out---maybe to better things, like Christ, maybe not! But the pattern's always the same, the

old human pattern of revenge and conflict. Every minute's a conflict, that's how I look at it.'

'Well,' I said, 'it seems a funny sort of religion to me.'

'I think there's a natural justice in that religion. Those that mean to get through, get through. Those that don't, too bad, they should.have checked up with their ambitions before setting out on the road. It's what made me come here tonight---!' He gave me a wild gaze for a moment. 'I need to be a whole man, Glen, I do! I don't want my ideas just to keep me COSY, I want them to go right through my life. When I say the soul's a charnel house, and it stinks like a lavatory, and a lavatory is where you go every day, I MEAN it, Glen, with the whole of my being, and I act on it! When I see this poor damned Lou can't think of anything else, can't wait to get back to the lavatory they share together every night, I say to myself, be strong, Jeff, think of your ideas, you know what this life is, it's a damned, rotten, flat and nasty struggle, you've got to fight, you mustn't give in to any of these retrograde things like jealousy and stuff like that---' He stopped for a moment, and I saw to my astonishment that there were slight tears in his eyes. 'Glen, sometimes I say to myself I love that girl, I don't know what I haven't done for her, the more wicked she is and the worse she treats me the more I think about her. You know I follow her round to that office of yours, I've even been up there just after they've gone and smelled her smell on the air. There's no key, you can walk right in.'

'Yes, I realised.'

'That's not your bedroom in my eyes, Glen, it's a garden of delights, and I didn't get any of 'em, so when she comes back to the hotel I try and snatch what I can, and, boy, is she merciless! I told her this morning when dawn was peeping through, I said, you're a monster, Lou, and she said to me, isn't that the way you want me? And I think there might be something in that. I don't want any of this humbug and nice living and all that crap, I want the truth and the truth about the human condition is it's pretty nasty. Listen, Glen, shall I tell you something I've never quite been able to put into words before?' he asked in a matter-of-fact way, gulping his whisky again and smacking his lips. 'You know the feeling I always have over here, when I read a book or see a show or talk to somebody, what I feel is something dirty's being HIDDEN all the time.' He paused, looking at me in a conclusive way, his lips pursed. 'Know what I mean?'

'No.'

'Something's being COVERED UP, not mentioned. The charnel house, it could be. I guess the civilisation's been going for so long people have got used to decorating it and smoothing it over and looking the other way and now it's a fixed habit, but, Glen, I feel it all the time, until I want to scream out, Oh, shit, why don't you all COME CLEAN?' He smiled. 'I suppose I mean, come dirty! Now what's all the embellishment for? The way they talk sometimes! It's all so damned pretty you can't believe it. I wonder sometimes, do these people ever sit down on that pan and have a good shit? And doesn't it smell like mine?'

'But why should that worry you?' I said, gazing at him. 'We come from dirt, we go to dirt in the end.'

'That's right, you're damned right. So why don't they LIVE like it too? Let's see it on the surface! But no, they've been dreaming for so many damned centuries now, there's only the dream left. But, Glen,' he said with a sigh, settling even further down into the settee, 'do I yearn sometimes for the truth that stinks! But, look at 'em all---' eyeing the people on the dance-floor with their smiles and nods and glances round, so free (it seemed to me now) of any sense of dirt--- 'round and round, and standing on the same damned spot all the time.'

He went on: 'That's why when Lou came to me this morning with her eyes popping out of her head and looking like she'd been knocked up once a minute for a fortnight I said, all right, Lou, do it all you like and I hope you get it out of your system. Know what she wanted?'

'No?'

'Just one night. A whole night! Not just a couple or three hours after dinner, but the whole damn night from teatime on, diving into that charnel house, Glen---I wonder where they get it all from, I wonder what they can be doing to each other! Glen, she needs it so bad it's like a pain and I love her so much I want to spare her pain, so I say, all right, Lou, you get it out of your system. She knows it's all off with Muriel as far as I'm concerned, she knows it gives me the biggest thrill of my life thinking about HER, and that makes her even wilder to get back on that bed. What they must be doing to each other! Sometimes it frightens me! She told me they only have to get inside a room and they just kind of throw themselves in like boxers in a ring, they're on the bed stripped off before you can say Heironomus Bosch.'

'On my bed again, I suppose.'

He nodded, his shoulder still cosily against mine. 'That's why we're here. A kind of vigil. I promised to keep you out of your bed till dawn.'

'Till dawn? I've been posing all day,' I grumbled. 'I thought he meant just the early part.'

'Yes,' he said, 'they talk to me about nature, there's a whole bunch of 'em back there practising nature, in the comfort of San Francisco! I tell you what, Glen, Nature's a name for playing it lazy, and that's why this earth's been standing still all these centuries, nothing's been DONE, because of some damned frowsy idea that this old lady called Nature is out there looking after everything. Now, how do I behave, exactly, when I'm being natural, can you tell me that? Have they seen it or talked to it? I tell you what, Glen, we've got further in ten years of hitting nature round the face than they did in three thousand, those nature-bugs! Because life's a fight, every minute of the day, you've even got to be careful when you're asleep, don't sleep while your enemy's awake, Glen, always remember those words! No, I'd just like 'em to tell me what nature is...' he murmured, looking drowsy again and making a quick, unwilling yawn, covering his mouth with his dark hand.

'Try not sleeping for a week,' I said, 'then you'll find out what nature is. Nature's what our bodies have GOT to do, and what the earth's GOT to do---I can see it in my vines, for instance---'

He suddenly burst out laughing. 'Those vines again!' he said, gripping my hand with great enjoyment. 'They came o'er my ear like the sweet sound that breathes upon a bank of violets, stealing and giving odour. Enough! No more!' And he released another rusty guffaw, ducking his head and shaking it. I stared at him. The Shakespeare sounded so strange on his lips, like a prayer being said over long after the religion had gone, by a kind of mocking historian.

'Now we're on the subject of the grapevine,' he said with a wink, 'is there a nice juicy story in tomorrow morning's edition?'

'Well,' I said, 'I'm not sure about that. We can't launch you straight into a new image, since your old one stank so much.'

'Thanks,' he said with a quick, uncomfortable smile.

'But I've used everything you told me.'

'You have. That's good---isn't it?' he asked in a gingerly way.

'The truth's always good, I suppose.'

He eyed me for a time, then murmured, 'Thing you may not remember is you get paid when and if the stories appear, and if they're to my liking.'

'Oh, that's a new clause,' I said.

'Yes, Glen, it means you've got to have your antennae out every second of the day. Just watch out for yourself if I don't see a decent story in a couple or three hours from now, that's all.'

I said nothing to this and he went on in a grumbling way, taking several sips from his whisky, 'That's how fights are won. We've won the fight for language, ours is the most spoken language in the world, we're winning the fight for space, for the moon, for possession of the stars, we're conquering every aspect of life, Glen, and you're in that as much as I am. At least, you signed an invisible contract, to run my press relations, so don't back out now, there's a grand epoch ahead.' Again he eyed me, but this time, after a long pause, he said in a soft voice, 'What do you think they're doing now? Boy, I'm so randy sitting here I could fertilise a stable full of cattle out of season. Don't tell me infidelity breaks up marriages, Glen, it builds them into paradise. Unless this is hell. If it is, I'm staying here.' And he gave me a wink.

The whisky in the bottle went below the half-way mark, and the soda syphon was renewed several times. I drank sleepily and felt no effects. Sometimes I closed my eyes and slept, and I would wake to hear his mumbling voice. He nodded now and then, and his head fell heavily against my shoulder, when he woke with a start. There were few people tonight. That other night must have been a Saturday. I had lost count of days.

After some time we both slept soundly, and I was only woken by the band striking up a quickstep, which no-one seemed to want. We slept sitting straight, and in the dimness of the club the fact could probably not be seen. It must be nearly dawn and I got up carefully, not disturbing him.

I left the club as I had that first night, while his head fell forward precipitously, only saved in the nick of time from crashing on to the table. Again I went to the lavatory, and exchanged good night with the same attendant.

I slipped a note into the commissionaire's hand outside, and he tipped his cap to me as I walked off. I was getting expert. I walked towards St. James's Park, where the ducks and herons and kingfishers were waking up, at the edges of the pond, with little stirring sounds. There was a ground-mist, muffling the ancient walls of the Admiralty, but the gusty wind in the night, probably from the sea, had dried the pavements. Only a few puddles were left, with the first grey light in them. Nothing moved along the Mall and its royal tarmac, tinted red, was like a quiet garden path into the past, where our consolations lay, but where we were forbidden.

I yawned and felt the bristle on my chin. I wished I could boil water in my room. That cold shave every morning stung my skin every morning. People began passing, while the mist turned to fog and became more luminous. I walked along Birdcage Walk, then the Embankment: the fog poured from the river in ungainly mouthfuls, sweeping over the pavement, chilling and choking, and the buses still had their lights on, while fog-horns sounded from the Docks. There was the rumble of an early train across Hungerford Bridge, making me think of lonely nights and the smell of factories.

When I walked up the road to the office I saw that my light was still on. I stood gazing up, wondering if they were still sucking their pleasures, frantically. I walked up and down. More traffic passed along the Strand. But this street lay in its night-silence still. The curtains didn't move and I thought I would tiptoe up the stairs. I was careful to make no creaking noises---I knew where the worst creaks were. The office lay in its curious silence, the furniture waiting for its tenants, dim and soft in the first light. Pat's chair was swivelled away from the table as if she'd only just left for her date with Klydonhall, having been initiated (again on my bed) by Palermo. I thought of her lying by Klydonhall in this dawn, long-faced, her carefully planned hair strewn over her face, her tight ballroom dress flung on the arm of a chair, her mouth open.

I stood still on the landing outside the office and heard nothing. Then I walked up the remaining stairs cautiously, listening for the sound of breathing. There was nothing. I went on further, until I saw the light from my room shed on the top landing. My door was open. I turned at the top of the stairs and again stood silently, listening as hard as I could. I was just moving on when I saw a hand. It was lying open in a submissive way by my bed. They must be there. And I found I wanted to see them: nakedness was nothing for me now. Even Lou's nakedness I knew. Now I could see the whole arm, dangling from the bed so that the hand---it was surely Palermo's---lay on the floor. He was lying there, alone, naked, face down, his hand dangling just as mine had that morning, when I had posed. Not even a blanket was covering him. He was quite still. The blankets were crumpled together at the foot of the bed. A towel---one of mine---lay on the floor near his head. His hand had a delicate stillness about it---a heavy gold ring on the marriage-finger: like the Italians he wore it on the right hand. His hair had a specially black look, rolled in curls at his neck: I had never seen the back of his neck before---delicate too, with something hesitant. He was slim, his skin

olive, to the point of a faint sallowness. I was about to call him, even to pull him by the arm, but the silence told me something. The realisation made a cold hand go down my back, and I stared at him. Palermo was a dead man. I stood there for a long time, the light on, the curtains undrawn, with the silence so deep that the thought of noise was frightening. I began shivering. The noise of my shoes when I moved slightly made me jump round and look behind me. But death calmed me. He remained lying there in a magnificent last assurance. No, it was absurd, and I would wake him. I stared and stared at him. I knelt down and looked into his face. His eyes were closed. There was no breathing. I touched him slightly with the tip of my finger, and he was only lukewarm, not cold exactly. I called his name softly, rather like a child: 'Palermo, Palermo...' My whisper was like dust---in the dust of the hard light and the mute curtains. I could smell Lou's scent. Her clothes had gone. His were lying on my chest-of-drawers, the trousers thrown down carelessly. His tie was on the floor. I sat down on the chest-of-drawers and did vigil with him. All the time I gazed at his body. His neck seemed to become frailer and frailer, quite unguarded now. I went on shivering, then I sat down on the floor, close to him, leaning against the chest-of-drawers, my feet tucked up to avoid his hand. And I went on looking at him. Once a sigh came from him, but I knew he wasn't alive. It was like the last sigh afterwards, when a summary has been taken, a sigh for the whole of life. The door was still ajar, leading into darkness. Strange how his pose was exactly mine of that morning: his hand falling in the same way, his head half off the pillow, his legs together on the mattress, the mattress half off the bedstead. It was like talking to him. He lay there telling me everything that had happened, and still advising me. But none of it was facts. It didn't belong to time. He was telling me real things, and I was listening, so much that I didn't want to get up. Yet I could never repeat what he said, and would never know what it was. One car went by outside, booming between the houses for a moment, but it had the effect of emphasising our silence, cutting us off closer together. His body shone in the light. The arc lamps and the camera were still in a muddle in the corner, and the room was not quite chill, as if the single arc lamp which he used for heating had been switched off only minutes ago. There was the close atmosphere of love just done. I looked at the crumpled towel, and thought I saw stains. Not dark stains. The room's peace grew, and I went on sitting there, my arms round my knees, gazing at him as if a second mustn't be lost, while the traffic increased outside and I could see the faint light growing beyond the curtains. As to what my mind

believed---that was far away from this room: I couldn't believe he was dead, even that I was really here, but there were deeper facts than this, such as that he and I were together now, and I was protecting him in some way, the last person on earth to do so. That seemed to be his requirement, too, in the silence - that I should stay. And we went on with our dialogue, comparing notes, while the silence buzzed. His arm, the way his hand fell on the floor, his feet closed together, his head half off the pillow, were telling me things, he was explaining them to me and I would be the only person in the world to know. I'd come at the right moment, before the warmth left him. He seemed to be disappearing from life slowly, in a rhythm that was beyond life. Then his stillness seemed to become fixed. He had gone beyond in some way. He was now in some way like the other things in the room. The talking was over. I got up slowly, still shivering, and groaned with the effort. I walked downstairs, yawning and shivering in turns. I went through to his office and took up the phone, dialling the operator, and said in a tired voice, hardly above a whisper, as I slumped down into his chair, 'Get me the police'.

She said, 'What is it for, please?' But I said nothing to this, only gazed through to the other office, waiting, my eyes half closed, the receiver trembling so much that it was an effort to keep it by my ear. And I was aware of my eyes staring out of their sockets, my mouth open. Then at last she said, 'I'll get them for you.'

A long time passed in which I almost slept, the receiver falling away from my ear until I woke suddenly and dragged it back. There was a hard voice at the other end saying, 'Hullo, hullo? Do you want the police?'

'Somebody's dead. Come over.' And I gave the address.

There was a pause at the other end and the voice asked, 'Has there been an accident?'

I didn't reply to this either, and like the operator he gave in after a time and murmured, 'All right, somebody's on the way. Give me the address again.'

I did so and put the receiver down so heavily that it was like a crash through the house. I had the absurd frightened thought that it might waken him. I walked down the dark, narrow corridor to the other office, and out on to the landing. The traffic was noisy now. I heard it as he might have done, from his silence. My shivering was so great that my teeth chattered against each other.

When there was a pause in the sound of traffic I listened, as if he might move and prove all this mad. What seemed an hour passed. I heard voices enquiring below in the street, and it occurred to me that here were the police. I didn't go down to help them. They drifted away again, looking for the number, and this building carried no number. And they drifted back again. This time I heard their voices on the stairs, suddenly strong and constructive----life raced back. They came up slowly, making a clattering noise with their boots. They talked to each other, 'Reckon this is right?' I still didn't speak. One of them said, 'Anybody here?' And they stood still. Then one of them said, almost behind my back, 'There's a bloke.' I turned to look at them. They were both heavy men, one flushed and the other with a lined face that reminded me of Grigg's for a moment, though these lines had no purpose holding them firm.

I got up and nodded to them, still shivering. I pointed upstairs. They screwed up their eyes, trying to understand. The three of us stood about the same height. The blue of their uniforms gave a dangerous element to the room, and their buttons shone.

'What's happened?' the one with the lined face said, peering into my eyes.

Again I pointed upstairs and they looked upwards. I found I could say nothing, my teeth chattered violently.

They walked up the stairs, waiting for me to follow. And I went behind them. He was still there, and I found myself surprised that nothing had changed, down to the position of his hand, frail and passive, on the floor. But his silence was beyond conversation now. He was a body. I found the sight of this a tremendous shock, and I burst into tears, making a coughing sound as I stood on the landing while they went inside. They took no notice of me, only looked at Palermo, bent down, got up again, gazed round the room, bent down again, touched his eyelid, raising it for a moment, then getting up again. They turned their attention to me again. I made no effort to hide my face; the tears were pouring down into my mouth, with that salt taste of childhood.

'Whose room is this?' one of them asked, turning his eyes from me as he asked the question.

'Mine.'

The flushed man looked back heavily into the room and said, 'How did this happen?'

I shrugged and looked at them helplessly.

'Rather not talk at the moment?' the lined one said.

'Suppose you come along to the station with us?' he went on. 'There's plenty of time. We've got a car. It's only round the corner. Phone here?'

I nodded and he put his hand on my arm soothingly as we went back downstairs, leaving the other man with Palermo. I took him through to Palermo's office and again he said to me, while lifting the receiver and dialling, 'How did it happen, mate?' Still I didn't answer and I heard him giving the details to his superintendent: a hospital was to be contacted. He talked in a muttering voice, his mouth very close to the receiver, looking down at Palermo's desk. At the end he said, 'There's a chap here. I'll bring him along. He's a bit broken up.' And he said to me, taking my arm again and leading me outside, 'We'll get you a cup of tea, mate, you'll be all right.' We went together down to the street, he keeping his hand gently on mine, which---together with my tears---made passers-by look at us. We got into a police car, where there was a driver waiting. I heard the policeman mutter to him, 'Home, James, and don't spare the horses. Sid's staying there.' And as the car started towards the Strand, speeding past the pub where Palermo and I had sat, he turned round to me and said, 'You don't know how it happened, mate?'

And again I shook my head.

At the station there was a hatless superintendent behind a desk, in a bare room with high walls. I had no idea where I was: the ride had been short, a swift spurt round two or three corners. I was put into a chair and a cup of tea was brought by a man in plain clothes: he gave me a look of distant curiosity, that made me feel included with other criminals who had sat there. The tea was good; hot and sweet. I sipped it quickly, gazing out at the narrow street, down bleak steps. The policeman who'd been with me came and went, with little glances at me, and I half-heard him giving the details to the superintendent---no marks of violence, seems to be some sort of offices, this chap says he doesn't know anything, deceased without a scrap of clothing... All in a muttered voice, his head close to the superintendent's, who watched me with what seemed to me wary, compassionate interest, sucking the end of his pencil, his eyes clear without penetrating, as if his whole job was to wait and listen. When I'd finished my tea they at once asked me if I needed another, and I said yes. This time, when the second cup came, the policeman sat down at the table opposite me, while the superintendent stretched and went out, collecting his belt from a hook and saying, 'Rotten weather again,' to someone in the corridor outside. The street was quite busy: cars and trucks passed, not buses. I heard voices sometimes, scraps of talk---people on their way to work. It was still quite early.

'So let's have your side of it,' the policeman said, with a touch of ultimatum.

'Well, I came in about dawn, and that's what I found.'

'Came in from where?'

'The 1810.'

'The night-club?'

'Yes.'

He gave me a long look, as if this revealed much, and said, getting up, 'Hang on a minute.' He fetched a pencil and pad from the superintendent's desk.

'When did you leave the club exactly?'

'Just about dawn, I mean light was just coming up, I don't know the exact time.'

'Alone?'

'Yes.'

'You went to this club alone?'

'No. With a friend.'

'Who?'

'Professor Grigg.'

'What does he do for a living?'

'Lectures.'

He looked at me for a long time again, and I realised that my eyes were wet. I took out my handkerchief and wiped them. I felt calm, though I still shivered.

'And this is your room, where we were just now?'

'Yes, for the time being.'

'Can you explain what he was doing in your room?'

'He used it sometimes.'

'What for?'

'I don't know.'

'I reckon you do know, mate.'

'Well, it's not my business,' I said.

'It's ours, though.' He made a note and said while he was still writing, 'Your name, please.'

I gave it to him, and he asked at once, 'The deceased, what's his name?'

'John Palermo.'

'What's the firm?'

'Capitol Holdings Ltd.'

'You work for them?'

'Well, yes.'

'Why 'well' yes?'

'I mean, I haven't for long. I didn't get a regular salary.'

'How did you live, then?'

'Oh, he gave me money.'

'Who did?'

'Palermo.'

'What is this firm, exactly?'

'Well, sort of press-agency, publicity work.'

'Where did you live before you got this job?'

'I live in Italy. I only came over a few weeks ago.'

This time he gave me a hard look and said, 'Now, look, let's get to the bottom of this. Suppose you just tell me everything you know, starting with why you came to this country---' He interrupted himself. 'You're English, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Born or naturalised?'

'Born.'

'Where?'

I heard a phone ring in another room, and went on answering his questions quietly. The answers came with great ease because I wasn't afraid any more. I had the relieved feeling that I was back in the world after a strange absence, and this quiet inquisition was necessary, for me as well, so as to put my life into the grip of facts again.

The superintendent came in and whispered something to the other man, and they both looked at me.

'The superintendent says there ARE signs of violence,' the man told me, narrowing his eyes. 'Not violence exactly, but some struggle took place. Know anything about that?'

'No.'

He turned to the superintendent, 'I think we ought to get this other chap here, a professor, they were at the 1810 all night, so he says.'

The superintendent looked at me with momentary bleakness: 'You were at a night-club?'

'Yes.'

'Often go to night-clubs?'

'When work calls for it, yes.'

'Work?'

'He's some sort of press agent,' the policeman told him.

The superintendent looked down the policeman's pad: 'What's this, you live in Italy?'

'Yes.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I came over to get a job for a time, then I thought I'd get my wife over---'

'You married---any children?'

'One.'

'How long are you going to keep me here?' I asked them.

'Well, let's put it this way, we have to guard against foul play.'

'Yes, I see that.'

'So what was he doing on your bed?' the superintendent asked me suddenly, so that he seemed to dart down on me like a bird.

'Well, he used it sometimes, I mean he used to sleep there.'

'Didn't he have a place of his own?'

'Yes.'

'And did he explain what he wanted your room for?'

'Well, it was his office, I had no right there really.'

'You're hiding something from me, but I'll find out what it is,' he said, his eyes with their peculiar soft unpenetrating tenacity.

There were more bell-ringings, and the policeman disappeared, and then returned again.

'I'll tell you what happened,' he said to me, 'I reckon he was with a woman in your room, and he didn't use his flat because he's married.' He added, 'Is that right?'

'I don't know.'

'We'll check up on how long you were at the 1810, and when a few more facts come in you can go. Do you like mischief?'

'No.'

'Shouldn't mix yourself up in it, then.'

One of them always stayed with me, while the other phoned. I gave more facts about my life, with interruptions, and policemen came and went from their point-duty, saying hello and making muttered jokes while they gave me indifferent glances.

In the course of an hour they contacted Grigg at his hotel, found out Palermo's private address and sent a plain-clothes man round to Muriel, who was apparently still asleep.

The superintendent came into the room suddenly and said, 'We know who he was with. It was the professor's wife, wasn't it?'

'If you know, why ask me?'

'No, you could have saved us the trouble.'

There was a long wait while the post-mortem was being prepared. I gathered that the Cambridge police were being informed, and would visit Lou.

The questions were now over, and I was asked if I'd had breakfast, to which I said no. So the superintendent invited me into another room, where to my surprise he sat down with me, while food was brought from a kitchen at the far end of the stone corridor---eggs, fried bread, tomatoes, more tea. He mumbled odd little questions to me, without form, and made no reply when I spoke.

'I'm going to let you go home soon,' he said, 'but you'd save your own time if you remained on tap for a day or two. Know what procuring is?'

'Yes.'

'Ever do any?'

'No. Why?'

'Somebody's been suggesting you procured for your boss. Any truth in that?'

'Who said that?'

'The professor seems to think it wouldn't have happened without you. Don't worry,' he added, pushing his plate away and sucking his teeth, 'there isn't the basis for a charge there.'

Getting up, he said, 'Would you like the morning papers? You'd better stay in here till the post-mortem comes through.'

The newspapers came, and I picked out Ryan's tabloid with its red headlines. I hoped I had done my work at least there---had burned my boats, could leave the country with THAT comfort at least. There was nothing on the front page about Grigg. But there was in the middle, opposite Fashion, under banner headlines: AN UNSHAKEABLE BROTHERHOOD. The article was about a so-called Afternoon Assembly at Cambridge, at which Grigg had spoken the day before: 'The professor, introduced by Mr. Charles Dornelling, made an appeal for a new faith, to bring us level with the new frontiers of knowledge, space and techniques achieved in our time. This new faith, he said, would be the establishment once and for all of indelible values,

and the defeat once and for all of the ancient enemies---sickness, ignorance and vice. All three could be dealt with by the revolution in communications which, of all the new realities of our time, was perhaps the most fundamental: we were one world at last, and we could if we chose belong to one reality. In education, medicine, art, in the craft of political government and electoral methods, we had new world-wide possibilities which we only had to grasp in order to enjoy. The question we should ask of any new development, he said, was not was it good for Africans or French or English or Americans, but was it good for Man. When we divest ourselves of petty national feeling the possibilities multiply. For this new faith we should band together in a vast new club, the like of which had never before been seen, a club that would have all the consolations and privileges connected with that word, but which would girdle the world and hold it fast in one unshakeable brotherhood. 'Let us call it a club of men,' he said. 'That will be enough. In this new reality it will be enough to be---a man.'

I looked for criticism, a touch of irony, but there was none. I read the article again and again: it was simply reported, nothing added. I looked in the other columns for signs of malice-by-juxtaposition, but these were on the most harmless subjects, a health conference, an international congress of architects.

The results of the post-mortem came through shortly before noon: a heart attack. The Cambridge police had talked to Professor Grigg's wife, and what they learned apparently absolved me. I could go. I stodd in the bare entrance hall feeling giddy, looking from one to the other.

There was no longer fog, but the sky was low and thick, shedding a deadly light on the streets. The shops had kept their lights on, from which I took an idiotic comfort, as if they'd done it for me. I walked back slowly, not knowing where I was but knowing I was near. I turned one corner after another, and got into Soho. It wasn't until past two that I found the office, not that I'd really looked, or wanted to go back.

I heard murmuring voices upstairs and stopped short: perhaps they hadn't removed the body yet. I made out Pat's voice, a girlish drone. The other one I didn't recognise.

I got to the top of the stairs and saw, of all people, the Orangery talking to Pat. They were standing together by her desk, and hardly turned round to look at me. Palermo's silence had hardly been broken in my absence.

Pat said, 'Hullo, Glen.' She was paler even than last night, with a

frightened look in her eyes. She kept moving things on her desk, while the Orangery stood there stolidly, his massive red beard seeming embarrassed at itself.

'You were the chap at the police station!' he said, with his slight friendly smile and hesitant blink.

'Yes.'

'What, you found him?'

'Yes.'

'That couldn't have been very nice,' he said quietly.

'No.'

'The police have been,' Pat said.

'There was only one when I left,' I told her.

'Those two were here, the ones who asked you a lot of questions.'

'Oh?'

'They've been at Muriel again.'

The silence returned, while we all stood together.

'Chandler-Williams sent me over,' the Orangery said. 'To take care of the office.'

'I didn't know you were being employed even,' I said.

'Oh, yes. Palermo put me in the other office.'

'Which one?'

'With Chandler-Williams.'

'Oh.'

He added, 'What say to some lunch?'

'Yes. You come too,' I said to Pat.

We walked to the Strand and found ourselves where Muriel and I had snatched breakfast the day before. The lunch-crowd had gone and there was the sound and smell of washing up. We sat at the same table---I led them there.

'I haven't even shaved,' I said, rubbing my face and yawning.

'Somebody phoned from Cambridge twice,' the Orangery told me.

The lunch was foul. I remembered the Bologna---should have taken them there.

The Orangery didn't walk back to the office with us. He said he had to return to Chandler-Williams, who was waiting for him for a full report. Pat and I went alone, and sat aimlessly in her part of the office. She did her fingernails, painted her lips, made a cup of tea.

'I think I'll go home,' she said in a whisper. 'There's nothing for me to do.'

'Are you coming in tomorrow?'

'Yes, he said nine as usual.'

'Who did?'

'Mr. Ruff.'

As she was going, buttoning her collar tightly round her neck, though it wasn't made to do that, I asked her, 'What was your night out like?'

'Oh.' She gave me a grudging glance, like a child. 'All right.'

I wished she had stayed longer, enough for me to slip upstairs and get my cases. I looked through my wallet---enough for a hotel, at least. And plenty in the bank.

Dusk started and I was about to switch the lights on outside when there were voices below. Heavy feet started coming upstairs. I waited.

It was the plain-clothes men who'd interviewed me before.

'Hullo, Glen,' the thin, dark one said. He had the same dull blue-serge suit on, and I wondered he wasn't cold.

'Hullo.'

'We've just come for a few questions.'

'Oh, yes.'

We walked through to Palermo's office, which seemed to have established itself for interviews.

They sat down, one of them behind the desk, while I took a chair from the wall.

'We were here this morning. These photographs,' the blond one said, pointing to the proofs of <u>Adam and Eve</u> on the table, 'any idea what they're for?'

'A book.'

'Isn't that you?' he asked lifting one up, with a cool look at his friend.

'Yes.'

'You know somebody charged you with rape this morning, do you?' he asked without looking at me, fingering through the prints.

'No.'

'Of course we're not taking it seriously,' he went on, still bent over the prints. 'It's that girl again.'

'Nice backside you've got,' he murmured after a long pause.

'You going back to Italy any time?' the other one asked.

'Yes.'

Then the blond one leaned forward casually and took a small notebook from his pocket. At first I attached no importance to this, thinking it was his. But

then I noticed the way he was playing about with it, twirling it round between his fingers. It was my little red diary.

'Know about this book, Glen?'

'Yes, it's mine.'

He fingered through it, glanced at several pages.

'Can you tell me what this book is about?'

'It's about the weather we've been having.'

'Oh? What about the rockets to the moon? Do they come under the heading of weather?'

'That's what I was wondering. That's why I kept notes on the weather, to try and find out.'

He laid the little book down on the desk and said quietly, while the dark one stared at me, 'Don't pick it up. You can't have it.'

'It's mine.'

'But you can't have it.'

It lay on the table between us, reminding me of the room where I had sat writing it, with apricot trees outside.

'Known Professor Grigg long, Glen?'

'No.'

'Who introduced you to him?'

'Palermo.'

'Is that true?'

'Yes.'

'Did you have dinner with the professor in Cambridge on the twenty-eighth of last month?'

'Yes. At least, I suppose that was the date. I had dinner with them, anyway.'

'And you arrived in Cambridge on the three, twenty-nine?'

'Yes.'

Again he was silent, looking down, while the dark one continued to bore me through with his eyes.

'Did you come to England to contact Professor Grigg?' the blond one asked suddenly, turning his eyes full on me too.

'No,' I said. 'I'd never heard of him.'

'Do you know an American called Alexander Parsons, living in Naples?'

'Yes.'

'A friend of yours?'

'Yes.'

The dark one spoke: 'Did you try to embark on subjects of defence with the professor's wife?'

'No. Why, is that what she said?'

'Never mind what she said.' He moved forward slightly in his chair and asked me in a mild voice, 'Were you aware when you went to a party given by the professor a few days ago that you'd be meeting people connected with defence?'

'No.'

'Did you speak to General Heeley?'

'Yes.'

'Can you remember your conversation?'

'No, we hardly had one word together.'

'Were you aware of the existence of Mr. Charles Dornelling at the party?'

'Not at the time. Only afterwards.'

The blond one nodded towards my little book and said, 'You can have it now.'

'What are you doing in England?' the other one asked. 'Why did you come?'

'Because it's my country.'

'Come on, I want a real answer.'

I shrugged. 'I wanted a change of work.'

'Did you speak with Alexander Parsons before leaving Italy?'

'No.'

'Did he suggest the trip?'

'No.'

'Are you aware of big military installations in Naples?'

'Not much, no.'

'Mind if we look round a bit?' the dark one asked me.

'No.'

They went to the other office and searched the drawers of both desks. They seemed about to keep Muriel's personal photographs, but then these were put back. And they went upstairs. I still dared not go up. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask them to bring my cases down. But they called me up.

'Glen! Come up here, mate, will you?'

I walked up slowly, my eyes wide: I couldn't stop the shiver returning in full force.

'What are you afraid of, mate?' one of them asked me as I walked into my own room. The curtains had been drawn, and the photographic apparatus removed. But the mattress and the blankets were lying as I had seen them at dawn, with Palermo on them.

I gave them no answer and the dark one said, 'A query came up this morning as to why you had your suitcases ready packed?'

'I packed last night.'

'When?'

'Before I went out.'

'Before you found the body?'

'In the evening, yes.'

'Why? You needn't answer if you don't want to, mate, but it'll help blow away any aspersions that might cling to your character'---from the blond one, with an ambiguous look.

'I don't know why I did it.'

'You don't know?'

'No.'

'You pack your suitcases carefully, and you don't know why you do it?' They both watched me while I shivered. 'That doesn't sound like the truth.'

'I can't remember why I did it.'

'Well, you'd better remember before tomorrow morning, if you want to go back to Italy.'

I stared at him, and for a moment there was an image in my mind of my wife waiting alone, the kitchen without me.

I said, 'I didn't like it any more...' The tears came to my eyes. 'Please let me go, please!'

'Now, come on, mate, pull yourself together,' the blond one said, blinking.

'I didn't want to go on working for Grigg, I had the idea of getting out---'

'Did you get a cheque for three hundred pounds from Mrs. Grigg?' the other one asked.

'Yes.'

'What was that for?'

'I don't know, it was some payment for the work I did, Palermo gave it to me, he told me it was an advance on my salary, then afterwards I realised she'd given it to him. It was some kind of bribe really.'

'And what were you being bribed to do?'

'Oh, say nice things about them in the papers, personal relations kind of thing.'

'That's a lot of money, though.'

'No, it isn't. Not in this business.'

'Then what did you want to leave for?'

'It's not my line, I fell into it---I---' Again the tears welled into my eyes.

'OK, Glen,' the dark one said with a sigh, 'we'll leave it at that. Only people don't fall into set-ups like this without their eyes open. You nearly got yourself into a scrap with George Swinburne, only we were kind enough to arrest him yesterday. He's sensitive about his wife.'

They started going downstairs, but one of them turned and said to me, 'There was two calls from Cambridge this morning. Any idea who from?'

'The Griggs, it might be.'

They took no notice of my answer, only showed me their shoulders and walked on down. I took my two cases before the sound of their boots had died away and rushed them down to the office. There! I was free!---I dropped them by Pat's desk, out of breath, the tears still not dry on my cheeks.

I slumped into Muriel's chair and began to doze while the homegoing traffic passed and repassed in the street below.

That night I spent in a hotel, I found it not a hundred yards away, a slim building with tiny rooms and no restaurant or apparently any service. The wallpaper was yellow and the sheets were like damp parchment. I locked my door and slept at once, throwing off my clothes and leaving them piled on a chair: I had only pulled the coverlet half way on me when I fell asleep. And that was how I woke in the morning, the upper part of me still uncovered. The noise outside crashed into my head suddenly, and I felt as if I'd shot upwards from a dark chute where there had been the most final silence on earth, Palermo's, and I had lain in this all night. I returned to the office, frightened of the policeman's warning---I mustn't seem to be fleeing. I had breakfast at Muriel's table again, and found myself wishing her there.

The day was dark but dry. Again some shops had their lights on, and the buses were lighted too. It was time for me to be at the office, but I stopped at the barber's on the Strand for a shave, with very hot towels. At the office there were lights everywhere, on both floors, and from the street I saw Pat's pale face pass by the lower window for a moment; she was bending towards Muriel's table, sorting

something out. I felt rested but my shivering had become permanent, making my eyes twitch, sometimes my cheeks. My fingers would suddenly get a spasm in them, then be still again. I found myself thinking that Palermo was still up there: his shining body seemed immovable from my bed. I walked up and heard bustling movement, and practical voices, lowered, in the office. Chandler-Williams was there, with Pat and the Orangery, and there was an atmosphere of obedience, with Pat saying 'sir' and the Orangery standing about with a dutiful look. I walked in and nodded hullo.

'Oh, Glen,' Chandler-Williams said, taking my hand, 'come in.' He looked away from me almost at once. 'Nasty business, eh?'

'Yes.'

He glanced at me, biting his lip: 'You found him?'

'Yes.'

'I could see it coming, I'm afraid,' he said. 'My wife too. He overdid it.'

He picked up a file, put it down again. He was dressed in a quiet dark suit, and he'd clearly been to the hairdresser who had shorn his hair to the scalp, leaving a shaggy dark patch on top. I remembered that first day in his office, how stifling the room had been. But here it was cold; Pat hadn't put the gasfire on.

I sat down in Muriel's chair while they did a kind of inventory of files and letters, piling them on the floor. At least, Pat piled them and the Orangery got them out of the cupboards, while Chandler-Williams made perplexed notes, which probably made no sense. The proofs of Adam and Eve---showing Muriel's bosom, the instep of one of my feet, her hand laid on my stomach---were on Pat's desk, and I noticed that he passed over these without a glance, as if they were natural office material.

I walked through into Palermo's office, where the desk had been cleared, and sat there for a time in the darkness. Then I went upstairs to my room. That was a surprise, though it failed to work on me: my blankets had been folded neatly on the bed, and the mattress had been folded too; the chest-of-drawers was thrust close to the wall, and the carpet had been rolled up. The End was written all over them. Only the curtains had been left.

When I went downstairs again there was a woman with Chandler-Williams. I heard him murmur, 'Hullo, Elsie,' so that she must have just come in. When I appeared in the doorway she turned with a frightened movement and blinked towards me.

'This is Mrs. Palermo,' he said, and we shook hands. Pat was watching her.

She was about Palermo's age, the same height. I found myself intrigued with her, and kept hold of her hand for a moment after I'd shaken it. Her frailty struck me, and then the firmness behind it, straight like her back. She was dressed in a blue two-piece suit with a matching hat slightly out of fashion: like a county woman up in town for the day. She walked behind Chandler-Williams through to Palermo's office and picked up a few of his things---his silver cigarette case, a leather folder, two unopened bottles of whisky from inside the desk, a pocket camera I had never seen. Chandler-Williams then left the building, with her, holding her arm, without saying good-bye.

The Orangery touched my arm in his hesitant way and said, pointing down the corridor to Palermo's office, 'Can we have a talk?'

'Yes.'

I followed him down, as I had followed Palermo many times.

'Look,' he said, settling down into a seat---but not the one behind the desk, 'I've been talking to Chandler-Williams. He wants to know your plans.' And he looked into my eyes earnestly, leaning forward, as if he were desperately trying to work me out. His gaze was narrowed, and my eyes felt as if they were objects, set in my head as features merely, not to see with.

'I don't know,' I said.

'A friend of yours was at his office this morning.'

'A friend?'

Again the earnest peering of his tiny eyes, delicate and friendly, entrenched in ginger hair. I felt how right Palermo had been - 'the Orangery' struck it off exactly: that sense of luxuriance and forced heat.

'Mrs. Swiburne. It took him an hour to get rid of her.' And the peering look went on.

'I hardly know her.'

'She said she was bringing a charge against you.'

'Yes, I know about that.'

He blinked. 'Is it true, then?'

'What?'

'Well, the charge.'

'Not on your life. She's mad, everybody knows that.'

'She didn't seem it,' he said. 'She was crying her heart out. You can't fake tears. Anyway, Chandler-Williams wants to know your plans.'

'I'll go back to Italy. When the police let me.'

'Listen, Glen,' he said, shifting his chair closer to mine, 'this is none of my business, but three hundred quid are missing off the accounts and he says a cheque for that sum was made out to you.'

'By Palermo, yes.'

'Well, he can't trace a reason for it. Palermo took it off our funds, not his private account.'

'It was an advance on salary. That's what he told me.'

'But he was paying you out of his pocket as well. Pat gave you ten or twenty pounds at one time.'

'Did she tell you that?'

'Well, Chandler-Williams was asking her. He's got to get the place in order.'

We heard Pat making the morning cup of tea next door, out of earshot.

'Are you in a position to give it back?' he asked, blinking. 'That's what he wants to know.'

'I can give back a couple of hundred, probably.'

'And that's apart from what you got from Jack Ryan, according to the police.'

'Oh,' I said, 'you seem to know my business.'

He crossed his plump legs, and put his hand on his chin, drumming his fingers. 'Listen, Glen, would you take that two hundred pounds as settlement of your contract with us?'

'What do you mean?'

'He wants to know if you'll call it a day---then he won't bring up that three hundred any more.'

'That three hundred's mine. Try and prove it isn't.'

'No, but what he wants to know,' he said uncomfortably, with a slight appealing look, 'is will you leave the firm, then you can take that money?'

'I told you, the money's mine.'

'Oh, well,' he said with a shrug, 'I've done my best. Why the hell he can't do his own dirty work I don't know,' he added. 'I've been working in his office for a fortnight and I can tell you, there's no creative atmosphere.' He asked, 'Would you like to see some of my work?'

'Yes.'

He went into the other office and I heard him asking Pat where his title pages were. Then he came back with a large draughtsman's file and laid it on the table.

'Look,' he said quietly, biting some of the ginger hairs on his lower lip, 'just look at this.'

There were all sorts of single letters, and combinations of letters, but the predominant ones said ADA or ADAM AN or just EVE or AD, in different founts and designs, some twirled and flourished, others severe. One page had a full and complete ADAM AND EVE, 'with Preface by Adrianov'. It was in simple large capitals, done in black ink. He was following my face, standing close to me.

'Well, what do you think?'

'This is the title page of the book?' I asked.

'Yes. Makes an impression, doesn't it? It took two damn weeks and two days to work that out.'

'But it seems just printing.'

'What?' He screwed up his eyes. 'It's the design you have to look at. Don't you know about these things?' His peering look began again.

'What,' I said, 'the space between the lines and that sort of thing?'

'The choice of fount. The whole set-up. To get a homogenous set-up that makes you think there's nothing to it is the most difficult thing of all, what we're all trying to achieve.' He closed the file again, and I'm sure he put me down as a philistine.

'Who's Adrianov?'

'Oh, that's a name he made up.'

Most of that day I sat in Palermo's office, behind his desk, not leaving even for lunch. This was the last part of my vigil for him. Sometimes the Orangery came and sat there too, to talk. Also a call came from Cambridge and I recognised Lou's whisper at once. Her voice trembled like my own cheeks did.

'You found him,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Glen,' she whispered, 'I had to pull myself out from underneath. I couldn't get out. I was crying, I was pleading with him, Glen, and he wasn't alive any more.'

I waited for her to say more but there was only the sound of crying. The pips went and she still hung on the phone. At the end she said, 'Jeff's having a Mass said this morning.' She rang off, I having said only one word, 'Yes.'

The Orangery asked me in the afternoon if I could help number the proofs of ADAM AND EVE, as Palermo had left no instructions about the order he wanted, or even captions. We wrote 'Arm', 'Adam reclining,' 'Adam and Eve listening' and so on.

'Mr. Selsey called the office this morning,' the Orangery said. 'They're giving me a week. I don't see why it should all come on my shoulders.'

He tried to fathom me again, just before dusk. 'Mrs. Swiburne said you were the devil incarnate. I can't believe that exactly,' he said with a hesitant smile, peering at me. 'But I think Chandler-Williams can. There's not a thought in his head that somebody else didn't introduce there.'

We smiled together.

'Yes,' he said. 'The police talked about procuring too. There was some idea that the three hundred pounds was Palermo's payment for knowing Mrs. Grigg.' He smiled slightly again. 'You're not telling me much.'

'No.'

'Mrs. Swiburne said she didn't know there could be a human creature like you, that was cold and cruel and calculating from top to bottom.'

'I'm going when the police let me,' I said.

I went out for a walk, with tears in my eyes again. Passers-by saw me, and gave me looks of what seemed pity, not embarrassment as I would have thought. I wondered that the city of my birth should have shown me so much, in so short a time, and not an element in it expected.

When I returned a policeman was there, in uniform, standing by the files cupboard. Pat and the Orangery had gone.

All the lights were on, so was the gasfire, and he was just bending to warm his hands when I came in the doorway. He turned with a great creaking of boots. I saw he was one of the men who had come the day before and stayed with Palermo.

'Just one more thing, if you don't mind. Where's Miss Davis?'

'Who's she?'

'She works in this office.'

'Pat? She was here this afternoon.'

'No, mate. Her name was Muriel and she lived with your boss. She's cleared. This morning she was still in bed when the police called, then after dinner she vamoosed. As you had your photos taken with her we thought you might know.'

'I don't.'

'She didn't telephone you?'

'No.'

'You haven't laid eyes on her?'

'No.'

'Mind what you're saying because you can get yourself into trouble.'

'I haven't seen her. I can swear to that.'

'All right, sir. That's all.'

He walked past me, so close that I could smell the carbolic soap from his flushed, plump, intimate cheeks. 'Am I supposed to be on tap still?' I asked.

'On tap?'

'That's what they said at the station. I mustn't go away yet.'

'Oh, you can forget that,' he said, walking down the stairs with a great thumping, not looking at me again. 'We'd all like to pin a charge on you, but unfortunately we can't. We worked on it all night, though,' and he added in an undertone, yet clearly so that I heard it as he approached the door downstairs, 'does a type like you have friends?'

I stood on the landing with these words rolling in my mind like a prayer-wheel we kept in our bedroom at home, hanging on the wall. Sometimes it was taken down for the child to play with, and it would spin round, but not too fast, with that pace you need for prayer and accusation...

I left all the lights on, and the gasfire. And again I fell on my bed at the hotel while the deafening racket from the Strand shook and numbed the room; this time I woke at dawn, and waited for the light to appear, in the silence of the street, with only the cleaners out, their long brushes hissing on the pavements. After breakfast I went to the bank and transferred two hundred and twenty-nine pounds into traveller's cheques. I bought an air ticket to Paris. I remembered Mr. Parsons and went to see him.

'The police are after me,' I said, 'they're trying to pin something on me. So I'm not your best man for that sort of work.'

At which he stroked his chin, and wheezed, and looked understanding. I put down two ten-pound notes for the furniture and he mumbled, 'Oh, that's all right, mate.' I left the shop with no obligations, and found that my heart wasn't even beating fast: I had become an expert.

'The stuff's there for you to pick up,' I told him.

In Paris I would buy presents, spend a day along the Faubourg St. Honore, catch my usual train south. I would call on a wine-contact. I would eat with him, he liked <u>bistecca al pepe</u>---we spoke Italian together. And a bottle of burgundy. I comforted myself with these things. I told myself that everything was just as Before...

I would telegraph my wife to come to Naples, she would book a room there and wait for me. We'd done that many times before, when I had to make a wine-trip nor'

The room we usually had looked down on the sea, from a height where noises couldn't penetrate, only the washing of the waves at night and the sound of ship's horns. Ship-lights twinkled and shimmered in the harbour.

I wondered about Muriel. No trip south for her. Perhaps she'd chosen to follow Palermo: second time lucky. He had shown her the way. I thought of them together, as if their destiny was together.

The little prayer-wheel went round and round: in the train, in the taxi to the harbour. It only stopped when I had it in my hand, standing in the bedroom. Everything had changed: my wife had had her adventures too. The vineyard lay half in ruins. Terraces were broken down---staves, wires, everything. A cyclone, as they called it, had torn it all to shreds, whirled it, beaten it to the ground in a series of whirlwinds that were over in three or four minutes. The outhouses had collapsed, on top of my vats and casks, wrecking nearly all of them. One of Luigi's walls had split like an orange. But our house remained, still and serene. It would need every penny of the money I had made.

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