Robin

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Flower in the Dusk

Robin

by

DORIS HEDGES

AWARENESS:

The Quality or State of Being Aware

Oxford English Dictionary

VANTAGE PRESS • NEW YORK

WASHINGTON • HOLLYWOOD • TORONTO

FIRST EDITION

Published by VANTAGE PRESS, INC.
120 West 31st Street, New York 1, N. Y.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 57-10256

Robin

Chapter 1

Robin Blount stood leaning against the mantelpiece in a loose-limbed way that was characteristic of him—a fifteen-year-old with instinctive grace which masked the young awkwardness. He looked tense; he was staring determinedly at his father and trying not to feel nervous.

John Blount had heard what his son had just said, but he took his time in considering it. He put the newspaper down on his knees and gazed at the headlines absent-mindedly, his handsome mouth taut. Robin said, continuing,

"I've asked you this several times before in my life, and never got an answer."

John Blount made a quick movement of his body, and the newspaper quivered. Then he looked up, and straight at Robin. He was smiling, and his eyes had nothing but pride in them, pride in this son of his.

He said, kindly, "You've asked me twice before. Once when you were about six and again last year. I remember perfectly."

His voice said, now don't be unreasonable, boy, and don't try to put anything over on your father.

Robin looked at John Blount with affection, but his voice was stubborn as he said, "You surprise me."

Both of them laughed. John Blount's face lightened, and he put the paper carelessly on the table, rumpling the pages. He was a big man, powerful and successful and used to having people around to pick up what he dropped. One of the things he liked about his son, however, was that he never picked them up.

He continued to look squarely at Robin, still smiling, but a little warily.

"I only said 'several times' to emphasize it," Robin said. "The first time I asked you I was five, not six, and the second time wasn't last year, but after New Year, this year, 1958. The reason why I do so well at school is because I have a swell memory, and can mug things up."

He laughed. John Blount spoke, a little sharply, "The reason you do so well at school is that you have a fine, logical mind, which we are both trying to give the training it deserves."

His eyes never wavered from Robin's; he was thinking that Robin was obviously approaching a difficult stage, that perhaps it might be a good idea to take his son abroad with him next spring, just to broaden him, and that it would be a darn good thing if Robin were to begin getting enthusiastic about girls. He was thinking, again with pride, of Robin's prowess in sports and also in his classes; but there was uneasiness in his mind. Robin was a queer fellow in some ways, could turn warmth off and on like a tap, without any obvious effort, and there were times when he exhibited an almost uncomfortable austerity of thought. If he liked a person he said so, and showed it; if he didn't, he did not always show it. For his age, he was too—well—benevolent about people and things he disliked or which bored him. It wasn't natural.

"Well, what is all this about a woman at your christening?" his father said.

His voice was cautious; it might have been any father's voice answering, or trying to answer, a damfool question put by someone young.

Robin moved. He crossed the room swiftly, pulled up a hassock and sat on it, quite close to his father. It was like someone making an unexpectedly strong backhand at tennis, or a boxer sidestepping. Robin clasped his hands together loosely, leaning forward. He wasn't looking at his father, but over his head at the October sunlight on the trellis outside.

"I can't be put off any longer, Dad," he said. "You might as well give it to me straight. Who was she?"

Color came into John Blount's face, an angry color, and his mouth stiffened away from the smile it had held. His mouth now looked like the mouth of the man he was in public—the prominent business man, the leader in local politics, the intrepid fighter for place, prosperity, and prominence. He replied, almost in a shout.

"Well, O.K. since you insist. I'll give it to you straight. It's a delusion, a completely zany idea you've got, a bee in your bonnet. I did not squelch it before, because I was sure you'd outgrow it, forget it. There were three women at your christening. There was your mother, there was that ghastly nurse we had to get rid of afterwards, and there was your Aunt Elaine. And those were all the women at your christening."

"There was another woman there," Robin said slowly. He had gone white. "I saw her quite clearly. She was in a sort of grey dress, and her hands were brown, sunburned. She most certainly was there. I've been hoping you'd tell me."

John Blount banged his hands against his knees, and got up. He stared down at Robin with a baffled expression. Then, as he made a decision, his face cleared of anger, and the flush faded.

"Look here, Rob, don't you trust me?" he said quietly. "I hope you do because this is my last word on that subject. You've let this give you a complex, and complexes can be dangerous and uncomfortable. You were a baby of ten months, bright, I'll admit, but not as bright as all that. And there's another thing: what does it matter anyhow? Suppose for sake of argument only, that I were to say, to please you, that there were four women at your christening, what difference would it make? What's the great, thundering significance of this imaginary woman?"

He sounded genuinely puzzled. He put his hand on Robin's thin shoulder, and shook him gently back and forth.

Robin remained quite still under the hand, neither welcoming nor repudiating it. He was very fond of his father.

John Blount said, "Better forget it, Robin, before it gets you down. Better accept the fact that you've been imagining something all along, for some reason or other, and wanted to make it come true. We all have day-dreams, you know, and you have this colossal imagination. Will you trust me, and forget it?"

"Thank you, Father," Robin said in a strange voice. He got up, feeling his father's hand drop from him as he did so. He looked at his father, and John Blount had the embarrassing feeling of being a stranger to his own son. They had been repeating themselves of late, these cold and lonely moments of strangeness. He disliked them and resented them. He was a fiercely possessive man, and this was his only son. He laughed, but it was not his best laugh. It was the snort he gave when things were blowing up to annoy him.

"There's nothing to thank me for," he said.

Robin spoke calmly. "Oh, yes. It's cleared the air, you see. I feel better about it, knowing you don't want me to know."

John Blount saw Robin's eyes go slowly dark, as they often did. He turned away from his father, smiling. He looked ages old and perfectly self-possessed. A feeling of bafflement bore in on John Blount, and his pulse quickened in a sort of helpless fury.

He did not show it, however. Instead, he said, holding his voice even, "Well, let's leave it that way then. I'll try to get over your not trusting me, and you'll try to work it out for yourself, as sensibly as you can."

"That's fine by me," Robin said. He was a boy again, his voice sounding a trifle high, just past the breaking stage, and his body suddenly going gangling and young. He said, "Well, I better be going. It's football practice, this morning."

John Blount watched Robin go out of the room, and

called after him, "I'll be along later, to pick you up for lunch. We're going to Elaine's, remember?"

"Oh, gosh," Robin said, his voice softening with reluctant anticipation. His father's sister was quite a gal, but tiring. After a few hours with her he always felt sort of squeezed, like an orange after the juice has been pressed out. Besides, it would shorten the football, maybe. He would have to pull out of it, and shower and get ready for the fifty-mile drive to Benton. The long lashes were down over Robin's green eyes as he swung out of the house into the damp autumn air. His football sweater dragged from his arm, as he started to run towards the school.

Chapter 2

John Blount stood quietly where he was when Robin went out of the room. He was remembering, with pain and shame, but no compunction. What he had done, he had done because it had seemed the right thing; and if a man does that, there is never any reason for regret. He had dismissed the nurse afterward and paid her an enormous sum to keep quiet. He had no reason to think she would ever say anything. In fact, he did not know whether or not she was still alive. It had happened fifteen years ago. He even had difficulty in remembering her name. As he stood there, he made an impatient mental stab at finding the name in his mind, but it evaded him, and he abandoned the attempt.

The doctor was dead, definitely dead, and he admitted it was a relief, and best too, for everybody. He admitted to himself that he had wished the man to die, and that his long, saturnine face had haunted him for years, but that was over. Unconsciously, reviewing these things, John Blount's

muscles relaxed, so that he stood less straight, and his mouth loosened from its tension. He looked down at the table, felt for a cigarette and lighted it. He sat down again where he had been sitting, deep in the armchair with its modern slide-back, and pushed it into a comfortable position.

And then Emily. She was dead too. He had loved his wife, because she had been the only person in his life who had belonged to him completely, loved him inordinately, and been utterly obedient, not only to his desire for her, but also to the life he ordained for her. She had had no life of her own when he married her, and she was therefore able to fit into his with soft complacency. Not that Emily had not had a firm little character. John Blount would not have been able to stand living with an unintelligent or weak woman, but Emily had been, when he first met her, like a photographic plate, waiting for someone to make an impression on it. It had been thrilling and exciting, and also heady, even to him, to find the perfect mate—a reflection of himself.

Yes, he had loved his wife, and because of that, he had given in to her when she asked him to go through the farce of pretending she had borne a baby, when she could not have one. It had cost him money; for the doctor, who had merely connived, made visits when visits were necessary to fool the neighbors; and for the nurse, who did not know at first that the baby wasn't Emily's, but who overheard a telephone conversation at the wrong time and came to John Blount in a blackmailing mood.

He remembered perfectly how the phone conversation had gone.

"But, sweet, you can't change your mind now," he had said to Rowena, "the thing's done. The baby's in Emily's arms now. It's hers."

The silence after that had made him ask anxiously, "Are you there, darling?"

When she said, faintly, "yes," he had sighed with relief,

and said quickly, "Listen, Rowena, you're just having a reaction. You know it's best all round; we've been over all that. You don't want the child, and you know I'll see to it that you see him from time to time; and you know, remember, that it's far, far better for him than if you brought up a bastard."

Afterwards, he had been sorry he had used that word.

He never heard from Rowena again. He searched for her, made extensive enquiries. She had gone. And after a while, his longing for her dimmed, and he got to the point of considering Rowena an unnatural mother, and that it had all turned out for the best.

Emily, of course, thought the baby was merely a child ready for adoption; she never discovered that Robin was her husband's son.

For some time, John Blount resisted the creeping knowledge that Robin did not like Emily, that he resented her, and that he merely tolerated her. The baby had an uncanny expression in its eyes, and it had taken John Blount a year or two to get to love it. And then, his possessiveness took shape. The child turned out to be very bright, almost too bright. The doctor advised not pushing it, not letting Robin overtax his strength, mentally or physically.

Once John had asked the man, worriedly, if Robin was all right in the head, and the doctor had merely smiled that long, lean smile, and looked back at John with contempt. He had needed the money the Blount fortunes had been able to give him, because his sister was dying of cancer. He was merely a poor country physician and could not otherwise have afforded the care required to make her last days comfortable. But he did not need to look anything but how he felt, and that was definitely contemptuous, not so much about substituting the baby, but because of the way it had been done. He had no patience with people who bothered inordinately about the impression they made on other people. And for a man in John Blount's position to go to all

that trouble to make it seem that his wife had had a child seemed ridiculous, even wrong.

He had died of a heart attack, but the sister still lived in the expensive sanitorium, and it turned out that the progress of her cancer had been controlled and that she might live for a long time. In his heaven, the doctor, whose name John Blount never forgot—Michael Downs— would, John Blount supposed, look down on the sanitorium with a certain satisfaction. He too had done something worth while for someone he loved.

No, John had no sense of having done anything out of the ordinary. The baby had made Emily happy until she died, in spite of its, to John, apparent and obvious indifference to the woman who acted the part of its mother. Emily had seemed perfectly satisfied with Robin's lisping coldness, his avoidance of her caresses, and his aloof, appraising look as he surveyed her. She thought with calm sureness that it was because the baby had had what she called "cold" parents, and her whole thought and ambition was, gradually, to soften Robin into a fine and humane man. When they adopted a second child, a girl, two years later, Emily accepted her too, with the same calm.

It was too bad that Emily had to die, John Blount was thinking, his face gone sombre and sad. Emily had looked so young and pretty and chic. He had bought her everything she asked for, even when it was unsuitable to her, and she threw the things away with a childish lack of appreciation of their value. Even this prodigality pleased John Blount, although it did violence to his own sound and hearty respect for the material.

The only time he had put his foot down was when Emily had wanted to dress Robin in sissy clothes, silk shirts and such. Robin was a healthy child, a little thin perhaps, but strong and wiry. He got into the usual amount of trouble and made the usual stinks and messes. He was popular with his friends and showed early signs of leadership, which John Blount watched with interest and an inward preening. A

chip off the old block. It was only when he thought of Rowena, and that was seldom, that John Blount had an uneasy feeling that Robin was not so much his son as hers. There was something uncannily nostalgic in some of his gestures—a lift of the head, a movement of the long hands, the inner grace, a sort of second sense before the event.

There was the time when he had taken Robin to the circus, his first one. Emily stayed home with the baby, Mandy. They left her sitting on her chromium chair with the down mattress, wheeled into the shade on the terrace, with Pooter hovering about to get her tea or another magazine. The circus was a famous one, and John Blount had looked forward to going with Robin. Emily had insisted on Robin taking his sweater, "in case of draughts," and Robin, with a glance at his father, had surreptitiously left it on top of the stone staircase in front of the house. This had pleased John. He said, "You shouldn't have done that," but he liked the glow of being a conspirator with his son, and he felt glad about it.

In any case, it was a terribly hot day, one of Montreal's summer sizzlers. They had gone in the small car to Sherbrooke, had lunch in the local hotel, and afterwards drove to the outskirts of the city where the circus was being held.

It wasn't until they were almost there and could see the tents and hear the music, that John noticed that Robin was sitting very quietly and still, not like himself. His face was pale, and John wondered uneasily if the hotel goulash had disagreed with him. He said,

"Tummy-ache, Rob?"

Robin shook his head. His hand was on the top of the car door, and John saw that the knuckles were white. Robin said, "D'you mind if I don't go in with you? I'll wait here."

John got out of the car, annoyed. He said, "I won't have you developing whimsiness, Robin. We've come all this way to go to the circus. What in darnation is the matter with you now?"

But Robin did not answer. He was staring, with what seemed to be fear, at the front of the big tent. His eyes were dark, and he had what John had begun to think was a "queer" expression, one that appeared too often, these days. He must be firm about it. He said, impatiently, "Come along, Robin. I've got the parking ticket. We'll be late. Hurry up!"

Robin shook his head, and when John resorted to taking him bodily out of the car and trying to drag him along, Robin had made a scene, yelling that he wouldn't go inside the tent, and he didn't wanna go inside the tent, and he hated the tent, and so on. So much so, that John Blount finally gritted his teeth, and drove them both home in angry silence, aware that there was nothing of the guilty small child in Robin's attitude, or anything he could feel it right to punish him for. After all, he simply hadn't wanted to go inside the tent. Well, children have funny notions, and he, John, would have to find out what this one was about, and fix it by direct action as soon as possible. But he was angry and fussed by Robin's strength, and he resented being beaten by it.

At Marieville, between Sherbrooke and Montreal, they stopped for an ice cream at a roadway stand. The radio was blaring out that there had been a terrible accident at the circus, that the tent had collapsed, killing some people and injuring many.

John Blount had never really assessed that circus affair, and Robin's part in it. He was thinking about it now however. He sat up in the reclining chair, and it snapped him forward rather too suddenly. The awkward motion was like his mood and his thoughts and his memories. Unrhythmic and not too pleasant. He eased out of the chair, trying not to notice that, these days, it was getting a little more stiffly difficult to do. He straightened, and stretched and looked at his watch. Eleven-thirty. Robin's football practice would be well under way. In another hour, he would get the car, put Robin's bag in it, with his own, and start for Benton

where his sister Elaine lived. It would be nice to be with Elaine. She admired him so much, and a man's family were best at certain times, when old memories got out of hand. It was the conversation just now with Robin that had done it, awakened old sleeping dogs better let lie. Yes, a visit with Elaine would calm him.

There were times when a man liked being fussed over, and he got only paid fussing these days. He saw to it that his servants fussed, nicely, of course, but fussed. Pooter's deferential manner pleased John; after all a man has his place, and Pooter knew his. He was definitely the servant type. Why not? A man has his work, and a servant's work was as useful as any other. The house was well run by Pooter and his wife, who were very highly paid, and by a niece of theirs who came in by the day, to do housework. There would never come a time when any servant of his would call John Blount ungenerous. He believed that a workman was worthy of his hire, and sometimes a bit more, maybe, for loyalty and good manners.

John Blount straightened, put down the cigarette and ground it out in the cloisonné ash-tray. He must get those damn ash-trays put away and have proper ones, the sort with grooves in the side. He went to the ribbon bell-pull and jerked at it.

Pooter appeared quickly. He had been cleaning the hall, as it happened, but it seemed to John Blount another symbol of the perfection with which he ran his life; he loathed inefficiency, and all the bother people made these days about getting service seemed to him to be balderdash. He spoke to Pooter, in a man-to-man voice, "I've been meaning to speak to you about these ash-trays, Pooter. Will you put them away somewhere—I believe they're very valuable—and get me some big ones, with grooves. Mrs. Blount—" He broke off. He had been going to say, "Mrs. Blount hadn't any sense about these things," but stopped in time. He shifted it to, "Mrs. Blount liked these, so be careful of them; but get us some man-size ones to replace them."

Pooter's cream-coloured face did not move. He merely said, "Certainly, sir, what color would you prefer? Perhaps green? To go with the drapes?"

"That'll be fine," John said. "Ask your wife. . . er. . . Jane. . . to help you pick them out, but don't let her, er. . . influence you."

He laughed jovially, bluffly, and Pooter smiled correctly.

Their eyes met for an awkward moment. It is always awkward when two human beings get too close, get closer than the pattern warrants; and John Blount had set the pattern for Pooter from the start. The pattern weaved around them as they stood there, two men trying to fit into an artificial channel carved by the mental attitude of one of them. Then Pooter turned away, but not before John Blount noticed that the man's eyes were blue, and that he had a gentle mouth. It was the first time that Pooter's eyes and his mouth had intruded on John Blount, and it made him a little uncomfortable.

He said, in the slightly nasal voice with which he addressed his board meetings, "See to it at once, Pooter, will you, and get the best ones you can find. Go to Birks. Never mind the price. Just buy good ones."

Pooter stopped for the correct instant at the door, before going out. "Good ones. Certainly, Mr. Blount, nothing else would have occurred to me," he said.

The door closed behind him, shutting out the baffling effect of his words and his smile.

Chapter 3

As Robin swung along the road, he reread in his mind the letter he had received yesterday from his young sister,

Mandy. She said in the letter, "Tell Daddy I'll be home for Thanksgiving." Robin thought, gee, I forgot, I'll have to remember tonight.

He was fond of Mandy, who had been projected into his life at an awkward moment, when he had measles. The snooty adoption place had sent Mandy along just as the doctor was leaving, so Mandy had to stay, and afterwards she got the measles too. Poor kid, Robin thought, smiling.

She had not minded getting the measles. She was a gay child, always with a grin about some sort of devilment she had thought up. Robin remembered the time she came into his room just as he was finishing hanging all his shoes by their laces on the prongs of the new tie rack his mother had put on the door of his cupboard.

Mandy stopped short, and her mouth dropped open for a moment. Then she said, "Where've you put your ties?"

Robin laughed, and pointed. The ties were all neatly hung on a wire clothes hanger in the cupboard.

Mandy said, "Now you'll get a pot."

It was wonderful how quick she always was to get the point. This time she had hit it right on the nose. Robin had said to himself, "all this stooping round in the dark for my sneakers."

Robin had found out early, that invention was far more fun and practical too, than using things as intended. He was forever substituting one gadget for another instead of using them properly, or not using something because the right object did not come immediately to hand; like the piece of broken plate glass he put on his desk so that books would slide along it more easily. It wasn't until the maid cut her hand that Mrs. Blount discovered the glass on the desk.

Robin had been terribly sorry and contrite about the cut hand. It seemed that one was forever causing hurt to other people without knowing it. He began to think about that.

Mrs. Blount was nice about the glass, and so was the maid. John Blount, however, was angry. He said,

"Why in darnation didn't you come to me for a glass top if you wanted one?"

"It wouldn't have been the same," Robin started to say, and did not say it. His father would not have understood the joy he had felt in merely finding the glass in the field, bringing it up to his room, and shoving the books about on it. Underneath the glass, the unslidy top of the desk showed through, thwarted and beaten. No, it would have been impossible to explain a subtlety like that to his father.

But Mandy understood such things. She was a great kid. She aided and abetted Robin in his "slippies" as they called the things Robin had fun discovering.

Nevertheless, Robin was glad to have a new glass top for his desk, and pleased when his father said, "It's a damn good idea, at that," and had one put on his own library table. But Robin never did explain to his father about the frustration that went on under the glass of his own desk, nor the pleasure it gave him in having overcome the unsliding-ness.

Robin was almost at the football field now. He could hear the fellows shouting. Mandy would be home in time for the match next Saturday; that'd be swell. His eyes were bright as he walked over to the bench where the coats were piled and put his on top. He pulled the sweater over his head with a graceful movement, and swung his arms down into the sleeves. There was quite a bite in the air. He breathed heavily out of his mouth to see, and, yes, there was a faint steam coming out of his mouth, enough to make him think of hockey.

As he walked over to the coach for orders, he was thinking that, this winter, he was going to get to be goal-keeper, if he tried very hard.

The coach said, "I'm going to try you out as back."

Robin stared at him for a moment. Then he laughed, and

the coach said sharply, "What's funny about that? Better snap into this game, Blount, I've noticed you slacking lately."

It wasn't true. Robin never slacked. He had just been thinking in the future, that was all, he had been thinking about goal-keeping on a glittering green ice rink. Robin flushed and a quick-tempered reply flung to his lips and spilled out.

"I thought you told me last time I was good. I thought you said I'd make a good back."

His voice sounded loud, to himself. He snatched it back.

"Oh. O.K. O.K.," he said, hating it that now it sounded sulky. Why was it that a guy was always appearing not what went on inside? He started to think about that.

He ran out onto the field, before the coach could tick him off again, made a brilliant catch almost at once, and went on thinking about hockey. It was possible to do two things at once. This proved it. A feeling of exhilaration filled him. An hour went by before anything special happened. Then he saw the pass just in time to run backwards, watching the ball slowing, slowing in the air, and then diving downward into his hands. It tucked against his chest as he ran with it down the sideline, swerving sharply to avoid Tomson who tried ineptly to intercept him. The ball felt good against his chest as he fell on it behind the goal line, and the boys piled on top of him in a flurry of too-late interference. The coach was standing over Robin, as the boys took themselves off him.

The coach was grinning. He said, "If you continue to do that, fella, it'll be O.K. with me."

Who cares about you? It's doing it for the school that matters, Robin thought, but he grinned up at the coach, relieved that the brief feud was over. He loathed disharmony of any kind; he was thinking it would be O.K. with the school, if he got to be good.

The coach said, "That'll be all, kids." He turned and

started walking off the field. Robin, still holding the football, began to follow the coach, when he noticed the fellows looking at him, in a bunch, like a still-life, sort of frozen in inanimity.

It seemed to Robin that they stood there for minutes, looking at him before Jack Lowden said, gruffly,

"It'll be O.K. with us too, Blount, if you do that from time to time."

Jack Lowden was the captain of the team, and spoke with authority. He grinned at Robin, and Robin met his eyes. They were friendly and more than that, they held a new respect. Well, if people wanted to respect you because you did things well, it was up to them. Robin grinned back at Lowden, and the still-life melted into the usual activity of boys rather reluctantly breaking up after the fierce concentration of sport. Robin and Jack Lowden walked off the field, side by side.

Robin said, diffidently, "Maybe I can be good, maybe I can't. That touch wasn't an example. The ball just fell at me."

"You were there, ready," Lowden said, thoughtfully. "I've been noticing that lately, the guys who're on the spot usually get the ball; but it isn't as easy as all that."

Robin looked at Lowden sideways. He had thought Lowden rather stiff, even priggish. He was head boy, and good at most of his subjects, especially math. But at this moment, he was captain of the football team and, by golly, making more sense than the coach. He understood how it could happen that a guy might think faster than other guys.

"It's up to us to win the game on Saturday," Robin said, "my sister's going to be here. She'll ride me if we don't."

"Mandy?" Lowden slowed his pace. Robin, looking at him, thought he saw a faint flush on Lowden's cheek-bones. They plunged out of their sweaters, joining the noise of the gang as they all ran into the school to the showers in the locker rooms.

Robin was thinking that Mandy was only thirteen, and

here she was making a fellow like Lowden blush at the mention of her name! Gee-golly. He would have to look into this, maybe there was something to girls he had missed. All those books; all those miles of well-conceived words; the romantic poetry of guys like Shelley and Byron—all that. There must be something to it. Meanwhile, there was Mandy to watch out for, look after. He was Mandy's brother. It was his job, his especially, because of they were so close.

Robin remembered his father saying to him only the other day, "For heaven's sake, Rob, don't go on saying 'because of.' It's one of those vulgarisms that get into you. *Stop* it!"

John Blount had gone to Oxford to finish his education and had come back with a pronounced English accent. This, he had stuck to until he had gone into the investment business and discovered that it lost him customers; besides it was phoney, not Canadian. One thing about John Blount, he hated anything phoney. Yet, he had fooled everyone about Robin being Emily's son.

Robin was thinking about his father as he showered. He decided to stop saying "because of" just to please him. He could feel the pressure of his father's hand on his shoulder just now, when they were talking. He pushed aside the memory of their discussion about the christening. This wasn't the time to think about that. He had to hurry now, to get ready to be picked up to go to Aunt Elaine's. It was funny, the way the fellows were; even Nelson had said "sorry" when they bumped into each other trying to get into one shower. Nelson had backed out, grinning, leaving the shower to Robin. It wasn't like Nelson at all, it certainly wasn't. Yesterday, Nelson would have pushed Robin aside, would have said, "Hey, who're you shoving?"

It was since that touchdown. You do something sudden like catch a leather object in your hands, hug it to your chest, run with it at the right time and in the right place, and fall onto mud with it, and hey-nonny—eyes changed

their way of looking at you, voices that had been rude got friendly, the whole future brightened, widened, opened up.

Robin ducked out of the shower and grinned at Nelson, who was waiting, naked, outside the curtain. Nelson looked funny, standing there without any clothes on, grinning obsequiously. Robin wanted to say, "Oh, blah, blah." He disliked the change in Nelson. It wasn't founded on the right things. Lowden was different. He just hadn't been sure about Robin before. Nelson never would be sure, about anything. He would just fumble round.

Robin could hear the horn of the new Jaguar outside the lockers—deep and sonorous, rich, opulent, saying, "I am fast, very fast, and very beautiful, and very difficult to come by. I am the new, big Jaguar. Don't keep me waiting, with your petty little dressing."

Robin rushed into his clothes. When he got outside, he could see his father, with a pipe in his mouth and handsome tweeds on his handsome form, chatting with Lowden at the gate of the school. He looked splendid and powerful, like the Jaguar.

Robin ran hastily down the path, and stopped beside his new friend and the Jaguar and John Blount. Definitely, it was the Jaguar that dominated. Lowden was talking about the car, admiring it, his eyes nicely envious. His father was a lawyer, distinguished, but with a career that had been interrupted by a war. His kind of money didn't run to Jaguars. Gee, I wish Lowden could have our Jaguar, Robin thought, feeling sorry about it. He would have preferred a less ostentatious car, so that porters wouldn't rush around, or doormen drool. He hated the look on faces that rushed and drooled because of a great beast like the Jaguar.

"Well, Robin, my boy," John Blount said, glad to see Robin and showing it. "I've been hearing things about you."

"Oh," Robin said, blushing. So, it could be a girl, or it could be a ball in one's arms. Either way, a guy had to go and blush!

He climbed into the car, throwing his bag into the back seat. Now for Aunt Linnie. His face looked closed up as they drove away, leaving Lowden gazing after them.

Chapter 4

Linnie LooGuaj stood looking out at the dullness of the trees. It was a very uninspiring day, and Linnie was trying to put some zip into her thoughts, knowing that her brother and nephew would be here any moment, and she wanted to get the most out of it. She always instinctively slanted her acceptance of any situation that way, to get the most out of it. It wasn't consciously egoistic, and in any case Linnie gave as much as she got, often more. It was just that she had reached another period of approaching boredom, when she would have to take off from Benton or die.

Linnie looked around at the room behind her. Into it she had at one time poured all the artistic and practical creativeness she possessed. She had lived in a great many places, making them home in each case. Adaptability was in the markings on her palm, in her personality, and in her laughter. Too adaptable, she said, often. If I hadn't been, it would have been better. I wouldn't have ended up like this, stuck. Not that Linnie LooGuaj was, or could be "stuck." It was just that she felt she might have done something more amusing and more useful if life had treated her differently, and if she herself had handled it better. Linnie faced herself honestly, even though no one ever discovered this. People thought her cold, or complacent, or arrogant, or charming, or warm, or friendly, as circumstances and Linnie's temperament shifted. And it shifted like the breeze in March. It was just that she was an extremely intelligent

woman who had never taken the trouble to stop her heart throbbing long enough to think about what she wanted most.

Living, she had thought, was enough. She had lived high, wide, and handsome, and she took some pride in the fact that it had all been done with finesse, discretion, and artistry, hurting no one, and leaving no stink behind that she could think of.

Her eyes, deep blue and wide apart, with very long lashes, swept this room in which she stood with concentration. She always had to concentrate deliberately in order to see material things one by one, such as the contents of a room. To her, a room was a picture, a vista, a background for the people in it. One could feel at once, by the arrangment of a room exactly what the owners were like. It did not matter in the least to Elaine LooGuaj how much things cost, or if someone had interlaced Messrs. Woolworth with the fourteenth century, put a nice glass copy of an Etruscan vase on top of a cabinet pocked with the usage of centuries. If they went together, they went together. One's own sense of the fitness of things was all that was needed to accept or repudiate. Linnie's values were concretely and stubbornly aesthetic and not materialistic.

These things, she was thinking, aren't as easy as people imagine. I've had my fights to stick to it. She walked slowly over to the fireplace, and stood looking up at the very fine Daumier over it. No one had ever sold Linnie a "bad example." The face in the picture was serene, with the calm of another era. Linnie's gaze became at once contemplative, and the boredom she recognized as being rather worse than usual swept through her and made her shiver. She had said, when she bought this house outside Benton, that she would settle down and become a "proper" Canadian citizen. "All this gadding about," she had said, wearily, "where has it got me?"

That had been after she had left Jan LooGuaj in a permanent rage. He had thought it temporary, however, and

for quite a long time he tried to get her back. But Linnie had had enough. The marriage with Jan had lasted much longer than the other, almost ten years, so she knew when she had had enough and must stop. Linnie had left Tunis, where Jan had had a strange kind of job to do with wines, which certainly he knew about, and come back to Canada for the "last time," to "stay," she said, and bought this house.

She had lived in it for about fifteen months, all told, in the six years that had passed since her flight from Tunis. It was a truly beautiful house, and Linnie had been happy in it, but that sort of happiness, to Linnie, came and went, mostly going.

The room *was* lovely. Linnie stooped and put a match to the logs, watched them catch, and drew the swinging black mesh across the front of the fireplace. As she crossed the room she could hear the crackle, and it cheered her. It sounds so new and fresh, like Spring, she thought, hating the drab October day outside. She kept her eyes from the window, where the great trees stood outlined, dripping their last leaves. Linnie was for beginnings, not endings.

She ran her fingers lightly over the top of her satiny bleached-mahogany desk, looked at them, and grimaced faintly—but Mary was pretty good at keeping things beautiful, and it was a big house. Linnie thought, not for the first time, I love Mary and what she does for me, and I like Higgins too, and I think they're very kind to work for me as though they like it. She was smiling as she drew out a piece of tissue from her pocket and dusted the top of the desk, moving the Tanagra figurine and the wooden Buddha from Bali to do it. Each object meant something to Linnie, something vital or amusing, such as the glass fisherman's ball between the André Gide and the *Alice in Wonderland* in the bookshelf. The ball had floated all the way across the sea from Portugal, where it had been empty, light, and useful, and found its way onto a beach on an island in the Bahamas, where Linnie had picked it up.

She went over to the glass ball now, and took its warm

unevenness into her hand. The Gide promptly fell sideways in an undignified way that made Linnie laugh aloud.

She looked down at the big book, and said, "Oh, you, you know very well you never needed to be propped up, like me." But the thought troubled her. She passed the glass ball lightly from hand to hand, thinking. The room was very still, except for the ardent crackling of the fire. Linnie stood in the shadow of the bookshelves which lined the wall, and the seawater in the glass ball swept mysteriously round and round as her hands moved it. In her feminine tweeds, amythysty and greyish, with the huge gold and amethyst earrings, flat and opulent at the side of her cheekbones, she looked like the Buddha from Bali, sitting easily and stiffly in his pose on the desk. Her hands, slim and restless, felt the glass of the ball as they turned it about. She looked down at her fingers, spread around it, and noticed that they were getting white again, losing their tan. She suddenly put the ball back with one hand, and snuggled the Gide against it in their original positions.

Propping. Well, everyone needed it, and she was quite sure, now that she had stopped to think, that Gide, whom she admired very much as a writer, had needed propping as much as anyone else. She felt better now, having got to that point, about Gide. One forgot values in a place like Benton, Ontario. It was good, to forget values sometimes, to vegetate; but one must be careful not to let the hiatus last.

I shall begin to plan after they've gone, Sunday night, she thought, turning once more to face the trees outside the window. Her whole being had taken on a new glow. Where shall I go, this time, she thought, her mind, with its vast experience of travel, suddenly roaming in every direction, making a series of small and enticing pictures. The deep blue of an undulating and gentle sea, behind the curving line of a beach that smelled of coral and coquinas. Waving

branches of oleander, blazing fields of tulips. The exciting slope of a great mountain side dotted and friezed and redolent with jonquils and hyacinths. Small, chic beaches, with cabanas and umbrellas and careless people with gorgeous bodies, and the smell of gin. The relief of luxury after a war. The booming forties. These tiny, clear pictures filled Linnie LooGuaj's eyes with dreaming, so that they looked wider and bluer and more intense than ever. Her full, well-shaped lips were smiling.

She had tried living in Montreal at first, after leaving Jan. But no one could pronounce her name, even when she tried to make it easier by saying casually, "Oh, well then, just call me baggage." After a month or so at the Ritz, and never getting parcels, or telegrams, or phone messages, she decided to live in the country somewhere, and call herself luggage. Mrs. Luggage. No one in the country would think this funny, she imagined. People were simpler outside cities. It was like Jan, she thought, to make me think of myself as excess baggage. But then, it was only in Europe that one called it baggage. "I know it's a hell of a name," she said, crossly, just before leaving the Ritz, "but it happens to be mine, and I can't help it."

Before that, she had been Mrs. Foster Howard. It was her first try at marriage, and Foster had been a playboy of the first water. She had thought, at twenty-five, that such a life would be fun, and it would have been perhaps, if the war hadn't come along to spoil Europe for people like Linnie. Certainly, Foster Howard did not fit anywhere else but Europe. He simply loathed New York where they tried to find solace. Foster had been intelligent, underneath, but money had ruined him at the open doorway of a scientific career; and after a few sporadic tries to keep the special mental mechanics necessary for such work oiled, he gave it up, and degenerated so rapidly under a second-rate life of luxury that Linnie had to divorce him.

Then, light-hearted at getting rid of Foster, she started going about with Jan LooGuaj, but soon after her marriage, she discovered that Jan had married her for the money she had insisted upon getting from Foster Howard at the time of the divorce. Her lawyer had thought her hard on Foster, but Linnie's mouth, during that period, took on a firmness that it had lacked before. Less money would be good for Foster, and more would be nice for Linnie. And so it happened. Foster Howard, balked of his night life, and short of ready cash, took a science chair in a small university, and made good. Very good. People were still talking about his work in nuclear physics, and his small but important discovery of a new kind of ice.

Or something like that, Linnie would say, trying not to think it funny as the dickens that Foster, who had clinked so much ice in tumblers in his day, would be the one to do something new to it.

So, when she discovered that Jan LooGuaj had had a mistress all along, even during their engagement, she got out of that marriage too, more generously, and with less publicity.

By this time, Linnie had learned quite a lot about the law, if not about marriage. It had amused her, even in the midst of her heartbreak about Foster, that the word "mistress" was still used, legally, to describe the gal in the case. Linnie had never fussed about how people's minds worked, but it interested her vitally to discover motives and reasons. People's minds were a mass of emotion, she found out early in life; it was discouraging how many people simply did not know what made them do what they did.

Linnie heard a car crunching up her driveway, and turned to go to the door; but Higgins was there before her. She smiled at him. He looked so nice in the beige coat she had brought him from London, and so satisfyingly correct. Higgins went to the door, and opened it before John Blount and Robin had got out of the Jaguar.

"I heard the car, sir," Higgins said, respectfully.

Linnie went past Higgins, and down the steps, and to the side of the great Jaguar. She said,

"Royalty always gets greeted outside the house, in the cold, damp air, no matter what."

She laughed, and added, "All three of you are the handsomest things I've seen for a long, long time."

Robin came close to her, and their eyes met in a clash, not so much of antagonism as of mutual recognition of dynamic qualities which might disagree. Linnie kissed Robin lightly, and gave his arm an affectionate pressure.

"What's all this about a third person?" John Blount closed the door of the Jaguar and strode forward, with his purposeful walk.

"You and Robin and the Jaguar," Linnie said, with her lips in a half-smile.

Robin gave a small snort of appreciative laughter, as they went inside and Higgins closed the door behind them.

Chapter 5

"I've invited guests to meet you," Linnie said brightly, as they walked along the tiled hall. It was the tone she used when she wasn't sure. She looked down at the tiles, which were a beautiful pale orchid colour, and had been brought all the way from a small place in the island of Mallorca. Some of them were slightly damaged, but this improved the general effect.

Robin also looked down at the tiles. He appreciated the colour, the exoticism of the taste that had imported them, and the originality of the idea, but he was keenly aware

that his aunt wasn't sure, and this made him nervous. Who the dickens had she asked in?

Linnie said, "You don't know them. They're new here, and they invited me to a party last month, which I owe them."

"Good lord, they sound ghastly," John Blount said, unexpectedly, and laughed. He added, "Social creditors are usually ghastly."

"Don't be rude, darling," Linnie said. "And also, I think you'll like her."

He raised his eyebrows, and followed her into the living-room. He did not say anything more, but walked about looking at his sister's room, which he vaguely disapproved of, without knowing why. He had once told her, because she had pressed him, that he considered it "arty," but after the ensuing argument, had retreated from this verdict. No, it wasn't that, exactly; a better word would be "unsuitable," and this he had stuck to, politely but firmly.

Robin said, "Hey, new gewgaw!" He went over to the portable bar which Linnie had recently acquired, and studied it.

"It's American," Linnie said, "isn't it a darling?"

"It's neat," Robin said.

He slid behind the bar, and started to shake an imaginary cocktail mixer up and down, making buzzing noises.

"You sound more like bees than anything else," Linnie said. She squeezed behind with him, and gave him a hug.

She said, with one of her rare impulses toward expressed affection, "I shall begin to call you Robin and not Bobby any more. You're getting to be far too handsome and mysterious for Bobby."

Robin kissed her cheek, returning the affection. "You smell swell," he said, and slid out from behind the bar on the other side. There were sounds from the hallway, and he added, behind his hand, in a mock aside, "Hark! the She."

John Blount said, "S-sh."

A tall woman was coming into the room, followed by a child. The child was also tall, but there was something so feminine about her that she appeared graceful. The woman was saying gaily,

"Oh, what a charming room! Oh, what, oh, what a charming *room*."

Aw gee, the heck, Robin thought, and remained close to the window, putting it off. Linnie did the honors charmingly from behind the bar, her hands busy with glasses and ice cubes. Robin felt the silken texture of the curtain against his hand. It gave with his hand. Behind the soft fullness, he could feel the wall. A strange sensation was creeping over Robin, one with which he was familiar. It always meant something, although sometimes nothing happened to prove this, until much later. The wall felt cool, through the curtain, but suddenly Robin took away his hand from it as though it had burnt him, and a desire to push it outward was strong in him. Walls. Walls—they closed in; they were terrible.

He came away from the wall, and faced the tall woman and the daughter.

Linnie was saying "Mrs. Felter, this is Robin, my nephew; and Hermes, this is Robin. Robin, you and Hermes will have a lot in common. She wins all sorts of prizes at school."

Robin smiled, but his eyes were still saying, aw gee, the heck. He came forward and shook two hands, the large, firm one of Mrs. Felter, and the small damp one of the daughter. From the touch of the child's hand, Robin knew she was nervous, and hating it as much as he.

He smiled again, for her, and said, "It's a gross libel, about me I mean, winning prizes."

The feel of the wall was still in his hand after he relinquished the girl's. Unconsciously, he clenched both of his and opened them again, trying to rid himself of the wall.

Linnie was calling from behind the bar, where she had

made her famous rum swizzle. She handed the frosted glasses to her guests with ceremony, and to Hermes and Robin, tall orangeades. She came out from behind the bar and started a brittle but charming chitchat to get them together. She saw to it that her brother was seated on a large chesterfield with Mrs. Felter, and when this was accomplished, she sat down between Robin and Hermes on the fireside bench. She said,

"Mrs. Felter has that lovely big house on the other side of the valley, Robin, the one we can just see, now that the leaves are off the trees. You can't see the factory. It's nearer to town. Mrs. Felter's factory makes farm implements."

Robin heard his father say, "Well, is that so? A woman running a business like that!" There was admiration in his voice, and he was gazing at Mrs. Felter as though he was seeing something quite fascinating. Robin looked more closely at Mrs. Felter, while his aunt was drawing Hermes out. He saw that Mrs. Felter was more than he had at first thought; she had beautiful bronze hair, natural, he thought, and a nice mouth, full but firm. Her hands were large and capable, as were her feet, in handsome walking shoes with red soles. Shapely legs were crossed under a finely cut tweed skirt, and the scarf she wore carelessly tucked into the neck of her jacket had red in it to match the soles. There was a power and assurance in her that could be felt. It wasn't unpleasant, and Robin liked her.

She was saying, "When Hank, my husband, died, events just happened to push me into carrying on the business while we reorganized; and then I liked it so much, and we all got on so well, that I've kept it up. Of course, I have wonderful people behind me, loyal and interested. That makes the difference."

"But making farm implements . . . a woman . . ."

Mrs. Felter interrupted John Blount. She spoke lightly. "A woman can learn as well as a man. I've learnt."

She's been saying that so much she trips up on it, Robin

was thinking. For the first time in his life, he was wondering what it would have been like to be a girl; and this made him turn back to Linnie and Hermes. But before he could get his thoughts started, Higgins was saying,

"Luncheon is served, madam."

The meal dragged for Linnie. Having made the effort to bring her brother and the very suitable Mrs. Felter together, she was bored with them both. She talked in a sprightly way to the two youngsters, but they, too, were getting on well together, and Linnie, after feeling some amusement at her own isolation, began to feel her restlessness return. I do so much for other people, she thought, I *understand* other people; now why can't I retire into some kind of quiet contentment at my age?

She wished they would hurry up with the delightful strawberry soufflé, so that they could go into the other room, or for a walk, or something.

"Women in Canada haven't even begun to emancipate themselves," Mrs. Felter said, as they pushed their chairs back and started to leave the room. "To me, it's just plain silly. I always had an exaggerated conception of big business. My father never took my mother into his confidence, and when I tried to make him tell me, he thought me queer and had me packed off to a finishing school in France."

She laughed, a little gruffly, remembering her ignorance, and its disappearance in the world of machinery into which her husband had taken her at their marriage.

"I don't say it's easy," she said, "but a woman, if she keeps her head, and realizes that men will forget she's a woman if she behaves sensibly, can compete in the market as well as any man. After all, this is 1958 and not the dark ages."

As she and John Blount disappeared into the small library to look up a book Linnie had told them about on the origin of trenchers, the three in the hall heard Mrs. Felter say, "I'm afraid you're old-fashioned."

"Pop isn't going to like that," Robin said, smiling.

The girl Hermes said suddenly, "I guess he is, old-fashioned, I mean. I heard him say to Mother he would hate to cope with a woman like her in a business deal."

Linnie laughed with them. "I'm no business woman," she said, "but I think a smart gal can outwit a smart man any day."

Oh, the heck with that stuff, Robin thought, silently. All this conflict stuff, where's it got us anyhow?

He said, "Mind if I go round and see old Roger?"

Before his aunt could suggest Hermes going with him, he opened the front door, and went out into the cold. The feel of the air might get rid of this sensation of the wall against his hand. He put his hands into his pockets, whistling as he went around the side of the house to the garage, where Roger would be.

But Roger wasn't there. He was having his meal in the kitchen with the three other servants. Robin looked in at the open garage door at the shiny car, and decided to take a walk. There was something he had to think about, and this was a good chance. It was this queer business of being afraid of some things and not of others. It was getting to be a nuisance, not knowing why.

He must think things out more. He was aware that on the surface, his mind worked well and quickly, but unconsciously he was beginning to be troubled at the superficiality of his thinking. It just didn't go deep enough. He started for the woods, brooding and confused.

The feel of the wall in his palms had disappeared, but the memory had not. He had spoken of this sort of fear to no one; and when he had tentatively asked questions of the other boys, they had not answered satisfactorily. For instance, he had once asked Zippy, the quiet-type kid next to him in school, if he ever felt scared, and Zippy had denied it, although it was obvious he was terrified of the thunder-

storm raging around the school at the time. Zippy had gone quite green, and Robin had seen sweat standing out on his freckled forehead; but Zippy had denied his fear. Why?

He had asked the same question of another of his pals in the Scouts, when once they had missed their way in the woods. That time, he too had felt fear and had said so. But never after that. The expression of forced contempt on the faces of his group had determined Robin on that point. The scoutmaster had told them to sit down and wait until they got their direction by calling to the others in the distance. It had worked; but the episode had made its mark on Robin, and as they ploughed their way towards the other scouts, his lips were tight with resentment. It hadn't meant that he was going into any ol' panic or something. It was only that he was scared, and said so.

Robin felt a little chilly in the woods as he walked. The sun was up there in the sky, veiled but present. The trees had shed most of their leaves, and his feet rustled cheerfully in them as he picked his way. There was a distinct sense of something in the woods. Sort of sad, he thought, and yet not quite sad, but maybe it was only the autumn. Yes, the relinquishment of life in the woods was strong in Robin. He sniffed hopefully at the air, but what he received was merely a whiff of dankness and desolation.

He looked up at the sun, noting its position carefully. After the time when they got half-lost in the woods up North, he always looked at the sun and marked the special trees and rocks in his mind. Anyhow, here the woods were safer, more surrounded by villages, and less dense. Up in the Laurentians, a hundred miles or so north of Montreal, you could get lost, and that meant lost, in the winkle of an eye. You could go on and on in the wrong direction and die, if you wanted to; before you even knew it.

Robin stopped walking. He looked at a great rock ahead

of him and went over to it. His hand pressed hard against the cold of the stone, asking for answers to his questions. The rock felt chilly and a little unfriendly, but Robin continued to lean against it. This fear stuff. Maybe he was a coward, maybe not. He was scared at first when he had to learn to swim. He had been frightened when his father taught him to ride. His heart had nearly burst out of his chest the first time he went down a fast and icy slope in a ski race. Those things, that sort of thing.

Yet it seemed to him queer that some of the guys had no trouble about telling lies, when it was to their advantage, that is, such as the time when someone stole the exam questions, and used them, and lied about it. In the first place, what was the fun of passing an exam you hadn't got in your head? He just couldn't see it.

That one, he had offered his father in the form of a casual question; and before he could stop it, the conversation got out of hand, and he told his father the whole story. He had never got over the way his father had looked at him and said, "Rob, there's one thing I won't stand, and that is if you turn out to be a prig."

A prig? To be certain-sure that it wasn't any good cheating?

Robin's hand on the rock suddenly vibrated. He forgot about the scene he was reliving, and took away his hand as if it had been burnt. Gee, what next? He laughed aloud, feeling lonely and rather silly; and then he put his hand back on the rock. This time, he felt it distinctly, the vibration. There was no mistake; and now Robin could hear a rumble, a powerful groaning, coming from everywhere. It wasn't sad, like the woods in your eyes, or the sound of the fallen leaves. No, this was a rumble like big machinery, down in the earth. It was quite loud and demanding. It said, "power, power, power." Over and over, so clearly that Robin said, aloud, "Well, so what? Everyone knows Canada's full of it, 'way down there."

His own voice wakened him from his absorption, giving him a shock. The words sounded bald and crude, while the rumble was magnificent. Robin felt his cheeks flush, and his whole body tingle. He was warm now, almost too warm. There was no longer a chill in the air, or in the rock. A new and clearer light was all over the woods. Just to make sure, he put his hand back on the rock, and there it was! Vibration! And still the rumbling, far away, deep down!

He turned and started stumbling and half-running out of the woods. When he could see the edge, and the roof of his aunt's garage, he stopped to get his breath. He looked down at his hand, but it was just his hand, a little grubby, and long, and usual. The flush had gone, and the feeling of warmth. He was, instead, chilly again.

He walked more slowly, and as he came out of the wood, he saw that Roger was backing a large car out of the garage. He caught sight of Robin, and saluted him both respectfully and jocularly.

"Hello, Mister Robin," he said, with accent on the "mister," because Robin had told him not too long ago to "can the Master Robin, will you, for Pete's sake!"

Robin called hello, and watched Roger's expert handling of Mrs. Felter's car. He followed the car around the house to the front steps, where Mrs. Felter and her daughter were standing waiting, flanked by Elaine and John Blount.

"Where *have* you been, Robin?" his aunt said, a little crossly, "you've been gone over an hour."

"Oh, no," Robin said quickly, "I . . ." He stopped, wondering if she could be saying something impossible, or if it were true.

He looked down at his watch. It was true; it was almost three-thirty. Gosh! He came forward, politely. He said,

"I'm very sorry, I . . ." Once more, he stopped. He had been going to say, "I got lost, or something," but caught himself up. Why say a fool thing, and untrue, at that?

He said, "There was a rumbling in the woods, quite a rumbling. I guess I listened to it longer than I thought."

John Blount said sharply, "Really, Robin, a rumbling! What an excuse!"

But Mrs. Felter was laughing in a pleased way, looking intently at Robin. She said, smiling,

"I had no idea my factory could be heard as far away as this." Gee, she means it, Robin thought, she actually and definitely means she believes I heard her ol' factory in the woods.

His face looked closed-up at once, but his manners held. He merely smiled, and came forward to shake hands, and say good-bye.

He said, "I'm sorry I stayed off there so long, Mrs. Felter. I . . . gee, it was awfully rude of me."

He looked at the child apologetically, but she was standing close to her mother, and half hidden. She smiled shyly at Robin, without rancour, as though she was relieved not to have had to make conversation with a strange boy. Her eyes were a greeny-blue, Robin noticed that much.

"Mrs. Felter has invited us down for next week-end, Rob," his father said, and by his voice, Robin knew the invitation had been accepted.

Oh, the heck, he thought, but he kept on smiling stiffly until the car had gone. Then he said, "Oh, why the heck did you hafta go and do that? It's the football match, and Mandy will be home."

But John Blount said, "Mrs. Felter and her daughter are coming to the match, and we will all drive back here afterwards."

He sounded pleased and a little pompous. It had been some time since a woman had made such a fuss over him. Elaine LooGuaj and Robin looked at each other. Both of them, behind John Blount's back, smiled, but Linnie's was a smile of triumph at her little plot and its success, and

Robin's was a grin. Both smiles meant understanding of John Blount, an affectionate and plotting understanding.

Chapter 6

As Rowena Barrett came round the bend in the stairs, she could hear voices. They came from above her in the corridor, and were quite clear. Men's voices.

One was saying, "It's worth trying, isn't it?"

There was a fainter voice saying, "But if a thing's impossible, why try it?"

As Rowena came up steadily—because why shouldn't she get to her room as quickly as she wanted to, and why should she be so sensitive about interrupting?—the first voice said, "I dislike being trite, but nothing's impossible." The voice was right above Rowena now, and it sounded a little impatient.

I agree with that thoroughly, Rowena thought, and came on them round the top of the stairs. They fell silent at once as she appeared, both rather staring at her. They were so surprised by her appearance there that they did not move out of her way very quickly, so she paused with an oh-do-let-me-pass expression.

At once, the taller man moved, stood back against the wall, and put his hand on the arm of the other to make him do the same. It was a narrow hallway, in spite of the enormous price they all paid for their rooms in this little hotel on this little exclusive and precious island in the Bahamian Sea.

Rowena had taken out her door-key on the way upstairs,

and very firmly she inserted it into the big keyhole and pushed to the right as she had learned, in three weeks, to do. The key squeaked and turned, and the door fell open inward as was its habit. If she didn't catch it, it would bump against the night-table and perhaps knock down her radio; so she did catch it in one slim brown hand.

She said, "Now you can go on disagreeing in peace. I shall just close my door and try not to listen through the cracks."

She smiled briefly at the two men as she said this. Yes, he was, he was quite definitely attractive. He was tall, and even in the twilight of the unlighted corridor, with the moon coming in at the end of it, she could see that he was wide of shoulder, slim of waist, and had truly beautiful hands. Beside him the other man was nebulous, just a figure.

Rowena's glance and her smile went unanswered. In the dimness she couldn't tell whether or not the man even saw her. She closed her door and snapped on the light. She heard his voice say,

"It's time to turn in. We'll discuss it later."

There was silence in the hotel. Rowena went to her window and pushed back the curtains to let in the night air. She undressed slowly. There wasn't much to take off, just the soft girdle, a softer slip that came just above her breasts, and then the deceptively simple black cotton dress and the gleaming white beads and earrings. She stood in the middle of the room, remembering what she looked like, and then when she did look, in the half-length mirror, she still had on the huge baroque pearl ring with the rubies, that Meredith had given her the year before he died. It looked funny on her hand. Rowena laughed and said to her image, "I'm overdressed," and slid the ring from her finger onto the wooden dresser. It made a small and material slam as it dropped and lay there, inert. Rings. Chains. Dresses. Creams. Small talk. All that—left behind like old newspapers, never to be used again. In future, when she

enjoyed any or all of these things, it would be without significance, only as machinery, not even habit. Now, she was free of it. Now, she could go back any time, to Englewood, New Jersey, and start a new life. Or perhaps it would begin in Paris, where she had a flat, or in Rome, or anywhere she wanted to begin again.

In the morning, when she woke, the colored boy was knocking at her door. He carried a tray. He said,

"It's a mighty fine day, Miz Barrett, yes, mam, a mighty fine day."

After breakfast, Rowena went to her window and looked out at the jade and lapis-lazuli sea, shining and happy in the sunlight, and thought, I'm beginning to take it for granted. It's time I went home. I've been mentally lazy long enough.

Rowena spent the day as usual mostly on the beach, avoiding the other people as much as she could without letting them know it. She wore a white bathing suit against which her tan looked like gold. One woman, watching her, said, "She's beautiful," and another replied, "She's forty if she's a day." That sort of thing.

Just before lunch, Rowena went into the sea for her third dip. She loved playing a little game with the sea; she closed her eyes, walking into the water on the smooth sand. She did not know when the water was up to her chin until it slapped gently there, so soft was it. Then she opened her eyes, and there was the same breath-taking surprise, right under her eyes, jade and crimson, and deep blue and diamonds. Very slowly, she let herself lie back in the water until her feet went up and up and she was floating. She was alone in all the color and beauty. Perhaps I might give myself a little longer here, she thought, perhaps I'm not taking it for granted after all.

Reluctantly, Rowena came out of the sea towards the people, towards the appraisal and the wariness. She smiled and chatted as she went, and no one noticed the aloofness

in her eyes. She was not thinking about the effect she might or might not have. The effect was never, she thought, correct. Either they were for her or against her; either there were minds in those bodies that could be reached and enjoyed, or there were not. There were no halfway people in Rowena's life. Halfway people and ideas bored her, their sense of values were sloppy, and their discipline lax. Most of the holiday crowd on this island beach were like that, not kind people really, she thought, merely uncertain people with kind habits, which might not sustain them if the pressure was too great.

Rowena spent the afternoon writing letters which had long been waiting to be written. One to her stepson Bunty, whom she loved—a long letter, full of gaiety and wit and her personal deductions. Bunty was in his first job, in an architect's office in New York. Then there was a letter to her agent about selling some stock that a broker friend had said she should get rid of, and one to a committee in Englewood that wanted her to join it. This letter was very polite indeed, in its refusal: "I feel that I have done my share of this kind of service," she wrote, "I have resigned from all my committees for that reason, and because also, I think the younger women should be allowed to take their share of responsibility."

Younger women! What fun! This trip had been a grand success indeed, letting her be free to think without haste, open her mind to what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. I think I shall settle down to write, she thought, with pleasure mounting in her. So far, she had made a name for herself with articles which purported to be travelogues, but which had achieved a vogue because of their penetration into human pleasures and reactions to the unusual.

The letters, addressed and stamped, were in a pile on the night-table, and all afternoon had been spent on them. Rowena stretched, and looked out of the window, noting that the jade and lapis had melted into a bright and un-

interesting blue. She decided to dress early and have a cocktail on the terrace before the crowd got there. Afterwards, there was the party she had promised to go to at the estate around the point, given by some friendly Chicagoans whom she had met at the hotel, and who had liked an article she had written on speed.

She was sipping the cocktail in peaceful pleasure, when she heard footsteps on the uneven flags, and his voice said, "May I join you?"

"It wouldn't be quite the conventional thing to do," Rowena said.

He came closer, and stood in front of her table, and folded his hands as though he were making a quick prayer. He didn't say anything. To Rowena's relief, he merely stood there, with his hands folded, looking at her, with deep blue eyes, and a nice expression on his firm mouth.

He said, at last, seeing her tiny smile, "I shall meet you formally, at the party tonight; but that will be three hours away."

"Please sit down and be unconventional then," Rowena said, "it's possible we both feel the same about these things."

He pulled out the small iron chair, and lowered himself slowly into it with a gingerly movement. His eyes were still on her, in warmth and appreciation. The waiter, dressed for the cocktail hour in what the proprietors of the hotel had chosen as appropriate garb for him, came forward with a wide grin.

"Yasseh? The usual, seh?" He continued to grin.

Rowena said, "You've got a different sash on tonight, William."

"Yessum, Miz Barrett, the ol' sash sloshed up with some stingers las' night."

"The usual, William, please," the man said, and William moved away with unconscious feral grace, exuding happiness and harmony.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" Rowena said, "I wish,

oh, how I wish, man could learn to copy from his fellows only what is fine and amusing, and leave the rest. As it is . . ."

"As it is," he said, "all we manage to do is to hate each other for our accomplishments and gifts, and do our damndest to extinguish them."

As their eyes met again, Rowena felt that very definite sensation. The past shoving through again, habit, the old experience and what she had done with it, as it came along. It had all been such fun, her life. The fun was all over her now, making a glow. Behind her, the quick, brilliant sunset was about to begin. The red sparkle darkened her form a little, giving her a strange outline against the freshly sprinkled jade in the sea. She had chosen to wear a simple dress tonight, for what she knew would be a slightly over-dressed party. The dress was an odd shade of cinnamon cotton with a shine on it and tiny silver stars sewn on the shoulders. The silver loops in her ears caught the sun. She was so brown now that the skin of her neck and arms ran into the dress, so that he could see only an enchanting blur of color and Rowena's brilliant eyes and lips.

"I am . . ." he said, and stopped as suddenly as he had begun. The expression in his eyes had not changed, however.

"I know who you are," Rowena said, "I asked."

"I wasn't going to give you my name so baldly," he said, and she laughed.

"I know that too," she said, lightly, and looked into the jade which had now melted into the surface of the calm waters and had already begun to turn crimson from the reflection of the sun.

She knew he had planned to say something suddenly personal. She knew he was enchanted. It had happened so many times; all her life, it had been happening.

"I've loved all of it," she said now, suddenly looking at him, "and now I'm going to love the new thing just as much."

He put back his head and roared with laughter, as though she had said something perfectly understandable, as though he felt the same way.

Rowena was charmed. "I believe you know what I mean," and looked at him frankly, with appreciation. She felt happy and gay.

William suddenly appeared with a tinkling tray, and put two cocktails carefully down on the table. He wiped the top of it with a gay handkerchief he took from his pocket.

"Yesseh, Mister and Madam," he said, with ceremony, and went away again, grave with the errand of bringing back the tray of tiny biscuits and the pickled inch-fish, and the huge ripe olives.

When he had set it down, he stood for a moment looking over their heads at the sea. He said, gently, "The moon have change, Mister and Madam, yesseh, the moon have change." He went away as silently as he had come.

Rowena said, "Now what on earth could he mean by that? The moon's only half full, and everything looks clear."

"Your eyes are clear," he leaned forward, "clear and very beautiful. You must let me say these things to you right away, as I feel them. Will you?"

The question came as a surprise to her, and she considered it for a moment, her lips relaxed and smiling.

She said, "Let us say exactly what we wish, to each other, just for this evening. Or, no, let us not set even that limit. I believe you can be trusted to stop when we can't go on."

She lifted the glass and sipped the icy tang of the liquid. "I know your last name is Passavant," she said, "and that you come here every year to do something or other, but I don't know what it is. Will you tell me?"

"My first name is Nigel," he said, a little reluctantly.

Rowena put the glass down quickly, her heart giving a small flip.

"Nigel Passavant? The very famous ontologist?"

He acknowledged it with a wry smile.

"I have read your articles," he said, and added, "Rowena Barrett."

"Oh, how very tiresome," Rowena said. Her face had gone sombre, and he saw it. Quickly, gently, he put out his hand and laid it on hers, lying on the table, suddenly tense. She looked up, surprised, startled.

"I've been trying to get away from *everything*, even happy memory," she said, in a small voice. "I wanted *nothing* tangible, not work or reputation nor any past achievement. We were just two nice people meeting."

He was smiling again, and his hand did not withdraw. It rested quietly on hers, without moving, strongly there, neither embracing nor releasing. From his hand, Rowena felt a giving, a tenderness. Nothing like it had happened to her before. Here was the same old thing, that she was used to, but it was different. There was no quick probing in his eyes, no rising of imminent conflict. His eyes were dark, looking at her, with the sun in them. His shoulders were broad and his coat fitted.

Rowena's eyes swept him. She said, "It's *so* nice. I may be an American, but I do appreciate Englishmen's clothes."

His hand went away from her hand, but she did not feel a loss, only a sense of happiness.

"I've been a widow for a year now," she said, "and although we were very contented together, both Meredith and I realized all along that we were not one. I miss him terribly; but I'm looking for a new thing, and anyone who comes into my orbit just now must not expect me to be very helpful."

Again, he put back his head and laughed, deep and gay in his throat. "I loathe helpful people myself," he said.

Neither looked at the other, sipping the drink in silence. The quick violence of the dusk surrounded them, and the shadows swept across the sea, melting it into night. Rowena felt the sharpness of the cocktail in her throat, reminding

her. She thought, it doesn't matter what I do; I've done so much, been so many places, lived so fully, everything will always remind me. The thought began to sadden her, and she stiffened a little, resisting. Nigel Passavant put down his glass, and rose. He lifted Rowena's silver-lined mink cape from the back of her chair and put it across her shoulders.

She said, gratefully, "I wasn't cold, really. It was . . ."

William came gliding across the terrace, with his tray, and the shining smile. Nigel Passavant was paying for their drinks, and Rowena watched the two pairs of hands just at her eye level. Both were quite beautiful. Nigel came around again to the table and sat down.

"There's a charming little place not far from here," he said, "where we might dine, if you will do me the honor. Then afterwards we can go to the Chicago party. Would that suit your mood do you think?"

"It does change, I'm afraid, whatever I do to stop it," she answered. Her eyes were quite sad now, looking out at the thick black of the sky and sea merged into a shifting glitter of stars.

"You see," she continued, rising, "I had an experience I tried very hard to forget because it seemed best; but it's no use. I simply can't forget it because it is so much part of me. I shall have to stop trying."

"Is this experience still part of your life?" Nigel spoke carefully, his voice impersonal. It was as though he were trying to think for her, to help her to assess, to clear the issues for her.

"It should not be," Rowena was saying, as they went across the terrace, through the tables now occupied by a gay and chic crowd of people. She felt his hand on her arm, directing her through an archway of hibiscus leading to the parking space.

Here, it was quiet. The stars shone on the tops of cars parked in neat rows, and there was no sound except the

soft breaking of the retreating waves. Rowena stopped obediently at the door of a low, cocky roadster, put one sandalled foot up against the step of the car and leaned against it. He thought, how is it possible a woman can be so breath-taking and be so unconscious of it? He did not hurry her; he found his heart beating heavily. This experience of hers, this memory haunting her . . . Had he found her now, only to discover something impossible between them?

Rowena turned and faced him, unsmiling. She had withdrawn into herself for the first time. She said, "You see, I had a son, years ago, and I did not stick to him. I let a man push me away from motherhood."

She was so absorbed by her thought, that she did not hear Nigel's quick breath, nor see the relief in his eyes.

"His name is Robin," Rowena said. "I know his name because I went to his christening."

"Is there any good reason why you should not see him now?"

Nigel closed the door on Rowena, and leaned on it, watching her profile. When she made no reply, he walked around the car, got in, and started it. They moved off silently, towards the other side of the island, to the club where they were going to dine.

Chapter 7

It was quite an occasion. Robin's team had won the football game, and Robin himself had played brilliantly. He felt queer now, standing in the middle of the group as the crowd began to melt away. He had been carried on the

shoulders of the team right over to where his father and Mrs. Felter and her daughter and Mandy were sitting with the rugs they had had over their knees in a mess of plaids on the hard ground. The shoulders under his buttocks felt hard and bony and young, and Robin thought, Gee, this is something. He slid down and felt the touch of hands on his back and shoulders, clapping him. Mandy's face was pink and her eyes were shining. She wanted very much to rush up to Robin and kiss him, but she was growing up and someone had told her about men not liking a show of affection in public; so she hung back. But Robin saw her eyes, and he smiled.

John Blount looked handsome and urbane and bursting with pride. He let Mrs. Felter go forward and shake Robin's hand before he moved toward his son; and then Robin was standing in front of him, looking at his father without any embarrassment whatever, and this seemed unsuitable to John Blount. After all, a boy in Robin's place should feel some shyness. He cleared his throat and started to say something like, "Well, well, my boy, you did very well, but you mustn't let it go to your head," but he suddenly felt all wrong, and merely smiled at Robin and shook him by the hand rather limply.

The Felter daughter looked at Robin. She didn't say anything, and her nose was pink from the cold. Robin took time off to think, it's her eyes, gee, she seems to look right through a guy. But he soon became far too busy to think about the Felter daughter any more.

He couldn't even remember her name until Mrs. Felter said in a commanding tone, "Hermes, dear, why don't you pull your collar up higher. You look cold."

The entire week-end had been the same. Mrs. Felter and John Blount and Mandy and Hermes and a big house with gadgets; just the five of them in a somewhat uncertain milling about, first one and then the other standing out in individual focus.

Then there was the walk Robin took with Hermes, around the farm part of the estate, to see the cows and the horses and the new threshing machine. The air was crisp, and steam came faintly out of their noses and mouths as they trudged about, in and out of stables and barns, looking desultorily at things. Hermes seemed ghost-like, so much so that Robin said at last,

"Are you interested in all this? I mean, you don't look like a country girl to me."

Hermes stopped in her tracks as though he had bitten her. She said in a suddenly high, tense voice, "I hate it, really. I want to go abroad, to Italy, and France, and Bali."

"Why Bali?" Robin asked, with curiosity. She was beginning to interest him, and those eyes of hers were queer, they honestly were.

But Hermes did not open up further than that, except to say, in the same tense voice, "My mother is a very busy woman, and I read a lot. I read the books in our library that she doesn't even know we have. There's a whole lot of different things in the world we never even talk about in Canada."

She speaks like a grown-up woman, Robin thought, but his respect for her grew, together with a new sympathy. He liked the way she said, "a whole lot of different things," with hunger for them in it.

"I'd like to go to every part of the whole world," he said, the thought new to him, and compelling. "I guess it's what everyone ought to do if they can."

"Oh, yes," she said, "oh, *yes*."

Robin said, "Canada's getting pretty darn big and powerful." He thought of the eerie vibration in his hand, the trembling, like an eagerness which he had felt in the big rock. "Maybe we ought to get to know Canada first," he said.

But Hermes was leaning against the barn door, kicking little fluffs of hard earth into the air with her feet. She

seemed not to hear him. She said, "Your aunt's giving a party tonight, a dinner. We're both invited. It will be the first night party I've gone to. I've got a new dress."

She looked at Robin shyly, and he smiled. "That's great! What's it like?"

"Oh, it's sort of greeny," Hermes said in a gruff voice, but her excitement infected Robin. It was at once highly feminine and childish. He found himself looking forward to seeing Hermes in the new dress. The greeny color she said it was would go well with those huge funny eyes of hers. Then he happened to see her legs disappearing into the big country boots she wore, and noticed that they were well shaped and looked very mature. Gee, girls, he thought with a prickle of a funny kind of discomfort, a sense of inadequacy, almost fear. He remembered how the mention of his sister Mandy had made his football captain Jack Lowden blush right there on the field. He laughed.

"What're you giggling about?" Hermes asked huffily.

Robin hastened to reassure her. "It wasn't anything to do with you."

The party at Linnie LooGuaj's was very grand. She made it so deliberately. She had invited a man down from Montreal for it, and that made the party seven in number, Mrs. Felter, Linnie, the man, John Blount, and the three children. The table looked lovely, with a set of tablemats made of a new material that looked like woven gold but was really plastic.

"I love discovering these things," she told them, as they sat down exclaiming at the beauty of everything. She had mixed her French sterling forks and spoons with some modern beaten-gold and silver-handled knives, and in the middle of the table she had concocted a delectable flat decoration of bittersweet and autumn leaves speckled with gold dust. Some of the gold dust sparkled in her hair as she turned her head.

Mrs. Felter looked disapprovingly at the hairdo, but she

did not permit the expression to linger on her face. She thought John Blount looked very handsome and distinguished, and her mind became occupied with the secret plans she was forever working out. She noticed vaguely that her daughter's new dress was just right, and that Hermes' eyes were bright and that she looked for once like a young girl.

On the way into dinner, Robin went close to Hermes, and touched her bare arm. It was cold, and that bothered him, but he said in her ear, "It looks swell, it honestly does."

Hermes flushed, but her smile was dazzling. For a moment Robin was stunned by it, and wordless, and then he saw that she had removed the gold band that had defaced her before, and that her teeth were white and strong and pretty. A warm sense of well-being went through Robin in a slow stream.

Unlike the lunch of the week before, the party went with a bang. Everyone was in form, and the food was perfect. The Montreal guest Linnie had invited proved to be an amusing story-teller, a person of sophistication and dash. He brought the youngsters into his narratives and conversation. His gay laugh lifted them all up with it. After dinner, they wandered into the living room for coffee. Linnie was wondering what she would do with them. She had set up a darts board in the library, with a protective back covering, and Higgins had put a bridge table in one corner of the room. The television set which Linnie had had sunk into a cabinet out of sight, had been uncovered, and several modern folding chairs with chrome legs and handwoven seats and backs were in place before it. The room was welcoming and charming. Linnie poured out the tiny glasses of varied colors of liqueurs and gave them to Higgins to hand round.

Higgins was standing in the middle of the room, giving Mrs. Felter her brandy, when they heard the front door close. There was a momentary lull in the conversation, and

then the man was in the doorway, his revolver pointed at Higgins.

He said, in a muffled voice, "Don't move, any of you."

The voice was so young it sounded bizarre behind the revolver. Higgins straightened up and turned towards it, holding the tray in his hand.

The young, tough voice spoke again, "I said don't move!"

Linnie said, breathlessly, "It isn't real, it can't be."

Mrs. Felter sat, frozen, with the brandy dripping sideways from the glass in her shaking hand onto the rug. The Montreal guest had been lighting a cigarette, and the match burned itself out. He cleared his throat. John Blount looked relaxed. He sat on one of the television chairs in the position he had been in, leaning forward to talk to Hermes. He remained in that position, but Robin who had been standing fiddling with the television knobs, saw that he seemed to be the only one in the room who was still alive and thinking. The others had gone dead.

"You!" the voice said, at Linnie, "show me where your safe is."

"I haven't got a safe, don't be silly," Linnie said, "having safes around . . ."

But he interrupted, pointing the gun from Higgins to Linnie, in a swift movement. The lights gleamed on the gun.

It was then that Robin heard the strange sound, like a chirp, in his head, and at the same time he felt a funny electric buzzing in the small of his back. Later, he was to discover these signs to be warnings of disaster. He was thinking clearly. He thought, if I could make a diversion here, maybe Father would be able to do something. Tentatively, Robin moved, relinquishing the knob of the television set. He saw the man's eyes behind the mask move in his direction, and the gun in his hand wavered a trifle.

It was enough. Higgins lifted his hands in a curiously slow, awkward movement and threw the tray with its decanters and glasses, right into the thief's face. The thief

recoiled, tripping backward on Linnie's scatter rug at the door. He fell heavily onto the hall floor, hitting his head on the bottom step of the staircase and lay still, the gun dropping from his hand. It was Linnie who picked it up, gingerly, but swiftly, and stood holding it in her hand. Higgins ran into the pantry and returned with a roll of heavy string, and John Blount rolled the thief onto his face and tied his hands tightly behind him on the floor.

Higgins, after handing John Blount the string, had gone to the telephone. They could hear him saying, "Mrs. Loo-Guaj. We've been held up. Right past the Old College Inn." He repeated "LooGuaj" in an exasperated tone.

Linnie laughed, and it relieved the tension. "Never mind, Higgins, I've been trying to get people to understand that name ever since I married it."

Robin came slowly out of the living room and into the hall after the others. He was trying to disentangle the incidents. The queer tingle in his spine had gone, and he wondered what had caused it. For a moment, it had looked exciting and dangerous, but here it was now just silly, with everyone in funny poses. Mrs. Felter was wiping the spilled brandy from her skirt, and the Montreal man was relighting his cigarette. He looked around for Hermes, and saw that she had come close to him, and that a bright flush was on her cheek-bones instead of the pallor.

She said, in a high, childish voice, "Wasn't Higgins wonderful, just *wonderful!*" She went past Robin, and put her hand on Higgins' arm in its well-tailored butler's sleeve. "You saved our lives, you really did!"

The expression on Higgins' face was noncommittal. He smiled at Hermes rather stiffly and started to pick up the mess of broken glass and decanters that cluttered up the doorway. Robin thought, she's awfully quick, and looked at Hermes with more respect than ever. It was probably true too. Higgins' action had certainly done the trick.

There was nothing to do now except keep an eye on the

recumbent figure on the floor, and wait for the police. John Blount had now tied up the thief's ankles in the string, and had pushed him nearer the staircase.

He straightened, and smiled at Higgins. "That was a grand job, Higgins!"

They were smiling at each other. Higgins said, in a voice Robin had never heard from him before, a warm, matey tone, "Thank you, sir. It was a lucky throw."

"You bet it was lucky," Linnie said. She also came close to Higgins and touched him. "Thanks, Higgins, thanks for all of us."

She looked at her guests as they stood around the hall, and said brightly, "Come along back into the living room, and let Higgins clear up his grenade."

She cast a glance at the figure on the floor. "We'll leave him to his thoughts," she said, "silly boy, thinking we have safes lying about everywhere. Why, half the time I have to borrow money from Higgins for gas and things like that." She laughed. "They have the funniest notions about us, don't they?"

John Blount took charge. His voice boomed out now, marshalling them back into the living room, offering drinks, telling Robin to pass them around.

There was a sound of sirens, and it became very obvious that the police were arriving.

Mrs. Felter said, acidly, "Really, is it necessary to make such a noise?"

Then the police were in the house, quietly efficient, and belying their sirens. They handled the unconscious thief unfeelingly, as though he were a sack of potatoes.

It was Linnie who got the sudden idea that it might be more than they had bargained for. She said thoughtfully, "He certainly lies still. I wonder . . ."

There was another sound from the hallway. The captain was phoning. They could hear his voice. "Get the doctor up here quick. I think we have a stiff here."

There was an appalled silence. Hermes said, breathlessly, "Oh dear, I do hope Higgins didn't hear that."

Mrs. Felter said, "We are all witnesses to the fact that your butler threw that tray at the man in self-defence, and that if he is dead it is because he struck his head in falling. Your butler can hardly be blamed for anything."

"I'll see to that," the Montreal guest said suddenly, as though his mind had come to life after a period of atrophy. "I'll put my attorneys onto it in the morning."

"I don't think that will be necessary," John Blount said, "as I see it, it's an open and shut case of armed attack, and attempted robbery. Nothing will come of it."

"But the man," Robin said, as suddenly as his father had spoken. To Robin, his own voice sounded funny, loud, and protesting. "But the man, he's *dead*, maybe."

"He sounded awfully young," Hermes said, her voice full of tears.

Higgins had come into the room. He had cleared up the glass in the doorway, and he shrugged more firmly into his displaced coat collar as he stood there facing them.

He looked directly at Hermes, and his eyes were full of feeling as he spoke. "That's right, Miss, he's young, and maybe I killed him. I didn't mean to, you understand, but I've killed men before, in the common good. Sometimes you have to. I'm sorry, of course, but these kids must be stopped. It's all wrong the way they are nowadays."

John Blount said, quietly, "I'd have done the same, if I had been fast enough."

Higgins was thinking about war, and death, and killing. The hard core of decision, of putting first things first, of relinquishing some good things for other and more important things that had to be done. A man had no time to think too much. But inside him, a man knew he was right.

Watching Higgins' somber face, Robin was thinking that this was something he would have to face very soon, perhaps he was facing it already, standing here in his aunt's

living room, trying to think clearly. He was thinking that violence seemed to be a part of life, an ugly but necessary element. He was thinking of war too, and wondering about it. He was thinking that war wasn't the only violence a man had to face.

He looked at Hermes, but she had gone pale again, and her eyes were full of tears. She was thinking of the sadness in everything, of the youngness of the voice behind the mask, and the no-moreness of it.

Chapter 8

The question that Nigel Passavant had asked Rowena was the one thing that haunted her unpleasantly in their gay and charming relationship which had continued when they left the lovely Island and went to Nassau. "Is there any reason why you should not see your son again?" he had asked her.

Well, there was no reason, really. Rowena had always stopped before her thoughts could arrive at that question for herself. What was the use? It would only stir up old memories, and perhaps start something complicated for Robin, if she were to make herself known to him. She felt certain that he knew nothing whatever about her, or that she even existed. In all the years, she had never once been to Montreal.

Still, was there a good reason why she could not find out where she might look at him, see what he was like, and go away again? Would she have the strength to do that? No, better not. Better not risk it.

Definitely, then, Rowena closed her mind to the tempta-

tion. She knew how to do this, through habit. It was only rather tiresome that she never quite got rid of the hunger to see Robin, to be close to him, as part of him.

At the Royal Victoria Hotel in Nassau, where she and Meredith had always stayed, Rowena kept on putting off her departure back to Englewood. A new sort of indecision gripped her, delicious in a way, but baffling. It got her nowhere. She could neither rest nor pay attention to anything fully. The hotel was emptying, with the season's end. It was March now, and getting too warm. Rowena was restless, and Nigel Passavant did not help. He kept on saying, "I can wait," in a nicely impatient voice. His very niceness was baffling. Rowena had never before had the experience of wondering about the thoughts of a man who intrigued her as much as Nigel Passavant.

Once or twice, they had come very close to becoming lovers, but it was Nigel who had drawn away before emotion became too out of hand. No man had ever resisted Rowena before, or even tried to. Once, after a particularly glamorous evening of moonlight, dancing, and champagne, Rowena had said, "Why don't we just stop thinking, and see?"

But in the dim light of the patio, with the scent of gardenias all around them, and the silence of the tropical night, Nigel had said, "Perhaps I am looking for something too, this 'thing' you speak of, this 'new thing.' The evil in the world, the decay, smells so strong, don't you think? Having found you, I do not intend to slide into anything except perfection. You are too experienced not to know what I mean. You are looking for it too. When I become your lover it will be at the right time."

"When" I become your lover, he said, not "if," or "please," but "when." Yes, it intrigued Rowena that he could resist her at such a time, with his hands warm on her bare brown skin, and his lips in passion on hers. But he was right, she felt. Alone in her room, she knew he had been

right. This way, it was still perfect, and tomorrow was still new. It wasn't fear, or delicacy that kept them apart. It was something else, and Rowena began at that moment, truly to love Nigel Passavant.

It wasn't a novel experience, for Rowena had loved before. To her, love was the dominant element of life. Very early, she had discovered that Goethe was right when he said that we are shaped and fashioned by what we love. Rowena had chosen not to fear, but to enjoy loving, and this philosophy had taken her into many strange and beautiful fulfillments. In her youth, she had been a voracious reader, and in the beginning had gone about her life with her tongue in her cheek and the wisdom of departed thinkers ringing in her ears. She had been an admirer of Rabelais, and when she came upon his misleading *"Fais ce que voudras"* she thought she had found the whole of what she wanted. To do what one pleased seemed to Rowena by far the most sensible thing she had so far read. But curiosity about life wasn't enough, she discovered. One had to have a certain respect; and respect is troublesome.

Experience is participation, taking part in life as it happens to one, and life in Rowena's case gave her more than usual opportunities to see life in a large sense. Her parents were Americans. A father with a nervous ailment, a spoiled mother, and sufficient money, dragged Rowena, an only child, about the world in her youth, through excitement and exploration, sophistication and gaiety, superficiality and danger. A child and a young woman of exceptional intelligence, Rowena's dependent nature became completely metamorphosed into a shell-like armor of humor, the brittleness of which she only discovered later in her life. She imagined she was living. With a highbrow sensitiveness, she read and reread her favorite books, and trusted to Oscar Wilde when he stated flatly that "life itself is the first, the greatest, of the arts."

Rowena thought that this curiosity about life seemed to

be dying out. Certainly her parents weren't interested in anything that did not touch themselves. Rowena stubbornly made a decision on her fifteenth birthday, in Rome, on top of the Appenine Hill. She decided not to let her parents influence her any longer, she decided to live her own life, to be curious, to go deeper every time. Even to say this over to herself gave Rowena a thrill.

"I will not live on the surface," Rowena wrote in her diary of those days. "I will be brave and live deeply even if it hurts, even if it's only little things that happen to me. I'll get into them too."

Very soon after that, a nice man in one of the Riviera hotels gave Rowena, with somewhat of a leer, a book entitled *John Heywoodes' Woorkes*, a reprint of the original first edition of 1546, in which she immediately found the proverb she thought would suit her forever. It was: "Nought venter nought have."

It delighted her, and in a rare expansive moment, she showed it to her mother, who said at once, "What on *earth* does it mean? Now, darling, is this some new language you feel you must study, or some cult or other, like that spiritualist?"

Rowena said, "Of course not, Mother. It's English. It means, "nothing venture, nothing gain."

Mrs. Carig said, "It sounds very dashing to me. What do you intend to venture on?" A helpless, worried smile was on her face, and Rowena stiffened. Her mother had said, quite recently, "I wish, dear, that if you must pick up people in this hotel, you'd make friends with some nice American girl, or even a nice boy like those Greens on the beach, not old men like Mr. de Hooven."

Mr. de Hooven was the man who had given Rowena the Heywood book. Men were always giving Rowena things; once it had been a Cardinal in a bookshop in Florence, who had fallen into conversation with Rowena over a book on religious relics.

The Cardinal had told Mrs. Carig, "Your daughter is most cultivated, madame. May I congratulate you."

Cultivated! Imagine Rowena being cultivated! It sounds terribly priggish! "I do hope, darling," Mrs. Carig said plaintively, "you aren't going to turn out to be a prig."

Mr. Carig, who had one of his nervous headaches merely grunted; he was by this time too much of a hypochondriac to take on the responsibility of Rowena.

Looking at Rowena with that childish scowl on her face, Mrs. Carig said, "People aren't always what they seem, darling, I mean, you've got to get to know the difference between a gentleman, and, well, the other type."

As Rowena stood at the window of her Royal Victoria Hotel bedroom in Nassau, the morning after Nigel Passavant had said, "when I become your lover," she was thinking of that episode long ago, in a similar hotel on the French Riviera when the stranger had given her *John Heywoodes' Woorkes*. Her lips moved, and she said, "Nought venter, nought gain."

The phone rang, and she went to answer it. Nigel's voice said, very caressingly, "Did I sound stupid last night, beloved? Did you understand?"

"Oh, *yes*," Rowena said, her voice lilting, "oh, yes, I understood. I think . . . I think I love you."

She had not said this before to Nigel Passavant, and not for a very long time, to any man.

Nigel did not answer; but Rowena heard the little catch in his breath. He said, "The sooner we get around to making me the second father of your son, the sooner we can begin to live for ourselves."

The second father of your son, he had said. Rowena repeated this in a whisper, as she hung up. It was a long time since she had thought of Robin's father. Nigel meant, "I shall share your life. It must be that way; and this son of yours is part of your life, as he must be part of mine."

It was going to be Nigel, then, who would force the

issue. Nigel wasn't the sort of man to have errant, unwise ideas. Rowena stood at her window, looking out at the thick fringe of trees shading the wide verandah. She was thinking about Robin, and what she would do to bring him back into her life; and then she thought of Nigel, and a wild surge of the old excitement went through her, a beating sense of happiness and hope.

Chapter 9

On Robin's sixteenth birthday, he and his father went to a baseball game. It was a warm day; the game was at the stadium downtown. Robin had begun to play baseball, but he preferred football and hockey. In the summer, he felt too lazy to play games in the intense way he wound up to in the Fall. The smack of a ball into a glove, and the hard crack of it on a bat lacked the feel of reality he got in the other games—the close and human competition of football, the nearness of actual bodies, the excitement of co-operation with other boys in a rhythmic partnership. In hockey, it was the speed, the grace, the toughness that he loved. Hockey was one madly beautiful picture after another, following each other, pictures that made and remade themselves as though painted by a superhuman caricaturist with speed as his demon, speed and slyness and dexterity. But John Blount was mad about the world series and every other form of baseball competition, so Robin went with him to the stadium. It was supposed to be Robin's birthday treat.

Robin had grown a lot during the past few months. He was well above his father now in height, well built and lithe, with narrow hips and wide shoulders and a merry grin which belied the seriousness of his eyes. Both he and his

father wore thin suits, light-colored with dark blue ties. They looked completely unlike each other.

The crowd had already gathered, by the time they arrived. Streetcars and busses were bunched up around the several entrances, and the Jaguar had a difficult time of it to find a temporary home in the parking lot. Finally, they made it. The Jaguar looked as opulent and arrogant as ever, in its row, between a smaller English car and a rather old American sedan. In John Blount's eyes there gleamed a fierce anticipation. He had quite a big sum of money on this game, with a group of men at his Club.

Robin and his father walked slowly, because of the heat. They left the parking lot and became immediately gathered into the stream of people making their impatient way through the reserved seats entrance.

There was a strong smell of smoke in the air; John Blount said, "Somebody's brakes burning."

Robin had not smelt the smoke until then. It had been in his nostrils, but he had not smelt it; now he did. Quite suddenly and powerfully, the smell penetrated his senses, and he stood quite still, blocking the forward moving crowd.

"Don't hold people up, Robin," John Blount said, "there's the team coming on. Hurry up!"

But Robin still stood, the acrid smell in his nostrils, permeating all his senses. The small quiver in his spine went on and on. They were standing near one of the huge transport busses, painted a bright orange and marked "Ball Game Today." As though by some force greater than himself, Robin pushed himself out of the direct stream of people and moved closer to the empty bus. The smell was coming from it. He looked up at the open door of the driver's partition and saw a small wisp of smoke curling around the seat. Something tightened in Robin, that thing he could always trust. He looked around him quickly, and caught his father's irritated eye. Robin said, loudly, "This bus is on fire. Get away from it."

He swung up onto the steep step, and went into the

bus. Flame was licking around the seats at about its middle. Robin thought, the gas tank! Those people! He looked desperately out of the window. He could see the mass of terrified yelling pushing people, and his father standing in the same spot, at the wicket, looking appalled. Robin yelled, "Get out of the way. I'm going to drive this bus down the road, away from the crowd!"

The bus handled clumsily, after the Jaguar. But it started nicely, and Robin pressed down the accelerator. The big vehicle almost jumped forward, and Robin could feel the heat of the flames behind him, blown into fury by the breeze coming in at the open windows. At the right, a man was standing at a rather flimsy gate leading to the lower end of the stadium, and Robin drove the bus at him. He yelled, "This bus is on fire. Let me through."

As though hypnotized, the man fell back and Robin drove the bus, now in flames, right through the gate and into the grounds. In the middle, I must get it into the middle! Robin thought. The heat was searing at his back. What if the thing exploded . . . But the best place for it was in the open space in the centre of the stadium, where there were no people.

He drove the bus more slowly, trying to prevent the wind from fanning the flames, which were now roaring behind him. He stopped the bus and reached for the fire extinguisher over his head, but it was no good. The bus was a mass of flames. He thought, I'd better get out and run. He leapt out, and looked around for help. Men were running, and yelling, men with pails of water, and at their heels a truck with fire equipment. Robin, breathing hard, stood and watched while, still yelling, they put out the fire. It took some time, and when it was out, the bus was a wreck.

Police appeared to disperse the crowd, and Robin was one of the first to be chivvied away. He felt tired, and something hurt somewhere. He looked down, and saw that there was a big burn in his right trouser leg, and felt the hurt

coming from there. He put his hand down, feeling his leg. There was a big red stain under the burnt trouser. Oh, heck, Robin thought, now Dad'll be mad. I'll have to get this fixed up, I guess.

But John Blount wasn't mad. He appeared at Robin's side, just as Robin took his hand away from his leg. The crowd fell away from John Blount as he pushed himself through. He was saying, almost yelling, "My son, that's my son. He saved this crowd!"

Robin thought, oh, the heck, for crying out loud!

He started toward his father, frowning violently to stop him, but it was too late. More men, and some women, were running through the group; they surrounded Robin and his father. The police were ordering the rest of the crowd back to their seats in the bleachers. The men and the women had notebooks. It was the godalmighty Press.

Robin could hear his father saying over and over in that loud cracking-the-whip tone, "My son. It was *my son.* Am I proud of him? Well, what do you think?"

So he's proud of me, Robin thought, but in spite of himself, he liked the idea. He said, "I better get this fixed up. I feel . . ." He looked at his father, and at the excited, interested faces surrounding him.

One of the Press gals said, to Robin, "Will you tell me when you first suspected the bus was on fire?"

But Robin's leg was beginning to hurt in earnest, and he felt funny. He heard someone say, "He's going to faint."

The burn was worse than he had thought, and he woke up in the ambulance taking him to the hospital. It was nice and peaceful, except for the siren. There was only one person there, a doctor, who said at once, when he saw Robin's eyes opening, "You'll be O.K., son, they do fine skin grafts these days."

"Will it take long?" Robin said, drowsily. "I mean, how long will I be sick?" He had a horror of being sick, and always had.

"You'll be swimming as usual, by August," the doctor said. "Now just relax."

At the General Hospital, they were waiting, not for an emergency case of burning, but for Robin, the hero. The Press was there again trying their damndest to get at Robin, even as he lay semi-conscious on the stretcher in the corridor in front of the elevator. He smiled at them. It was comfortable here, soft and kind of sheltered, in spite of the Press. They whisked him onto the elevator, and gave him another hypodermic. The burn was a very large one, but not too deep, and it took Robin about ten days to get out of hospital.

Two things remained in his memory: the fact that his father had been so pleased. About what? This hero stuff, oh, the heck! The other thing was a beautiful spray of yellow roses, country roses, with the true scent of gold in them, which came from someone who had written on a plain card, "from a proud parent." That's a heck of a funny card, Robin said, smelling the golden aroma. At first, he thought the roses might have come from his father, or maybe even Mrs. Felter, but neither of them knew anything about it. Mrs. Felter sent him a chunky bunch of petunias, and his father was continually bringing him clippings from the papers with Robin's name on them as being quite a guy.

The yellow roses lasted longer than any of the others, even than Hermes' shy little African violet plant, which the nurse watered from the top and left in a draught so it wilted. The roses remained strong and fragrant the entire time Robin was in the hospital, and just as he was looking at them and wondering who sent them, the day he was to leave the hospital, they suddenly and gaily shed all their petals which lay in scented profusion around their vase. It was as though they said, "We've had it, and it was fun, great, great fun, and good luck to you, Robin!"

Chapter 10

John Blount said to Robin, "How'd you like to go to Biddeford Pool for a week or so? It would be better than nothing."

He meant by that the disruption in their plans to go to England and France in August, partly on business for John Blount, and, partly because he thought that Robin needed to be "broadened." They had had to cancel this plan due to Robin's burn, and now his father was saying, "and it's a fine beach. I used to go there with your mother when you were too young to remember."

Robin thought, I remember O.K. What kind of an idiot does he think I am? He remembered the big surf and the chilly water and the fun of the sand. But he did not say this. He merely said, "Well, it'd be O.K., I guess."

He wasn't sure about it, however. Being an enforced invalid had irked him, and made him jumpy. Besides, the publicity was, to him, truly painful. He hated it with true hatred. The elderly ladies, who, when they found out who he was, fussed and cooed, and the girls who gushed, and the old men who patted him on the shoulder and said, "Fine show, very fine show. Reminds me of my old days," whatever they meant by that.

The boys were the worst however. His own pals. It made for uneasiness, a sort of reserve, a jealousy. Robin could not see why a moment of emergency in which he had happened to play a prominent role should disrupt everything in this way.

He said, again, more enthusiastically, seeing the disappointment in his father's face, "Gee, yes, let's go. It'll be swell. But I must be back here before September on account of football practice."

They drove down in the Jaguar through the mellow August countryside, through Vermont, and New Hampshire, and into Maine. In the mountains, the heat seemed to be hotter and the valleys were little alleys of cool air because of the arching trees. There was an atmosphere of old-fashioned virtue about the houses and the faces. Even the flat New England voices held a note of remoteness and the sureness that comes from being a little removed from the world's hurly-burly.

Halfway through Maine they stopped by previous arrangement at a fishing camp belonging to a friend of John Blount, who was in Europe and had suggested they use it. The camp was simple but elegant, all the latest gadgets for camping, and a man who called himself a "guide" to cook for them. There was everything there except fish in the glimmering lake, although they plugged at it seriously every day at the correct hours. However, the break in the trip was pleasant, and both of them enjoyed it. The woods surrounded them at night, and in the dry rustle of the leaves, Robin heard the chant and swing of his secret thoughts.

Robin was beginning now, at sixteen, to feel consciously the confusion in his world, a dissolution of values, and a helplessness in the vacuum left by their dissipation. People seemed afraid to give to each other, either trust or liking. There was a wary look in eyes, and Robin felt himself catching it, becoming wary himself. The things he heard said, some of them clever and even brilliant, because his father knew a lot of people—those things dropped neatly from lips soft with indecision. Thoughts were expressed glibly, from the surface of the brain. More and more, Robin began to hunger for reality, for truth, and for something harder and more vital.

He said nothing of this to anyone, but he often wanted to, with a desperation of loneliness. Being a Canadian was one thing he wanted to be sure about. What did it mean? In a big way, that is. Being a man, for another. Being lonely

was the worst, because it was illogical and nagging and never went away, but got worse.

The Montreal newspapers were waiting for them when they arrived at the Inn in Biddeford Pool. John Blount immediately settled himself in an easy chair in his room adjoining Robin's, and started to read them. "Here's a picture of Hermes," he said, "she's just won a swimming competition at her camp."

"Oh," said Robin noncomittally. He went into his father's room and looked over his shoulder at the rather blurred photograph of Hermes Felter in a bathing suit.

"She's going to be a lovely girl," John Blount said.

"Oh, gee," Robin said, suddenly angry. "Did you have to put it into the gad column?"

"The gad column, now what on earth is that?" John Blount said, shifting the paper. But it was Robin's private word for the Society Column, and in it, he had read his name, and his father's. "Mr. John Blount and his son Robin are spending some time at the Inn, Biddeford Pool."

"Your Aunt Linnie must have put it in," John Blount said.

"Well, I wish she wouldn't," Robin said, still irritated. "Now some nosey'll find out about the bus."

"Well, why not for heaven's sake?" John Blount said. He laughed. "You're the retiring kind, I suppose," he said, a little impatiently. "It's a mistake. You'll find as you get older that you've got to sell yourself if you want to get on."

"Maybe I don't want to 'get on,'" Robin muttered, as he went back into his own room and started to unpack. The burn was healed now, but it still hurt when he touched it, or bent over too far. "Gad columns," he thought, "gad columns and old ladies and fuss-pots and I wish Mandy was here. She'd make it O.K."

Mandy had not been able to go with them because she was booked for several visits with friends that summer. Mandy was far too popular, Robin thought. Gee, she'll be

getting married one of these days, and then what'll I do? He loved Mandy very much. He thought, let's see, she's almost the same age as me, almost sixteen. The thought made him feel gloomy for some reason. Sharing Mandy more and more with other people was a sorrow to him. It had never occurred to Robin to think of Mandy as anything but his sister, although he knew she wasn't. Mandy, he knew, had been adopted, but this was hard to remember.

Robin and his father fell easily into a routine. Breakfast at nine, Robin in shorts and a shirt, and John Blount in an easy-fitting summer suit. He acquired a tan very soon, and looked more than ever handsome and purposeful. The women all eyed him. After breakfast he read the papers on the verandah, while Robin rushed down to the golf course to play with some of the young people at the Inn. After that, the beach, where he and his father shared an umbrella—and both of them were popular.

It was in the afternoons, while his father had a nap that Robin could get away by himself. Once or twice, they took the Jaguar out for exercise on the magnificent turnpike road leading to Portsmouth and to Portland. But usually, Robin took a book onto the beach, walking far along it to a lonely spot. The book was merely camouflage for his thinking.

It was here he met the lady from the big house that stood back from the beach farther along from the other houses. She too liked to walk on the beach early in the afternoon. She too chose little rocky nooks to sit and read. She was very attractive, with bronzy hair and a fine figure that Robin admired. He saw her in swimming several times, and admired that too. She swam well. She was rather old, oh, about thirty-five, he guessed, and once when they had passed quite close, her eyes behind the dark glasses had looked at him warmly. He wanted very much to talk to her. She seemed kind of lonely too.

Then one day, her scarf blew away along the beach toward Robin, and he brought it back to her. She said,

"Thank you very much, I rather treasure that scarf. It came from India."

Robin looked down at the scarf in his hand. It felt light and cool, with some design that was unfamiliar to him, and exciting. Somehow, he did not want to let it go from his hand. He started to give it to her, but she said quickly,

"I can see you like it. Please keep it."

It was an odd thing to say, and what would a man do with a woman's scarf? Robin looked down at her, and saw that she was smiling. It was queer how he felt that he knew her well, like finding something familiar one never missed before.

She said, "You're Robin Blount, aren't you?"

Robin flushed, remembering the gad columns and the bus. Oh, the heck. Even at the Inn they made a fuss about it, wanted him to speak at the concert and all that.

"You're quite famous, you know," the lady said, "but I can see it bores you, so won't you sit down and let's talk a little. I'm lonely too."

Afterwards, Robin remembered she had said, "too." But just now he was so glad she had asked him that he sat down quickly, the sand sputtering up.

"Gee, yes, thanks. I'd like to."

They looked at each other. She had taken her dark glasses off, and Robin could see her eyes. They were deep blue, and went slightly up at the corners. Her skin was beautifully tanned, and her mouth was full and sensitive. She said,

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Barrett, Rowena Barrett."

Chapter 11

As she walked slowly up the narrow boarded pathway to the big house, Rowena was in a dream. The meeting with Robin had been an emotional experience of far greater force than she had anticipated. She found herself trembling now, thinking of him. She thought, I must cable to Nigel right away.

She felt lonely without Nigel, but he had had to go back to London to attend to his affairs and had said to her, at parting. "You must manage it somehow; you'll never be happy until you see this son of yours, get to know him."

And now she had done it. Rowena reached the door of the house and pushed it open. It was cool, almost dark in the long hall, as it had always been, when her parents had owned it years ago. It was musty too, from long disuse. The house had been for rent when Rowena had phoned the agent after seeing the "gad column" announcement about John Blount and Robin going to Biddeford Pool. After she had sent the yellow roses to the hospital Rowena had taken the next step in a rush of determination, closing her mind to any indecision. It all seemed too indicative to hesitate about. This was where she and John Blount had met, and loved, and separated. This seashore was where they had walked, at night, in secret, and kissed in passion. This was where Robin had been conceived.

The agent had known her parents and was very nice about making it easy for Rowena to get the house for a few weeks. He had even hired a maid for her, from the town of Biddeford not far away. Yes, it had been so easy that Rowena had not made a single concrete plan. She knew

Robin at once, when she saw him wandering on the beach with his book one afternoon. She recognized John Blount's well-shaped head, and the firm chin, which, in Robin, had taken on an even stronger line. Seeing Robin coming towards her, Rowena had turned and walked quickly away from him, ahead of him, toward the end of the beach. Her heart was beating furiously. She had taken her courage in both hands at last, and turned back, but Robin was already reading, his shoulders hunched up and his feet kicking up the sand behind him. I can wait, Rowena thought, and passed quite close to him on her way to the house. He will come back, she thought, knowing that this must be so.

And now, three days later, it had happened. She had looked at her son, sat close to him, watched the curious flecks of gold in his eyes, and the play of sensitive emotion on his mouth. She had seen the fineness of his body, with its long legs and arms and the wide shoulders. She had given him something of hers, the Indian scarf, had seen the way he held it delicately in hands still a little unformed, but full of grace and beauty. His hands were not like his father's, no, Robin's hands seemed to relinquish as much as to grasp, to seek as much as to ask. John Blount had always taken what he wanted, with charm but little tenderness.

Rowena stood in the dark, cool hallway and let memory get into her. She had deliberately not done this for a long time, but now she was forced to do it. She was remembering a love that had been her initiation into life, into the bitterness and the struggle and the heady beauty of experience, a woman's experience. She had loved John Blount with everything in her, with her heart and body and imagination.

It was his wife's illness that had brought them together. It was the first year of the war, 1939. Rowena was twenty-three, and lovely. She was also sophisticated and rather bored. John Blount told her at once that, to him, she appeared "European." This was true, because Rowena had

had a cosmopolitan education and was a product, on the surface, of the rattling thirties, the European version. She and her American parents had been everywhere, and seen everything. To her credit, Rowena held onto something inside herself which repudiated the bad and accepted the good in all this wandering about. From someone or some influence in her past, she had inherited a very fine sense of good taste, and this saved her. When John Blount met her first, it was this good taste that struck him most. It sparkled on her model clothes, and in her talk; it prevented her from being too much a part of the society in which she moved.

They met in New York in the Spring of 1939. War, in America, came slowly. New York was gay and inconsequential in 1939. People at parties assured Rowena that when England "fell," the United States would succor her.

Rowena, knowing England, was nettled by this. Once she said, quite loudly, at a dinner party, "But, please, you're quite, quite wrong. England will still be there whatever happens. England will *never* give in." The sadness in the faces around her only made her more irritated. It was obvious that they were certain England could never resist Hitler.

Rowena met John Blount at one of those parties. He was the only Canadian, and they supported each other in their assessment of the war situation. John Blount was sitting opposite to Rowena, and she saw the interest in his eyes. It did not particularly arouse her. Men were always interested. Afterwards, when he offered to take her home, she accepted with only a mild sense of curiosity, the desire to know him better.

He was too old, she thought, to become one of her long string of admirers, and besides she had overheard her hostess say, "How is Emily? Oh, I'm so sorry, how trying for you both." A sick wife, Rowena thought, and at least forty; but nice enough, and, yes, very handsome.

John Blount was not forty. He was a mere thirty-four

when he met Rowena that Spring night in New York. He was quite used to cutting a swathe with women, and Rowena's cool aloofness did something to his vanity. In addition, he was genuinely intrigued by her beauty, her wit, and her "European" sophistication. He thought she was older than she was, about thirty, he thought.

But Rowena was only twenty-three, and she had never been in love. At heart, she was romantic and believing, and her experience of love was rudimentary. Before they had returned from the drive in the park, a detour suggested by John Blount, she was definitely stirred, more, she was deeply excited.

All June, and then July, she remembered that one kiss he had given her on parting. All those weeks, she dreamed and brooded, and then he came to New York again for a brief visit and phoned her. She invited him to dinner at their apartment, where he was a great success with her parents. They thought him distinguished. During the evening, they suggested that he go to Biddeford Pool for a holiday in July, stay at the Inn, and spend tennis hours at the Carig mansion on the beach. He was noncommittal, polite, assured. Rowena was in a fever all evening, and until he left, with a brief caress of his hand on her bare arm, she was in despair, thinking he had forgotten.

Rowena stood in the cool hallway now, thinking back to all this. She shivered, standing there. I am cold, she thought, and went upstairs quickly, disliking the creaking of the old stairs. The agent had told her that the house had changed hands several times since it had belonged to the Carigs. The present owners had furnished it in a rudimentary way, and used it only for occasional week ends. At the moment, they were in Europe and had instructed him to rent it if he could "at a high rent."

Rowena went into the bedroom that had been her own in the old days. There was nothing familiar about it. The present owners had put their discarded bits and pieces in

the house, and it was dark and unattractive. Even the sun seemed to have disappeared from the window. Rowena shivered, and hastily shed her half-damp bathing suit. I wonder why I chose this bedroom, she thought, but she knew very well why she had done it.

When John Blount, with his ailing Emily arrived at the Inn at Biddeford Pool that summer of 1939, Rowena's parents were about to go to Bar Harbor on a visit. Rowena was invited also, but when she said she was going to pay a visit to a girlhood friend in Canada, the Carigs went off in their rapid, complaining way, and Rowena sat in the house and waited.

When she answered the phone the following day, and heard his voice, such a thrill went through her that she felt faint with the strength of this something she knew would be, something she had no control over. This compulsion drove her into the unfamiliar channels of passion, and later into despair; but for the time being there was nothing in her but the drive of desire and romance.

They met for the first time alone, when John Blount walked along the beach one afternoon when he was supposed to be playing golf. He surprised Rowena drying her hair on the front porch. It was very beautiful hair, bronze and alive, and when he ran his hand through it, all the fires in her nature came blazing forth to meet his caress. From that moment, neither of them was careful, or even aware of risk. They met several times in the old, empty house, and gradually Rowena's instinctive fear melted under the force of a shared lust. If Rowena's carefully positive ideas of romance became gossamer during their hours together, she did not admit it to herself. Her lover, asleep, afterwards, in a fog of feral male satisfaction; her own animal reactions, now fully developing; the concreteness of planning their meetings; the growing sense of guilt towards Emily—all these did not spoil the glamour at the time.

Rowena stood at the window of the room where she and

John Blount had been lovers, and thought about Robin, her son. *Her* son. His beauty; his sensitive hands; the way he had come to her at once when she asked him to sit beside her, without fear or restraint. His "Gee, yes thanks." He needs me, he *needs* me, Rowena thought, a strange, fierce possessiveness taking hold of her. She stared out of the window at the sea, now a quiet grey, unmoving. There's a storm coming, Rowena thought, but I don't care. I don't care about anything except my son. *My son*. John Blount seemed very far away, and quite nebulous, as was the memory of her son's birth, and the fierce and heady mixture of pride and anger in her at the time.

John Blount's horror, his generosity with money, her parents' helplessness, all this was a blur she successfully pushed into the background of her mind as it happened. The whole thing had been managed with deftness by herself, with John Blount's money, because she did not want to accept anything from her parents. Afterwards, she had returned the money to John Blount.

The worst part had been the decision to give up her son to adoption, a decision quickly upset by John Blount's suggestion that Robin be incorporated into his own family, by a trick. Emily wanted a son, and had actually suggested that it be done "as though I had really had one, darling."

The rest of it again became a blur of misery, and Rowena had gone to the christening of her son in a sort of dream. She came away silently, as she had gone, hiding in the shadows of the church's pillars. There had been one moment, though, when she had thought her son's eyes had stared into hers. . . .

Rowena could see that strange flash now, as she stood in her old bedroom at Biddeford Pool, thinking about all this. The baby's eyes staring at her, for just that one moment.

Rowena moved away from the window. Her own eyes had gone green and deep. She caught up her robe, and went down the stairs again. In the kitchen, the little maid

from Biddeford was singing while she prepared Rowena's supper. Rowena went into the living room and sat down at the telephone. Her eyes were still dark, but her heart was light. She called London, England, and Nigel Passavant.

Chapter 12

Robin said nothing to his father about the lady on the beach. He put Rowena's scarf carefully in the drawer of the bureau, and covered it with one of his sweaters. It was a big decision to make, and Robin did not realize its significance in his life. From that moment, he sloughed off parental authority, as such, and became just anyone, a fellow on his own. The decision to keep the lady on the beach to himself went very deep. It was instinctive, and its ramifications were to become more and more apparent to him as he went on.

They, Robin and his father, were happier together from that moment. John Blount noticed this change in his son, but as Robin had every appearance of being cheerful and more relaxed, John Blount supposed it was just that Robin was maturing, getting more self-reliant, and that pleased his father. John Blount and Rowena did not meet, although one day in the village, they almost collided at the door of the general store where they had both gone to buy a beach chair. Rowena quickly turned her back, and John Blount did not see her. Soon after that, after several meetings with Robin on the beach, Rowena left Biddeford Pool and went back to Englewood to wait for Nigel's return from England.

Robin and his father, meanwhile, stayed on at the Inn. The weather was pleasant, and Mandy had decided to come

to Maine for the end of her holiday and join them. Mrs. Felter and Hermes also came down to the Inn, and life became suddenly quite gay and active for both John Blount and Robin. There were picnics on the rocks, and tennis and golf and swimming and dancing. Every day was planned to its brim. The three Canadian youngsters, Mandy, Hermes, and Robin, were the focus of much entertaining and good fun. Meanwhile, the romance between John Blount and Mrs. Felter rambled along its more dignified route to what everyone knew was the ultimate conclusion. Mrs. Felter looked like a statue of ancient Greece in her bathing suit, but she had the knack of clothes and she swam strongly and well. She also played a good game of golf. A sort of haze of slowly moving accomplishment caught them all up, and they let things take their course.

For Robin, however, it wasn't so easy. Although the threesome of himself and Hermes and Mandy was harmonious and giddy, it was, to Robin, also a little shrill, and it made him somewhat uncomfortable. Mandy had definitely grown into a young lady, making Robin feel younger than she, and this irked him. Hermes on the other hand seemed young on the surface, but underneath, and in her strange eyes, was an ageless maturity and wisdom which drew from Robin a delighted respect.

"The gal's got a brain," he said unguardedly once, to Mandy, not thinking anything about it; and Mandy's chilly reception of this remark gave Robin furiously to think. After a while, too, he felt better and better about it. Mandy, he saw, was jealous of Hermes. Girls! But Robin was smiling when he thought this, and in spite of his innate modesty he preened himself a little. Unconsciously, he played one girl off against the other in a benevolent sort of way that amused Mrs. Felter and John Blount, watching from the sidelines.

From the moment Robin noticed Mandy's jealousy, a conflict grew up between them, a conflict that Robin rather

enjoyed, because it meant a new matching of wits with Mandy, and he loved her quickness of thought and tongue. But to Mandy, the thing between her and Robin was baffling, and she grew evasive, almost sulky under it. Mandy was possessive and warm; she had always had Robin to herself, until now. It did not matter that she had all the other boys at Biddeford Pool running after her, it was Robin's gleam in the eye she disliked, his new appraising of her.

"Shouldn't you wear white shoes with that outfit?" he asked Mandy one evening on their way to the golf club, where there was dancing.

Mandy stopped short on the narrow path, one slender red slipper on the grassy side of the path, the other down in the groove. She did not look at her feet, but unconsciously she put her red evening bag a little behind her. The dress she wore was a shining cotton with a glint in it of grey over a tiny red print. She had tried white slippers, and silver, and finally the red ones seemed the best, so she had decided on them. Now, hearing the faintly teasing note in Robin's voice, she knew she had chosen wrong. She flushed in the dim light. She looked lovely, standing there, defiant, a big-boned girl with good features and beautiful skin and fine legs. Her feet were well shaped, but larger than she liked, and it was because of this that she was especially touchy.

She said, "What could you possibly know about what's right with this dress?"

There was real antagonism in her voice, and it nettled Robin who only wanted to tease. He said, "Well, don't get ratty. I only wanted to help."

"Help!" Mandy said hotly. "It seems to me, Robin, you're getting awfully sure of yourself, these days. You're not as nice as you used to be. What's changed you? Maybe it's Hermes with her airs and graces."

Hey, Robin thought, this is going out of focus. Better stop it right now. He said, "Hold everything! I didn't mean

to make you mad, Mandy, honey, you look swell, honestly."

He did not take up the challenge of Hermes, or defend her. He took Mandy's arm, and they went down the uneven path together, shoulders close. At the open door of the club house, he stopped her with a touch on her arm.

"O.K.? Not mad any more?"

Mandy looked at him. The music sounded gay and welcoming, from inside, and they could see couples whirling round and round. In the light from the doorway, Mandy's eyes took Robin in, slowly, from head to foot: blue blazer, nice shirt, well-brushed brown hair, good shoulders, fine deep eyes and Robin's firm mouth with the small twist of a smile that was merry and understanding at the same time. Mandy's heart turned over in a sudden and frightening way that she could not stop or even pass over. Her breath fluttered in her chest; she managed a little smile however, and in a second of impulse, she leaned up and kissed Robin lightly on the cheek. They went into the club house together, and Mandy was immediately surrounded.

Robin looked around for Hermes and saw at once that she was dancing with a tall boy from Tennessee whom they had met during a tennis match that same day. Hermes was in dark blue net that swirled out as she danced. It was a simple dress, and she wore no jewelry except several bracelets on her left arm, which glimmered as she moved. She had already acquired a light tan which became her wonderfully, and her teeth flashed in an amused smile at something the Tennessee boy was saying. Her hair looks like ferns in the moonlight, Robin thought, ferns when the light catches the queer shine they have. Hermes' hair, blonde and smooth and unruffled seemed suddenly to Robin to have a lovely and hypnotic pull, like a pinpoint of light that draws the mind into an absorption. A sense of happiness, of well-being, filled Robin. He waited until Hermes and her partner came toward his side of the room, and then he went forward and cut in. "Aw, the heck," the Tennessee boy said good-humoredly, relinquishing Hermes to Robin's arms.

Hermes slipped into his arms lightly, impersonally. Her green eyes were gay and bright, for once, not mysterious or sad as they often were. Robin's arms wanted to tighten around her, but he held her the way her eyes asked of him, the arms of a partner in a dance. They were wonderful together, dancing. The rhythm held them without need for further contact.

Robin could see her eyes on his cheek, and her white teeth flashed as she said, "Someone kiss you, Robin?"

As she said it, they turned and suddenly he was facing Mandy as she danced by in the arms of one of the summer colony boys. Mandy was looking straight at Robin. She had heard what Hermes had asked him. He was about to say something noncommittal, when Hermes took a tiny handkerchief from the bosom of her dress and wiped his cheek with it as they danced.

"There! It's gone!" she said, and laughed gaily, like a child.

Mandy had heard that too, seen Hermes' action. Her eyes, as they rested on Hermes and Robin were hot again, and angry; and suddenly Robin said, "Let's go and buy us a Pool swizzle, it's getting diggety hot here."

They went to the soft-drink counter in the locker room, Robin tentatively fingering the place on his cheek where Mandy's lipstick had marked it. But in the mirror he glanced into in passing, he could see nothing. Hermes light touch had done its work well.

Chapter 13

Linnie LooGuaj was thinking what a relief it was to be in a place where men looked at a woman frankly, without

fear, or ignorance of the formula. It had been too long since she had been to London.. I knew it, she was thinking, I said so, often. It was high time I got away. Canada is fine, but for a woman, there's a certain "thing" about the men. Yes, it will be good for me to be somewhere else for a while. I was getting terribly old.

The Ritz bar was not crowded, and Linnie thought she would sit down at one of the small tables in a comfortable chair, and order something while she waited for Lord Grantly. She felt more like a foreigner than she had imagined she would. She felt that her clothes, although perfectly chosen, lacked something, and she also felt far too much like a stranger, and this she resented. I will never do this again, Linnie thought, I will *never* stay away so long again, why, I see now I was getting positively ossified and Canadian and dull.

She began immediately to plan, and as she did so, the color came into her face and she looked younger at once. She opened her lips to say, "A dry martini, please," and laughed lightly as she changed this order to "Please bring me a Dubonnet, with a dash of lemon in it." Oh, it felt grand! She looked at the women in the room, slowly, sweeping them with her eyes in appraisal. They were definitely chic and easy and having the sort of sweety time that Linnie had been brought up to, and had enjoyed during her marriages. Linnie glanced down at her own well-cut grey suit, and decided to scrap it for the time being, and get herself a few more seductive clothes. Yes, she thought, there *is* something delightfully bitchy about English women. I like it!

Lord Grantly was standing over her before she had time to take the first sip of her Dubonnet. He was smiling warmly, and it made Linnie feel better about her appearance. Lord Grantly was quite an old friend whom she had met when she was Mrs. Foster Howard.

Lord Grantly had sided with Linnie during the divorce. He had said, "My dear child, we all knew about Foster and

that woman, but it never occurred to any of us to warn you about it before you married him. You looked so self-sufficient."

Linnie was remembering the shock of that statement now, as she smiled appreciatively back at Lord Grantly. "Oh, Trevor, how lovely to see you again."

She waved at the seat opposite, and he sat down in leisurely fashion as though he had all the time in the world. That's another delightful thing about them, Linnie was thinking, they always look as though they owned the world and that the world owed them a debt of gratitude for condescending to live in it. She glanced with more appreciation at Lord Grantly's perfectly turned-out form, at his subtly cut clothes and freshly shaven look.

"Oh, it *is* fun," Linnie said, gaily, and laughed.

He looked at her. "Do I detect a slightly satirical note?" he said, his lips going up at the corners.

"Perhaps," Linnie said, "but what it's mixed with is utter and complete contentment to be back."

They both laughed. "I believe I know what you mean," he said. "Waiter! Bring me a martini, please; and I remember, Linnie, you were always as much at home here as you were in Canada."

As the waiter bowed himself away, Lord Grantly said, "I was delighted to get your letter, Linnie, my dear, and to hear you were to be here. I'll admit, though, it surprised me a bit to see the LooGuaj still attached to the Linnie."

"Oh why?" Linnie said, lightly, "you know I've had enough of marriage. It's such fun being free."

He made no comment. After her divorce, he had tried quite hard to get Linnie to marry him, but she had been in a queer mood. Trevor Grantly was too much like Foster, and she was afraid of being reminded of how much she had loved her husband, and how badly he had hurt her. Her marriage to Jan LooGuaj had been a mistake, she admitted it now. Apart from the tiresome mess it had been in a daily

and nightly sense, the name he had saddled her with was enough to make her marry again.

She said now, still smiling, "I'm getting used to the LooGuaj and all its ramifications in the shops and hotels and trying to get telegrams delivered."

"Another of the same?" he asked her, as the waiter put the martini down in front of him. Linnie nodded, and the man went away.

"Tell me about you, Trevor," she said, "Have you sold that huge house yet? And what happened when you went on that safari in Africa?"

"I didn't go to Africa," he said, and leaned back. "I went into business instead."

"Good heavens!" Linnie was genuinely astonished. It always seemed unsuitable to her when an Earl did any work. She looked at Trevor with interest. Antiques, she supposed. Many of her titled friends did that; to get rid of all that mass of horrible but valuable furniture their castles were full of.

"I'm in the clothing business," Trevor Grantly said complacently. "I've gone into partnership with a pal in the ladies tweeds exporting trade."

Linnie put back her head and laughed. It was so very funny! Tweeds! And for women too!

"Well, I do hope," she said, when she could speak, "you find out first what we want over there as you call it, before you send out those great massive suits we can't possibly wear in our hot houses."

He looked at her questioningly, with raised eyebrows.

"What can you mean?" he said, a little stiffly.

Oh, dear, Linnie thought, now I've stepped on his toes, and the first minute we meet too. She frowned. Oh well, it's just as well, somebody must tell them they simply can't sell such stuff with us. She said, quietly,

"You're smart, Trevor, so I'm going to stick to what I said. I always try my level best to 'buy British,' and so do

most of my friends. But why don't you send people out beforehand to see what American and Canadian women want, and to find out about our shapes."

He was smiling again, she saw to her relief. He downed his martini, and leaned forward.

"Shapes? You mean the old female form?"

"I do indeed," Linnie said. "Apparently we're misshapen or something. Your sizes are all wrong for us; they're either too small or too large, and not marked right, also, let's face it, we seem to be more busty and less hippy than the English gals."

He was looking at her now, his eyes travelling down, over her bust, her waist, and to her ankles. He did it slowly, with that slight quirk of his lips. His eyes came up along the same route, and met there.

He said, "I fail to see anything . . . er . . . abnormal there."

There was that old inflexible note in his voice, that maddeningly superior note that meant he wasn't going to pay any attention to Linnie's opinion.

She said, a little tartly, "Well, all right, Trevor, it's your funeral; I was only trying in my bumbling, Canadian way to be of help where it's needed."

But he was smiling into the empty martini glass, and Linnie felt that old sense of frustration. She thought, well, I suppose that is what has made them so great. They always know they're right, and nothing can change it. She felt a little hurt, however, that he had not accepted her hint, or thanked her for it. And we'll go on "buying British" all the same, she thought, with no small irritation.

"May I give you dinner tomorrow?" Lord Grantly said, "And there is a First Night—Fry, I believe the fellow's name is, popular chap in the theatre, I think you should see it, I know you always liked that sort of thing."

"It does sound dull, Trevor," Linnie said, in a good humor again. "Couldn't we go to a musical show instead?"

"Good girl, that's more like it," he said, relief in his voice. "Gosh, Linnie, you were so mad at me a moment ago, I was positively shaking in my shoes!"

Linnie laughed. She said, "Now, a Canadian man wouldn't even have noticed I was mad, and he wouldn't have cared if he had noticed."

And that's true, she thought. Well, we're different, and that's that. She picked up her gloves.

"I must fly, Trevor, thanks for the drink, and I'd love to dine tomorrow, and couldn't we just have dinner and perhaps dance and talk? There's a lot I want to catch up on."

"The old Linnie, she hasn't changed," he said appreciatively. "Very well, my dear, I'll pick you up at eight, and we'll go to the Belly, it's a bit raffish, but quite fun if you take it right."

"It sounds pure heaven," Linnie said, picking up the jargon with a happy dexterity. "And by tomorrow night you won't know me. I shall have made myself completely over, à l'Anglaise."

"Good God, don't do that!" he said, startled. "You're so refreshing the way you are!"

"Oh, pooh to you," Linnie said, nettled. "I know exactly what you mean, and by golly, by tomorrow there will be no more remarks like that one. Refreshing, indeed! By tomorrow, I'll be so sultry and European you won't know me!"

"I think I shall," he said. He ran his hand under her arm as they went out onto Piccadilly. Linnie thought, now, my good woman, be careful. But suddenly she felt light-hearted and full of vitality. She hadn't felt like this, exactly, for quite a long time.

Chapter 14

It was a longer article than Robin had thought, but he continued to read. There was something about it that made him pay particular attention. Maybe this is it, he thought. Maybe this is the time.

The article was a summary by a competent reporter, of atomic progress during the past four years, from 1954 to 1958. The world had hung between life and death for so long that people had begun to forget the peril, to forget the danger of nervous fingers on the triggers of death-dealing instruments which now were available to more persons than the mind liked to contemplate. There were, it was said, atom bombs small enough to be carried in a pocket, and lethal enough to destroy London. There were germ bombs powerful enough to sicken and kill whole populations. There were invisible rays bottled up in plastic containers, which could, it was said, render inert all energy for miles around them. The sun was still pleasant for sun-tanning, and as an amorphous glint on nature, but as an object of veneration and respect or even fear, the sun had taken a back seat to the very real white-hot radiation which at thousands of miles could cause disease, insanity, and a horrible crawling sort of dying.

No, it was difficult to imagine sun-worshippers in these days, and even more difficult to think of nature as something to be reckoned with. Even storms had been controlled in certain areas, and drought was in the process of total cure. Drought areas like Texas and the Sahara had been conquered by new methods and newer chemical application and the magnificent discoveries of man's inventive genius.

The trouble is, Robin thought, all these things are fine and dandy if we don't let them blow up in our faces.

And the people who must take hold of this thing . . . Robin put down the article, his eyes going far off to the ends of his imagination, his mind following. Pictures raced through his mind behind his eyes. The people who . . . I am one of those people, Robin thought. It wasn't a new thought, but it always sobered him, and brought his naturally high spirits down into a channel he was getting used to, a trough of thought. The trouble was no one seemed to think like that. He had tried to make them, but they wouldn't. Robin could see they were either afraid, or unable, to think.

The article said: "Nuclear power, and fissionable materials add up now to a potential of ghastly destructiveness."

Destructiveness! But why? Robin put out his hand and it suddenly came into contact with the wall. The wall felt cool and shiny, and it resisted his hand. Suddenly, Robin put the paper down and leapt across the room to the door. He had to get out, he simply had to get out of the room and into the open.

It was quiet in the garden, but Robin's ears were humming with a strange sound. He shook his head and tried to clear the sound away. It had been there before, this sound, as though millions and millions of humming, living things were battling to get out of a ball of atmosphere. Robin had not bothered about this strange buzzing before; but now he stopped and put his head against the support of the verandah and tried to think about it, to analyze it. The sound gradually faded, but Robin, this time, decided to remember it, and try to find out about it. There must be something to make it. Perhaps it was a new devilish machine "they" were trying out. Perhaps it was not devilish at all, but something grand and magnificent like those new planes, better and even faster than the jets, which could get you to Europe or Asia in a matter of a few hours, and

then settle down gently over an airfield with a silent glide. He would sure love to have a ride in one of those, and why not? One of these days, he would.

Meanwhile, by golly, he had almost forgotten the game. Robin went quickly back into the house, and ran upstairs. He could hear his father's new car crunch on the driveway outside his window, and then he heard Mrs. Felter's voice. Very soon now she was coming to live in this house as his father's wife; and Hermes would be here too. It was going to be quite a riot, Robin thought, suddenly smiling as he pulled his sweater over his head. Yes, quite a riot, with Mandy and Hermes in the same house, all related.

Next year, he was going to Oxford, but a lot could happen in a year.

"Robin, are you in?"

It was Mrs. Felter's deep voice, kind but too commanding. Robin started down the stairs, and saw her at the bottom. He said, "Hi! Yes, coming and going."

She never got what he meant when he spoke like that, so he explained quickly, "There's a ball game, one of the last of the season. I'm playing."

It was well to be firm, otherwise, Mrs. Felter would more than likely ask him to drive her somewhere, to get ice-cream, or fishing-tackle or some such. She was mad for fishing, he had discovered; and this suited John Blount, who loved it too.

The boys were gathering in the playground when Robin arrived at the school. It was an old school, in one of Montreal's fine old streets. A new road would soon be cut through the grounds however, and the school would soon have to find a new home. Robin noticed that the leaves of the trees were already turning yellow, with streaks of red in them. Gee, it hardly seemed possible that a whole year had gone by since football started up the previous autumn.

He felt a pang of regret because he had grown to like baseball. He peeled off his sweater, as the run up the street

had made him hot, and leaned against the fence, watching the others. There was Dan, and Jack Lowden, and Hank Reid. Lowden was honestly in love with Mandy, and made no bones about it; but Mandy, to Robin's way of thinking, treated him disgracefully, wouldn't give the guy a break, kept on being snippy, as though Lowden was a nothing; and he wasn't a nothing. Lowden was quite a fellow. He was head of the school, he was seventeen, he was handsome and would be rich. Also, he was a worker. One of the people who—Robin straightened—the people who would have to run this thing, to decide if the world was to continue to go round or stop; the people who would have to force the issue of death or life.

Robin was staring at Lowden as he approached the fence against which Robin was standing stiffly, tense.

"We'd better get going," Lowden said, "looks like rain, quite soon I guess."

He looked up at a cloud that was darkening the sun, and then at Robin. "Something wrong?" he asked, in his nice friendly voice.

But Robin shook his head, and forced a stiff smile. Not even to Lowden, his best friend, could he ever be able to say what he was thinking. The loneliness of the thought made him catch his breath, and Lowden thought, old Rob's in love, I suppose, with Hermes. Fellow-feeling made him put his arm around Robin as they went toward the others, standing ready to start the game. But Robin, although he gave Lowden a playful buffet, did not smile. He had seen something as Lowden stood there. He had seen a partnership between them, a bond of struggle and mutual suffering, without hope in it. His father had fought one war, and his grandfather had fought in still another. Now it was his turn, his and Lowden's. The thought filled Robin with anger and sorrow and frustration. He went white. It wasn't fair or square. Life was meant to be fun and work and getting useful things done, and where was all this leading to? All

this juggling with gasses and beastly germs and talk, talk, talk with no meaning in it.

For the first time in his life, Robin knew hate, and what it meant. He hated what was before him, hated and despised it, and the trap that life was, just a trap.

"You look mad as hops," Lowden said, "what's up?"

They stood together, as close as two young men could be, in harmony with each other, and in their school responsibilities and in their social kinship; but Robin could feel the shiny cold of the wall in the palm of his hand, and he felt trapped, like one of those badgers he had caught in the country. I've got to think of something, Robin thought, this is no good, it gets exactly nowhere. And suddenly he knew he would fight it, how he did not know, but strength for it was so hot in him that his body tingled. One thing he knew, it would not be with one of those bombs you could carry in a pocket. But he knew he would fight it. He smiled at Lowden. It was Rowena's smile, springing from somewhere deep in him.

Chapter 15

Robin Blount's seventeenth birthday fell on a Saturday in May. It was a fine day, the sun hot and the trees visibly swelling. In the garden of the Blount house which stood in a suburb of Montreal, the tulips were almost out and the hyacinths were ending. Robin had had a grand breakfast of porridge sprinkled with maple sugar, eggs and bacon, and several slices of toast and butter and marmalade. He felt wonderful.

He stood looking down at the bed of tulips, admiring them and feeling sorry for the dying hyacinths. Once, he

would have analyzed away his sorrow for the hyacinths, but his resolution to fight the evil in the world and not let it get him down, had strengthened everything in him. The moral values stood out stark and simple, and there was less confusion in his mind.

The sun struck warm on his smooth bare head, highlighting the bronze of his hair and the tan on his cheeks. Robin had developed during the past year; he had become a fine athlete, good at every game he took up. That part was easy. While he imbibed education, he also kept fit with football and hockey and tennis and golf and swimming. It was a relief to have so much to do.

One of these days, however, he would have to decide on a career. His father was always after him about this.

"But that's fine, my boy, fine," he would say, after Robin had won a cup or a pennant, "and I'm proud of you, but you must get at this matter of a career. What do you want to do? What business do you want to go into, since you don't seem to want to go in with me."

Robin had decided against Oxford after all, and was going to McGill in the autumn. I'd like to go over there later, he thought vaguely; but for the time being, there seemed enough to learn in Canada, right here, at home. Everything was going on in Canada, which in 1959 was booming with prosperous delving and sparkling with power.

In the West, in the North, the world's most important power developments were no longer developments but accomplished fact. In the East, the population had trebled, and housing was one of the greatest problems. Canada was teeming with outsiders: men and women with technical knowledge and know-how, men and women who followed the prosperity of the pioneers, men and women who came to Canada "just to see." It was no longer possible to feel that Canada was still a remote country, with a few dour and hardy folk doing all the work and taking all the profit, and saying as little about it as possible. No, in 1959, Canada's face was definitely lifted, to the sun of material wealth.

So many books had been written, hurriedly, and at the last moment, about Canada, that the Canadian writers felt disgruntled and angry with themselves that they had not thought of writing sensible books about Canada long ago. People in other lands no longer demanded stories about Indians and the wilderness of the woods as symbolic of Canadian literature. Together with the trade brochures and the immensity of the promotional agencies and their output, a small, shy shoot of literature was only now beginning to put its head out of the morass of money and self-importance. Canada's theatre, always strong and flourishing, boomed now with musical shows and smart living-dining-room comedies with a slightly decadent flavor. It was the decadent flavor that people demanded and that brought them into their twenty-five dollar seats in the new theatres.

Painting had long ago become a matter of abstraction, and music, always snobbish, wavered between demand and genius, so that only a few "amateurs" continued quietly to compose and to work at it, without audiences or desire for audiences. Small, closely guarded groups of musicians, poets, and painters, still existed, holding together by the sheer weight of loneliness and the desperate need for fuel for their brave service to the arts.

When John Blount asked his son Robin what he wanted to do with his life, he meant only one thing, of course, and Robin knew this. John Blount meant, what is my son going to do to carve out more money and more success from the worldly point of view?

"But Rob," he kept on saying, "but Rob, but Rob."

And Robin, until now, had not had any reply to give his father. He only had the useful weapons of excellence in his studies and in his games. These, he had to use, knowing them mere tools, and efficient only as outward defence against an inward sense of frustration. What *was* he going to do? How *was* he going to use himself? How long could he wait before deciding?

His friends seemed to find no difficulty, even those who

were faced with problems he himself did not have: lack of background, lack of wealth behind them, lack of brains, lack of personality. All these, Robin had to a marked degree. When John Blount pointed this out to him, Robin shivered. He makes me feel like a sort of stuffed superman, he thought, sheering away from it, hating it.

Inside himself, a small quivering needle pricked and pricked. Inside his good brain, a prayer was forming, a cry which became louder with each year he spent trying out his splendid equipment for a life he repudiated.

There simply did not seem to be a place for a person like himself, not in business, not in the professions either, not in a remote and studious one-track scientific career, not in society. There must be something, he cried inwardly, there must be, there must be; or must I make something for myself? But how?

Looking down at the tulips now, with the sun on him, Robin was thinking these thoughts. His body tingled with health, his eye took in the vivid color of the flowers with a sensuous pleasure, his spirit waited.

Mandy came out of the house and joined him. She was in love with Robin, but she was about to get herself engaged to Jack Lowden because she saw that it was hopeless and that Robin would never love her. She had accepted that last year, after she had come upon Robin and Hermes in each other's arms in the corridor of the Biddeford Pool hotel. She had heard Robin say, "I love you, Hermes. Will you kiss me?"

Mandy had not waited for Hermes to reply. She had slipped back down the stairs and waited until she heard the small noise of two separate doors shutting, and then she had crept up again, and cried herself sick all night.

That had been last year. Mandy had developed into a buxom girl, with firm brown skin and a flashing white smile. She did not like her stepmother, Mrs. Felter-now-Mrs. Blount, but she put up with it.

Mandy went close to Robin and her eyes went down

to the tulips also. She saw something quite different from what Robin's eyes were taking in. To Mandy, the tulips were gay and "pretty," they were the natural expression of spring, and not to be mooned over. She had quickly grown out of her imaginative period, or else the world had killed it. Now, she was an attractive, healthy girl, who would row in with whatever her surroundings would offer, and not put up much of a fight to resist anything that did not closely affect herself. Not now, quite, but later, she would say, "What can we do about it, anyway?" She would say, " 'they' ought to do this, or 'they' ought to do that." She would live a good, unselfish life otherwise, and bring up children which, because of the grace of God, and for no other reason, would turn out to be good solid citizens, and not gangsters and drug-addicts.

Robin smiled to see Mandy now. He ran his arm through hers, not noticing the slight, very slight, stiffening of her arm, or not choosing to notice it. He had worried about Mandy and himself, but now she was settled. Jack Lowden was a grand guy, and he would make Mandy happy, even if she did not love him as much as he loved Mandy. Maybe that was a good idea. It was awful when women fell in love, or thought they were in love. They suffered so much. It all went out of proportion. Girls were always falling in love with Robin. That too, was part of his equipment for life. Lately, however, he had become more adroit at seeing it coming and more adept in stalling it off.

But there were times, when his feeling for Hermes was more than just uncomfortable. Sometimes it was a surging of his blood and a thudding in his ears and a wildness in his brain.

He said to Mandy, "Getting used to the idea of living out west?"

Jack Lowden was graduating in the Autumn, and was taking his Engineering Degree and Mandy, he hoped, to his first job in one of Canada's largest power plants in Manitoba.

It was all so shiny and bright that Robin found it hard to see it as real. New young couple, new job, newly powerful outpouring of the country's wealth. Robin felt envious as he listened to Mandy describing, in unnecessarily emphatic detail, the big new house John Blount had promised to build for them there, the glass sides that let in all the necessary elements and shut out the tiresome ones, the important people who were now flocking to Manitoba, the fun it was all going to be.

Robin withdrew his arm from hers, listening. The emphasis was natural, he supposed, but was she being this way because she still felt angry that he hadn't fallen in love with her, or was it because she too was beginning to reproach him for not being more decisive about his own life?

Sometimes he thought he would like to represent his country in some way, diplomatically perhaps; but that had passed. What was a country anyhow? And Canada was being perfectly represented now by the men and women she sent across the narrowed world, people with clear-cut and materialistic ideals, and without inhibitions about values which hampered their thinking and actions.

Mandy said, a little impatiently, "Robin, I've been thinking. You said once you might like to be a diplomat. Well, I think you'd be splendid. You're popular, and suave, and distinguished looking. You've got a brain, and you can talk the hind legs off a donkey. Why don't you begin now? Father can help you, and it would please him a lot."

Funny, Robin thought, how an idea in someone else's voice can suddenly burst into a thousand fragments of sad disillusionment. He knew he had decided against the idea before this, but he was still toying with a compromise career. This, in Mandy's clear young voice, finished it.

He said, quietly, "Don't worry about me, Mandy, I'll be O.K."

He turned away from Mandy and started down the driveway to the garage. I'll have to watch it, he thought,

I'm getting ratty about things. It isn't Mandy's fault. And then he thought, I wish I could see Mrs. Passavant; she'd be able to help me see things more clearly.

Chapter 16

One day, in the early autumn of 1959, Robin decided he wanted to be alone somewhere, out of town. He wanted to think, without anyone to interrupt.

The Blounts had decided against Biddeford Pool that summer, and had gone to England, all five of them, John Blount and his Mrs. Felter-Blount, Hermes, Mandy, and Robin. It had been a strange trip altogether, with human emotions coming between their enjoyment and themselves. The new Mrs. Blount was a little uneasy and arch in her new role, and John Blount was trying too hard to satisfy her. Mandy, in love with Robin, was unhappy because of his growing attraction for Hermes, and Hermes was in the chrysalis stage—becoming a woman. Yes, it was a strange trip.

England was booming with a revived self-confidence born of her new role as elderly statesman and adviser in world affairs. Her quick grasp of a new idea stood her in good stead, and her comforts-for-tourists campaign was paying off. There were still Englishmen, of course, who complained bitterly against the new heating in hotels and shops, and those who fought the building of the new broad highways; but by and large, the return to prosperity had been a good thing, and lackluster eyes took on the old alertness. The British workman snapped out of his old lethargy. He was forced into renewed interest because England was

in the lead in certain industries, where quality, that old-fashioned word, was necessary in the making of such products as precision instruments, and machinery which had to stand up against the terrific pressures of the new power that drove it.

The London theatre was now the Mecca for true drama lovers, and poetry and painting and music flourished in a new unfolding.

To Robin, who had been to England twice before, it was a joy and a stimulation. He and Hermes went from concert to art exhibition, and to theatre after theatre. They bought and read books and met some of the people who produced all this. While John and his new wife went about with tycoons and the elder statesmen, Robin and Hermes delved into the deeper consciousness of the new England, and found it exciting and fun.

Linnie wasn't in England. She wrote from Italy saying she was having a wonderful time, but not elaborating.

It was Mandy who had the bad time, at first; she was the fifth wheel, and resented it, and she had not yet decided to marry Jack Lowden. Then Mandy met a young Englishman who still felt that "the colonies" presented better opportunities for such as he, and who was planning to go to Canada, in search of his fortune, which he intended to hew out of deep beds of ice and in the defensive face of hordes of Indians, Eskimos, and other uncouth folk.

When Mandy, rather tartly, reminded him that Canada was no longer a "colony," and that although Eskimos and Indians were respected citizens of Canada, they were not likely to be romantically menacing, the young man merely said, "Oh, I say, I do apologize," and went right on with his theme, unchanged. So Mandy, too, had a good time in England, and it was with a sense of stimulation that all five of them sailed back to Canada in September, and settled once again into John Blount's big house at the back of the Mountain.

It was Robin's last year at school, and for week-ends he joined the others in the charming house at St. August, which John Blount had recently bought, together with the small lake beside it.

Robin had driven up very early this Saturday morning, before the others. It would give him an hour or two alone to do his thinking. The house was empty and calm in the autumn mist, as he parked his car in front of the garage, to which he had no key. He lifted out his bag, and set it down on the front steps, and then he thought he would go round to the woodpile at the back of the house and bring in a few logs for the fire-place.

He had had his breakfast on the way up at one of the numerous food palaces lining the route, and he thought he had better wait a while before plunging into the cool waters of the lake. Behind the house, the woods had been left to themselves in a virgin roughness. The trees grew, wild and beautiful, in the midst of tawny underbrush, where in the Summer, one could pick blueberries and wild strawberries and many kinds of white flowers as they grew happily between the roots of the trees. In the lake, Robin could see reflected in the morning mist which shifted their contours, deep green firs and red and gold maples, against which the slim stalky trunks of white birches made a tracery of delicacy.

Robin paused in the path leading to the woodshed, and then he decided to go a little farther around the lake in order to prolong the intense pleasure he felt in the beauty of the morning. His feet made little sound as he walked, as he had been taught, very young, to walk like an Indian. In the silence and sweetness of the scented wood, he felt suddenly relaxed and happy. He could see the jetty, and the two rowboats in the water. The farmer who looked after the woods and grounds had emptied the boats of rain water, and put the cushions, under their plastic coverings, into the canoe, ready for the week-end.

Robin stopped. The canoe looked comfortable and alluring, like a dog at leash waiting to go for a run. He walked slowly down the short path, and pushed the canoe into the water. The paddle was in the bow, and the cushions felt soft and welcoming under his shoulders. Robin picked up the paddle and sent the canoe rapidly into the middle of the lake, watching the abstractionist effect made by its wake in the reflections of the maples and birches. It was as though he floated in a sea of fire. Now, I can think, he said to himself.

Suddenly there was a sound of wings, and a flock of wild ducks came down in the lake quite near to Robin. He could see their little eyes looking at him. He could see them breathing. They rested lightly on the water, but they were, to Robin, obviously tired.

He said, gently, "Well, take your time. I can see you need a rest. What part of the South are you heading for, I wonder?"

The ducks started to prink. Some of them turned their backs on Robin to do it, fluttering their wings, and washing the effects of the long trip from their bodies. They made quite a flutter and splash. One or two of them seemed to fall asleep. They lay quietly on the water, not moving, their eyes closed. Robin noticed that these kept themselves apart from the others, as though they were the leaders, in conference. He was certain they were talking to each other, planning the rest of the flight. He laughed, but the ducks did not pay any attention.

"You know darn well I haven't got a gun," Robin said, "and that I wouldn't use it if I had."

He moved in the canoe, and one or two of the ducks turned watchfully in his direction. He said, "It's O.K. I won't hurt you; but all the same I'll have to push off back to shore in a few minutes, or my father will think I'm lost in the woods." He waved to the ducks. "You stay as long as you wish," he said, smiling, "we're glad to have you."

He put his head back against the cushions, and settled his long body deeper into the canoe. The sun was pushing strongly through the mist now, and he could feel its warmth. Now, he would do this thinking, this important thinking. The ducks would probably help.

This thinking. Instead, he fell asleep.

The dream was extraordinarily vivid. In the dream, he was coming along the path behind the house, just where it turned off to the little jetty. And then he saw the man, standing in the path quietly, looking at him. Behind the man, and about waist high, an object lay on the path, blocking it. The object was rounded at the top, and tailed off in a sort of fin. It was a queer blue color which seemed to shine and yet did not reflect the rays of the sun. It glowed, rather.

Robin stopped about twenty feet away from the man, and their eyes met. In the man's eyes, there was neither surprise nor shock, just a sort of friendly benevolence on which Robin immediately relied.

"I am glad," the man said in an even and controlled voice, "that you are not afraid."

"Should I be?" Robin said, and laughed.

"You must forgive me if I have no laughter," the man said, in that calm and even voice which showed no emotion but was rather like a musical instrument making its last rehearsal sounds, quietly and alone.

"We have learned English," the man said, "but our laughter is within and we seldom make a sound with it."

Robin looked at the object behind the man. He said, "And that thing?"

The man continued to look closely at Robin as though appraising him.

"That is what you would call a space ship, I believe. We use another term; however, space ship is imaginative enough. We are always grateful when your imaginations make it easier for us to communicate."

"Look here, sir," Robin said, "this is O.K. by me, but perhaps it would be a good idea if you explained."

He felt no fear at all, but all his faculties seemed to be pricked into abnormal alertness.

The man said, "I did not intend to come down here. Something went wrong in my—space ship. Something magnetic I did not expect in this exact locality. I must refuel before I can take off again."

"I expect it might be the new iron deposits we've just found in the Laurentians," Robin said. The words sounded perfectly normal.

"That might be so," the man said, "and I must generate a counter vibration before I can draw out of it. I am in process of doing that now." He pointed to the object, which, as he spoke, took on a new glow, and a slight vibration could be seen in it.

"I would like to ask a question," Robin said.

Without waiting for Robin's question, the man said, "I am from the planet Corfus. We are not seen by the Earth yet; we have been in existence much longer than the Earth, and have lived in harmony with you, unknown to you since the time Earth was formed; but now there are elements, both human and scientific, on Earth, which threaten to disrupt the cosmos entirely. They are caused by incorrect thought and mistakes in the direction of science. We are very much disturbed by this and wish to assist you to rectify the situation before it is out of hand."

"You speak good English," Robin said, smiling.

"We were forced to learn English in order to communicate," the man said gravely, "we have your books, you know. We have long ago made studies of your cultures."

He did not say any more, and Robin felt that the people on Corfus did not think very highly of culture here below.

He took a deep breath, and said, "And what . . . er . . . what's your object now? I mean, what do you intend to do? Where are you heading for? When you get refuelled, I mean?"

The man smiled now, a deep, kind smile that warmed Robin to him. He said, "We are looking for the right people to take the lead in helping us to review and revise your values in order to prevent further damage. If your objectives of destruction and hatred continue, Earth will disintegrate, and that would disturb the entire cosmos. We cannot afford to let this occur."

"Do you believe in God?" Robin said, the words coming out of him unexpectedly.

The man had half turned to look at the object behind him, but now he faced Robin again, and this time, there was such a vitality coming from him that Robin went back one step. The man also recoiled.

"I am sorry. We had better not stand too close to each other until we have experimented with the safety reflexions more carefully," he said. He took another pace backward.

"We from Corfus have very strong vibrations, you see. They are now too strong for Earth people, and we must first decode them before we may communicate by touching." He continued, gravely, "Yes, we do believe in God. We have good reason for this."

He turned to the object which now was trembling violently. Its greenish blue color grew deeper, but still there was no reflection from it, although the sun was now shining brightly as the morning advanced. Robin watched him tensely.

"I believe it is fortunate we have met," the man said, with his back to Robin, and for the first time, Robin noticed what he wore. It was a sort of tunic in a grey color, and slim trousers which ended in a stocking covering his feet. His hands were bare, and on his head, instead of the usual hair, there was a pale shadow as though he had had hair and had shaved it off. His hands were like any other hands, only perhaps slimmer and finer in texture than most men's. His face was well formed, with good bones, and tanned skin. It was the eyes, however, that marked him as old.

They were very deep and dark and intelligent. They seemed to see right into Robin's mind.

"It is fortunate we have met," he said, "because I believe you to be the type we are looking for, a young man with intelligence, a modicum of fear, and spiritual maturity."

And then he suddenly took a long deep breath with a hiss in it, as though in pain. He said, quickly, "I must now refuel. I must now communicate with our Command." He turned to Robin, and spoke urgently. "Since you have been so intelligent, I wish to speak with you further, but I cannot. I must refuel. I must communicate!"

Robin took a quick step forward, but the man halted him with his hand. He was standing beside his ship, and both the ship and the man seemed to vibrate together. Robin felt a terrible urgency to stop the man, but words would not come.

The man smiled gravely at Robin, and again Robin felt the almost unbearable strength of his understanding. It produced an exhilaration, an elation. He said, excitedly, "If you people can get so close, *feel* such sympathy, and communicate it, why can't we? Tell me how! Tell me!"

But the man had turned to his ship. He disappeared into it. There was a sharp whirr, and the ship mounted straight into the air with incredible speed.

Robin opened his eyes. He was trembling. He sat bolt upright. The ducks had taken flight. It was the whirr of their wings that had wakened him. There they were, in flying formation, disappearing over the brow of the hill behind the lake.

Robin said, "Well, that's a fine thing! To take off like that, without saying good-bye!"

He did not know whether he was thinking of the ducks or of the dream he had just had. He shook his head to bring back reality again, and picked up the paddle. As he did this, he saw the hawk. It was coming swiftly, unerringly,

across the sky. It was flying very high. It looked sinister and dangerous. It was after the ducks. Even though they had not seen it, the ducks had sensed danger. Those leaders that Robin had watched, must have been awake all the time, watching.

"Well, what do you know!" Robin said to himself. He watched the hawk, flying steadily onward, after the ducks.

"The devil!" Robin thought, "Now I wish I had my gun!"

The hawk disappeared. Robin thought, I'll never know; again, he wasn't sure if he were thinking of the drama of the ducks or of his dream.

He beached the canoe quickly, and then he heard the sound of a car crunching on the gravel of the driveway of the house. He ran up the path, and around the far side of the woodshed. When he appeared a moment later, he was carrying two heavy logs which he deposited carefully beside his bag on the steps. He smiled at his stepmother, and at Hermes, who had got out of the car before the chauffeur had driven it into the garage.

"Hi!" said Hermes happily. She was looking wonderful in a pink cotton dress which showed her tanned arms and legs.

Chapter 17

"Robin! Come here!"

It was John Blount's voice, sounding more animated than usual, even excited. He came close to Robin, and put one hand affectionately on his shoulder, fishing in his pocket with the other.

"Look at this!" he said, and thrust a cablegram into Robin's hands. Robin read it quickly, the words making quick and amusing sense. He said,

"Well, good for Auntie!"

"Why, you snob, you!" John Blount said, but he sounded pleased.

Mrs. Felter had come firmly across the grassy slope from the garage and joined them. She was carrying a fishing rod and a box of tackle and flies. Robin politely took the box from her, and deposited it with one hand on the steps beside his firewood. He was still studying the cable, his lips smiling.

"An earl, I believe," Mrs. Felter said, in a noncommittal way. She had always vaguely disapproved of Linnie Loo-Guaj, but this marriage did seem to be quite a good thing, an English earl, and of a very old English family.

She said, "The Grantly family are a very old and distinguished one. My mother knew one of the girls; they went to school together in France."

The cable said, extravagantly:

"Have married a divine Englishman happier than I ever knew I could be he sells clothes very old family an earl name of Trevor Grantly we are coming to Canada end of October after shootin and fishin etc over here will live half here half there sake of money and taxes and so on you should see his castle am buying masses lovely clothes match it very much love wish me luck and Trevor too special love to Robin LINNIE"

"The one thing that puzzles me," said Mrs. Felter, on her way up the steps in the wake of the chauffeur with their bags, "is the phrase 'he sells clothes.' What in heaven's name can she mean by that? Some joke, I presume."

She turned and looked down at Robin, and he saw that her eyes were not at all like her voice. In them was a warm

affection and a sort of camaraderie. She said, "What do you think, Robin?"

He had noticed this in her lately, noticed that she came to him for opinions, asked his advice on things. He had taken it lightly, until now; but now he saw that she was beginning to depend on him for something, and it worried him. He thought, I wish I could love her, but I just don't feel anything.

"Oh, I guess he sells clothes, period," he answered. "Lots of Englishmen are in trade now. It isn't the social error it used to be, and they have to, anyhow. Remember the James' and the Royce's? They'd had to close up their houses long ago. Why, at the James', we stayed in what used to be the gamekeeper's lodge."

"But *clothes!*" Mrs. Felter said. Her voice dropped a little, addressing Robin exclusively. She said,

"You don't suppose he could be a Jew, do you, Robin?"

Robin laughed, wishing she would go on into the house and let him alone to think about what he had just experienced in the path at the back of the house.

"What's this about Jews?"

John Blount had finished talking to the chauffeur, and stood beside Robin, looking up at his wife with an expression of kindly, rather bewildered, respect. He had discovered that she was a very good business woman, and ran her farm implement factory with efficiency and dash. He himself had no snobbish prejudices or racial feelings, and his wife's remark about Jews and the clothing business fussed him.

He said, "Now, now, my dear, Jews are all right, and I'm sure Mr. . . . er . . . Lord Trevor Grantly isn't one anyway."

Again, Robin laughed. "I'd better take this wood into the house before Hermes trips on it." He was looking at Hermes' slim feet on the step above him. They were beautifully tanned, with pink toe-nails, and perched up on a pair of red

wedgees that matched the belt around the pink dress. Hermes' feet moved under Robin's eyes, and he saw her hands come down towards the wood.

"I'll help you," she said, "give me one of them."

Robin picked up the two logs, which were heavy, and his eyes came on a level with Hermes'.

He thought, she's like that, always will be, hands out to help where she can. He smiled down at Hermes. They were standing very close to each other. Robin could see the tiny crisscross lines at the sides of her eyes as she smiled at him, and the fine straight nose, and the sweet young skin of her neck. Her lips looked different, full and inviting. He shifted the logs a little, but he still looked down at her, his decision suddenly made.

He did not say anything, merely smiled, and passed her on the steps as he carried both logs into the house. His whole being was suddenly flooded with warmth and excitement and happiness. I love her, he thought, I love her, that's what has been missing all along. The profoundness of this truth hit him in a welter of true ecstasy. He had never really loved anyone before. Except maybe, except maybe, Mrs. Passavant, and that he could not explain, and did not try to. Between him and Rowena had sprung up a sort of conspiracy of sweetness and trust which Robin could not understand. Before she left Biddeford Pool the previous summer, she had given him her address in Englewood, and had written to him once, asking if he could come and visit her there. He had kept the letter to himself, wondering how to manage it. Somehow, he could not bring himself to speak of Rowena to anyone. Since then, he had seen Rowena once only. The opportunity had come during the Christmas holidays last year when Robin had had a chance to go to Troy, N. Y. to play hockey for his school. He had written to Rowena, and she and Nigel Passavant had met him in New York, and taken him out to Englewood for the day, depositing him at the station at night in time for the train

back to Montreal. Robin had said, evasively that "one of the fellows' aunt" had entertained him in New York, and no one had questioned it, rather to Robin's surprise.

It had been a wonderful day, and Rowena's happiness in Nigel was so infectious that Robin was caught up in a web of pleasure and lightness of spirit. But the relationship between himself and this woman was strange and somewhat frightening in its strength, its pull. Robin was a little wary of it, but Rowena seemed unaware of anything, and Robin relaxed.

Her smile, as she stood at the foot of the steps of the train late that night, was something Robin had never felt so strongly in his heart before. She's like my . . . mother, he thought, she's like what I wanted . . .

And then, in loyalty to the pale woman who had mothered him in John Blount's home, he withdrew the conscious thought, and instead, kept the memory of Rowena's smile deep inside him. It was enough, he judged, having someone like Rowena in his life. He would not question it, but just accept it.

"Don't you think, darling, you ought to tell him?"

Nigel Passavant spoke to Rowena that night as they lay in bed together after seeing Robin off at the train. Rowena moved closer to her husband, and stroked his chest inside his pajama coat. It felt fine and firm and like silk.

"You're too beautiful to be true," she said. There was a long silence, and then Rowena said, "I think it's better this way. You see, he needs me, terribly. Obviously, he hasn't been able to love anyone before, somehow. And he needs me. I think it's better, for now anyhow, not to clutter the relationship with concrete meanings."

Nigel held her closer. He said, into her hair,

"You have the wisdom of Circe and the loveliness of Eurydice."

Rowena laughed softly, holding him closer and closer. She said, "She went to Hell, eventually, didn't she?"

Nigel said, "In the end, he found her, remember?"

"Orpheus?"

"He found her, I believe, and I'm sure she did Hell one hell of a lot of good."

"But I don't want to do good." Rowena said, drowsily, "I'm sleepy, darling. I only want to be here when he needs me."

She was thinking of Robin, with that love which only a mother feels and understands.

Now, as Robin put the logs down in the basket beside the fire-place, he was thinking of Hermes, and of Rowena. He wanted to see Rowena, to consult her. Well, why not? Why not go down to Englewood? He'd think up some good enough reason for going away for a week-end. He'd phone tomorrow and ask himself down. As he decided this, a sense of exultant satisfaction filled him, and he started to whistle.

Chapter 18

Nigel Passavant sat talking benevolently to the pretty girl, but his mind was on his wife, sitting across the room, and on Robin Blount, who was half-facing her. From where he sat, Nigel could see them both very clearly, both their faces, and especially Robin's tense attitude as he talked to and looked at Rowena.

The pretty girl was hanging on Nigel's every word. She was the daughter of a neighbor, and had been invited over for cocktails before she and Robin went off to a dance at the country club. The whole evening had been tactfully manoeuvered by Rowena, who felt that Robin would enjoy the pretty girl and the dance better than staying at home

with her and Nigel. This wasn't true, because Robin, although he had been polite about it, wanted more than anything in the world, to talk to Rowena. However, he had fallen in with her plan for the evening with his usual grace.

Nigel sat relaxed in his chair, looking distinguished and handsome and younger than his years. He was a perfect picture of the Englishman who appears in colored advertisements in abnormally correct clothes with a tumbler of Scotch in his hand. Even the streak of grey at his temples was in keeping. He went on talking lightly to the pretty girl, but his mind was on the two across the room. He was beginning to get really worried. He felt it wasn't fair to an intelligent young man like Robin to hand him something that was not clear, like giving a fine duellist a dull foil to defend himself with. It was time, Nigel felt, that Robin knew about Rowena being his mother.

The pretty girl saw that his attention wandered. She said afterwards to Robin, "Mr. Passavant is the *most* fascinating man, isn't he? But he's so much in love with his wife that he can't bear to have her even sit five feet away from him."

When Robin got back from the dance, which had rather bored him, he was faced with Nigel, who sat deep in an easy chair reading a book. Nigel smiled at Robin, and said, "Have a night-cap? Help yourself."

He waved at the decanters on the server, and Robin went over and poured himself out some gingerale, and put a large piece of ice in it. He did not like drinking particularly, although he could match anyone at it when necessary. Nigel noted the gingerale with approval, although it did not show in his face. He said, "It's too hot to sleep; let's chat for a bit."

Robin did not want to talk, but he came over and sat down on the chesterfield near Nigel, and put his head back on the cushion. "I feel so much at home here; it's nice of you to let me come."

There was a silence. Rowena's last words to Nigel before

going up to bed had been, "All right, darling, I think you're right; and I want you to do it. I think it would be less of a shock, coming from your nice calm voice."

The silence wasn't quite right, and Robin felt it. Nigel wanted to say something, and Robin felt nervous about it. He sat forward, balancing his glass between his hands. He looked up at Nigel, and their eyes met. Nigel spoke then.

"I've something to tell you, old boy, something that may come as a shock. Rowena and I decided I was the one to do it."

Robin put his hands into his pockets, after setting the glass down carefully on a table.

Nigel looked at him, and cleared his throat. He said, "I always think it's best to say something difficult right off, get it over with, don't you?"

"Sure," Robin said, "I couldn't agree more. What's up?"

"If I were to tell you that my wife is your mother, how would that strike you?" Nigel was looking squarely at Robin, his face kind, his voice gentle yet firm.

Nigel saw Robin's eyes go dark, very dark. His mouth tensed, and he stiffened. Nigel thought, we've done this just in time; it was beginning to be a nasty deception.

Robin looked at Nigel and said, "I'd believe it only from a person like you; could you elaborate?"

I believe him, he thought, it's wild and crazy, but that's what it's been all along, something I didn't begin to understand, but I believe it's true. His mind felt dazed. Emotionally, he was in a turmoil of shifting feeling, anger at not knowing all along, a fierce resentment, a desire to clutch at what had been, and a small yet persistent relief. Something was clicking into place, and to Robin it meant the pattern becoming clearer and more harmonious. Yes, it was partly relief, to have this tension lifted.

He listened to Nigel telling him. Nigel did it beautifully, just right, in his "nice calm voice," that gave out to Robin, and did nothing else. He made the story of Rowena's

affair with Robin's father sound rather like an old, old tale which time had rendered respectable and artistic rather than immoral and shocking.

Nigel said, suddenly, "I wish I knew what you were thinking, Robin, so that I might go on or stop, whichever would be best."

And then Rowena was standing in the door, in a wide, billowing negligee, with her hair ruffled. She had been trying to sleep upstairs, but could not. She stood there, looking at Robin, and when he saw her, Nigel stopped speaking, and waited, his heart going out to both of them.

Robin got up slowly as though he were in a dream. He faced Rowena. His hands were held stiffly at his sides, and Nigel saw that he was trembling; but Rowena could see his eyes, and what she saw there brought a rush of color to her face. She came forward to Robin. Nigel thought there was an effect of floating; all of them floating on a web of intense emotion. Rowena put her hands out to Robin. She looked like a little girl, asking to be taken up into warm and comforting arms.

Robin took her hands, and looked down at them; and suddenly he stooped and held them against his face, burying his eyes in them, and Rowena felt his tears on her palms. They stood there quietly, not saying a word, and to Nigel the effect of floating was still strong.

Nigel thought, two people with souls, two people who are real, and vital, the kind of people who recognize love at once, in the right way, the harmonious and useful way, the compelling way. He got up and went to them, and turned them towards him with a hand on each of their shoulders.

He said, to Robin, "I should be very proud and happy if you would let me share you with my wife, let me be as much of a father to you as I have a right to be."

He smiled at Robin, and drew Rowena closer, putting his arm around her. The emotion in them went right through

Nigel, into his body; but Robin's eyes were calm again, and he had stopped shaking.

"Cripes! What a thing!" he said. He sounded very happy, and heady, and not young. It was a man speaking, with confidence. He said, in a wondering voice, "You've given me the key to what I have to do. Between you, you've given me the key."

Rowena leaned forward and kissed him gently, carefully, not wanting to make a mistake in this moment of finding new meaning in life for all of them. She wanted to hug him to her, but she thought, rather painfully, I must not grab, it's his life first, his happiness, and I must be grateful and not think of myself, ever.

Then she turned and kissed Nigel, not gently, but with a passion of love and appreciation.

Nigel said, "This calls for something, doesn't it? It's odd, but at times like this, the modern man can think of nothing but having a drink."

They all laughed, and Rowena said quickly, "Let's go into the kitchen, and we'll have milk and sandwiches. I'll make some in no time."

Arm in arm, they went out of the room and down the hall towards the kitchen, and as they went, Robin said thoughtfully, "At my christening, you wore a grey sort of dress, and your hands were brown."

Both men looked down at Rowena's hands, gently clenched on their arms. They were brown, and smooth and strong. Neither Rowena nor Nigel thought it a strange thing for Robin to say, until afterwards.

Chapter 19

The doctor's assistant closed the door on Mrs. Hander, and Mrs. Hander half-turned to go back into the doctor's office, but then she realized it would not be possible. She had already waited two hours for the few minutes she had had with him. And she a registered nurse! To be treated that way!

Ruth Hander turned, bridling, and slowly descended the steps of the private house in which the doctor had interviewed her; his house—his large, opulent house in this wide and fashionable street. What had he ever done to rate all this? Ruth Hander's thin lips tightened, and she hurried. Her heart was beating furiously, and her usually pale face was flushed. How had he dared to speak to her like that! Calling her a drunk, practically. Ruth Hander was trying desperately to evade facing what the doctor had said; but as she walked with somewhat uneven steps along the street toward the corner where she would take a bus back to her own part of the city, she was unable to push it away any longer. A bad heart; that's what he had said, practically. As a nurse, Ruth Hander had recognized with a frenzied alarm, the terms he had used.

And he said drink was very bad, would hasten her end, if she didn't stop. As though the drinking were his business. He had talked to her coldly, accusingly; "Mrs. . . . er, with valvular weakness, you should never touch alcohol." And, after the outburst which she had hurled at him, the pained expression of boredom, and his dismissal: "Well, Mrs. . . . er, I am extremely sorry, but if you will follow the orders I have given you, and are very careful with your, er, diet,

you may yet live many useful years. If you do not——" Shrug, raised hands, a forced smile of sympathy, and she was out.

And she a registered nurse, to be treated as a common drunk! Ruth Hander, still bridling in spite of the small warning prick of pain under her left breast, boarded her bus and sank or rather flounced into a vacant seat. She could hardly wait to be home, where she would show that doctor that she wasn't the kind of person to be pushed around.

When her son Leonard came home from work, his mother was lying in a stupor half-on and half-off the kitchen table. There was a smell of burning macaroni, and a wet puddle on the floor where a gin bottle had overturned. Leonard Hander went to the window and flung it up. He turned off the gas under the macaroni, and then he went over to his mother's form, and foul language poured from him into her sodden face. He lifted her head by the hair, stared at her face, and dropped her head back onto the table with a bump. It brought Ruth Hander to. She grunted, and moved. The chair under her slid away, and she fell onto the floor, and burst into loud sobs. Even the glass of cold tap-water he threw into her face did not stop the sobs; but it did flick her back into awareness.

"Get goin'," the young man said, "get my supper, you——"

Sniffling and hiccuping, the woman dragged herself to her feet and went to the frigidaire. There was no sound now but the click of dishes on the bare table, and the angry meal being eaten.

At the end of it, she said, "And I, a registered nurse, to be called a common drunk!"

Len stopped his chewing on a stale ham sandwich to say, "Oh, ya, the doc. What did he say?"

The likeness between them was striking. The same thin lips, the same pale eyes set too close by together. The woman's prettiness which percolated even through the ravages that her misuse of life had wrought, was apparent

in her son's narrow bones and fine complexion. They looked at each other.

It was at that moment, that Ruth Hander decided to tell her son a secret she had kept for eighteen years. If she was going to die, and she knew this very well, maybe he would be able to cash in on it. Funny she had never thought of that before; in fact, she had not thought of the thing at all for years.

She said, "Lemme see, his name was . . ."

She knew that if she tried very hard, she would remember; she got up and put some coffee into the percolator. The doctor had said, "No coffee, of course," but this was important. The small prick of pain in her chest suddenly became worse as she stooped to light the gas under the coffee. Len was swinging on the back legs of his chair, drinking noisily from a bottle of milk. He was reading the evening paper, his heart a black mass of resentment and rage at the pictures he saw there. Photos of rich guys! Guys who make the pages of a newspaper! And for what? Just for playing ball! Here was this guy Blount, Robin Blount, holding a silver cup. Tennis! Tennis champ! A sissy game! And what had he ever done to get to play tennis and the like, live on the fat of the land? While guys like himself had to sweat blood just to get along!

The coffee was perking, and his mother poured herself a cup. She brought it to the table, and sat down. She said, "There's something I want to tell you, Len, something I promised your father I wouldn't; but things being as they are, and you with no education, and me like this—well, I'm going to tell you."

Lennie Hander looked at his mother over the newspaper, over the photograph of Robin Blount holding the tennis cup. His eyes were hot and angry.

He said, "Make it snappy, I've got a date with some of the boys."

He did not tell her that the "date" was for a drive into the Laurentians to a newly closed summer cottage, where

his gang were going to strip it of what one of their group in the district had said was a "swell haul" of electrical equipment and beach stuff, including an outboard motor.

He watched his mother sip the steaming coffee, and his impatience gave way to curiosity. There was something queer about her tonight; she looked sort of sick, he thought, not drunk-sick, but real sick. Maybe the old lady had something good to let him in on, for a change; maybe he had better listen.

She said, "I don't see why a man like that doctor can get an education and live on the fat of the land, while my own son hasn't even been to college, or to Europe, or anything."

She took another sip of coffee. "It's this way; it was when I was nursing. I was a good nurse. I got good cases, rich cases——"

He made an impatient, rough gesture, and threw the paper down on the table with Robin's picture uppermost. Ruth Hander did not see it. Her mind was turned inward, in bitterness of memory that filled her with an angry frustration. She started to tell him the story she had promised her husband never to tell, in case, as her husband had insisted, it would "hurt somebody."

"Your father was a weak man," Ruth Hander said. "But it's a funny thing I never thought until tonight how it might let us in on something good, for ourselves, if we handle it right."

Len noticed that his mother was very pale now, and a faint stir of compunction made him say, uneasily,

"You better lie down. You can tell me tamorra."

But Ruth Hander, as though hypnotized by the memory, went on talking slowly, trying to remember details. The story she told was the damaging recapitulation of a nurse's suspicions after overhearing a phone call. It was the story of Emily Blount's desire to have a child, and of John Blount's connivance at the carefully worked out plan to make it seem that Robin was her son.

The story gave the details of the overheard phone call,

when John Blount had said: "Listen, Rowena, you're just having a reaction. You know it's best all round, we've been over all that. You don't want the child, and you know I'll see to it that you see him from time to time, and you know, remember, that it's far, far better for him than if you brought him up a bastard."

Then there was the $1,000 cheque that John Blount had paid Ruth Hander, then unmarried.

She repeated the bit of dialogue: "Well, Miss Travers, thank you for the very fine way you have looked after my wife. This cheque is to express my appreciation of your care, and, er—your discretion."

At the end of this part, Ruth Hander made cryptic reference to her own reply: "I said, 'Thank you, Mr. Blount. I have always said little pitchers have long ears, and I'm sure least said soonest mended!' and I didn't feel a bit bad about taking his cheque. After all, I *might* have gone to the doctor about it, but I've never been one to meddle in other people's business; and if he wanted to palm off one of his bastards on his wife, for a thousand bucks, he's welcome."

Ruth Hander paused. "It was a crackpot idea all along, but I didn't care. It was their idea and their money, and they paid me well for it, paid me not to say anything, and I didn't. I'll remember more about it later."

She finished her coffee, and put the cup back onto the table. She said, "One more thing I do remember; I don't know why I did it, but I wrote it all down in a diary, and I kept a cheque she gave me. She was always running short of cash, oh, for milk tickets and like that; and once, she borrowed from me, and then gave me a cheque for it. I kept it. The cheque was only for a dollar seventy-five, I think. I wanted a souvenir of that case. It was such a queer one. I have the cheque still, and the diary. I never cashed the cheque. It's in that black suitcase in the bathroom, and the diary's there too, with the phone call and everything in it . . ."

The pain suddenly seared her lips, and she gasped. Len

rose quickly and stood there, looking at her. The old lady sure looked bad. Maybe she was going to konk out. Ruth Hander swayed on her feet, and suddenly she caught sight of the newspaper. Her eyes widened, and she lifted her hand to point. She gasped, but words would not come. She fell heavily, and lay there on the floor, inert.

Chapter 20

Len Hander ran lightly across an open bit of grass in front of the house and crouched down beside the silent shadow of the verandah. It was a dark night, and muggy. The October day had been warm, with a threat of rain, and the last of the leaves had drifted down onto the ground with the slow-lifting autumn wind. Len Hander was glad of the damp, because it softened the few leaves on the lawn which might have crackled under his rubber soles. He could not hear his co-worker Mat Kluk, but he knew that Mat had run around to the other side of the house and was waiting there. After a few minutes, the two worked their way silently around the house to a window they had decided was the best means of ingress.

"It's empty," Mat whispered, and Len nodded. Mat lit his torch and flashed it upward to the window above them. He closed the torch and shoved it into his pocket. They stood there for another moment, absolutely still, just in case; but there was no sign of life anywhere. The summer cottagers had all moved back to town.

Together, they set the small aluminum ladder in place, and Len mounted it and started his usual adroit manipulation of the window. He was almost perfectly noiseless in his

movements, but once Mat said "Sh," and Lennie stopped his scraping.

"I zink I hear somezink," Mat said. His accent always grew more pronounced in times like these. But there was no sound at all, except a late and sleepy bird at the edge of the lake, calling to some faraway mate in the South. Lennie lifted the pane of glass neatly out of its casement, felt inside, unlocked the catch, and pushed the window up. He could smell the usual smell of a house which had been closed in damp weather. He was used to it, and it sent prickles of excitement through him. It was sure great, this life, full of elating fears and rewards. In half an hour, less maybe, they would go out the front door carrying the first of the stuff, the radio or the portable oven, maybe even a fur coat, left there for use in the skiing days to come.

They would carry the stuff to the car parked at the side of the road three hundred yards away, report to the Boss, and return to do a more thorough job, or erase their tracks so the police couldn't trace the theft to them. Lennie's face was white and tense in the light of Mat Kluk's torch shining up at him. He signalled to Mat that all was well, and climbed in the window. He could hear the rustle of Mat's windbreaker as he too climbed through. But Mat did not start off at once as he usually did. He stayed where he was, near the window, and Lennie sensed that he was uneasy.

"I am not zure," Mat said in a whisper, "ve better go easy."

Lennie laughed. He said, "The Boss cased the joint good; we ain't got nothing to worry about."

He started for the electric light switch, but Mat's hand was on his arm. He said, "Ve better go easy all the same."

Lennie took out his own torch, and threw the ray around the room. The radio should have been on a table near the door, but the table was empty. Heck! The people must of come back and took the radio to town after all. Oh well, there was the electric roaster, and the T.V. set in the other

room. He switched the ray of the torch back to Mat, and then he noticed that Mat's face was queer. He was staring at something behind Lennie's back. The hand that held his torch was shaking. He turned in a flash, and the first thing he saw was a man's hand holding a gun. Lennie's eyes travelled in a breathless second upward. He saw a big jaw, and a mask, with eyes glittering behind it, and a thin-lipped smile under it. The hand holding the gun was steady as a rock.

Mat said in a silly voice, "He must have got inside zome ozzer way."

The man said, in a high assumed voice, "I came in through the front door, why not? It's the easiest way, isn't it?"

He suddenly thrust the gun at Lennie, and Lennie backed up hastily. The man said,

"You kids got guns?"

Mat said, "Zertainly not, ve only got knives."

"Throw your knives over here," the man said. He sounded like one of those television heroes Mat and Lennie were so used to. But both the boys took out their thin, wickedly honed knives and threw them a little way toward the man. The blades glittered on the floor. The man shoved them away to one side contemptuously with a well-shod foot in a rubber-soled shoe.

He said, "O.K. Now you kids stay where you are. I've finished. When you hear my car drive away, you can go back to where you came from."

He laughed, mirthlessly. He fished in his pocket with his free hand, and pulled out something that shone with blue and green sparks. It was a fishing-reel, a de luxe model, shining with gadget and chrome. The man was still laughing.

He said, "A souvenir. This was a slick job, everything easy to come by. They even had four hundred bucks in the safe. Nice guys. I'll have to thank them one of these days."

Suddenly, fury made Lennie sit up straighter. He said, "A safe? We never knew about no safe!"

Resentment and more was in his voice, a sort of childish helplessness. Up to now, he had had a mad kind of adoration for the Boss, a thwarted dependence.

The grim mouth under the mask grimaced in the thin smile. The man said, "Most of you amateurs will never get past that stage. Better wipe off the wet behind your ears and go in for baby-sitting."

He slipped the fishing-reel into his pocket again, and shifted the gun in his hand so that it shone in the light of Lennie's torch. Both boys thought he was going through the door, but he stopped, and there was a long silence. It was as though the man wanted to say something, but could not think of how to say it.

"Kids! Bunch of amateur kids!" he said, and in his voice was a reluctant kindness and even sorrow. He closed the door quickly as he left, and the boys heard the key turn in the lock. There was total silence.

Mat was at the window, his hand outside ready to support him onto the waiting ladder below, but Lennie said, quickly. "We better wait, like he said, he'd shoot us same as killing a cop."

Mat's hand froze on the window. He said, in a high, frightened voice, "What'll the Boss say?"

But Lennie was picking up the two knives which had slid across the floor under the empty table. The Boss! That was over. From now on, he was going to be on his own, strictly, and go where he could learn how not to be an amateur. There was a faint sound of a car in the distance. The man had even had the effrontery to park it right on the road outside the house. They hadn't even seen it, in the darkness. The sound died away. The man was gone, leaving, Lennie was certain, no trace, no mess of fingerprints, no broken window, nothing to warn the police, who might pass the house a dozen times and never see anything wrong.

And he had opened the safe, he had known about the safe!

Lennie said grimly, "C'mon, let's go. We'll say some guys got here before we did, broke the window, took the stuff."

They climbed out of the broken window, deflated, Mat full of fear about what the Boss would say about this; but Lennie was far away. This phase was over. He hadn't known what to do about the information he had found in the black suitcase in the bathroom of the tumbledown house he and his mother had lived in before she died, but now he knew he would do something. He would think of something; that was big league stuff, that Blount tip-off. He'd make that bastard Robin Blount squirm, make him pay to have the secret kept. How, exactly, he did not know; but he would model himself on the clipped, professional notes in the man's voice as he said, "Most of you amateurs will never get past that stage."

I'll show him, Lennie was thinking as they walked away from the house. I'll show him and all the guys like him I can be a pro, all right, a bloody pro. That's what I'll be.

As he came abreast of the car, and saw the outline of the Boss' head stuck out of the window, he made a quick gesture, a crick of one finger against his throat, the gesture of kaput.

Chapter 21

Linnie Grantly heard the noise of the letters being dropped through the slit in the door, and she went out into the hall. She smiled at Pooter, who was coming toward her from the pantry.

"Never mind, Pooter, I'll get them."

Pooter said, "Very good, milady," and it was all Linnie could do not to giggle. She simply could not get used to this new ladyship business. After the LooGuaj it seemed too, too flossy somehow. Not that she and Trevor weren't ecstatically happy, but Trevor was so unassuming and un-hotsy-totsy that the title seemed too ponderous for either of them.

She saw Pooter's back recede into the pantry, and shut the door and then she went into the small lobby and stooped to retrieve the letters. There was a big pile of them. It was just before Christmas, and cards were pouring in for the Blounts, for the Felters, and for Linnie and Trevor Grantly, who were spending the holidays with the Blounts.

Linnie picked up all the letters, most of them rather fat ones, cards, she supposed, and at the bottom of the pile, she saw a thin rather dirty envelope, so bedraggled that she took a look at it. The address read: Mister Blount, Junior. Linnie grimaced, looking at the letter. She held it gingerly in her fingers, apart from the rest of the mail, and went into the living room.

Robin was sitting at the T.V. set, watching the end of a football game down in Virginia. As Linnie came in, he switched off the set, and got up. His eyes went to the letters in her hand, and he said, disinterestedly, "All for your ladyship, or are some of those for the humble Blounts?"

He sounded cheerful and carefree, as he felt. He had enjoyed his first months at McGill, and in the hum of activity of campus and society, had sloughed off some of the tense awareness of underlying things. He had, in fact, been living in a shell for the first time in his life, a pleasant, irridescent shell, but still a shell.

Linnie said, "Don't you ladyship me, you big lug!"

She smiled at Robin with affection, and as she handed him the dirty envelope, she kissed him on the cheek. Robin took the letter with one hand, and gave Linnie a small hug with the other. It was swell having her here, and the new

husband was a fine type with a sense of fun that Robin appreciated. The clothes business that Mrs. Felter had thought so out of place had turned out to be a tweedy affair that she accepted as an "eccentricity of Lord Grantly's," and thus she described it to their friends.

Robin looked at the letter and whistled. "Mister *and* Junior. Well, that must be me, I suppose. Someone's idea of a joke."

He tore it open, and started to read it. Linnie turned away, sorting the letters in her hand as she went to the table to put them down; and then a stillness in the room made her turn.

Robin was staring at the letter, his face gone white, his body tense.

"Something wrong, Robin?" Linnie asked.

But at the sound of her voice, Robin quickly folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket. He smiled, but she could see it was forced, and that he was still pale. He said, "I was right; somebody's idea of a joke."

It was obvious to Linnie that he did not want to discuss it. She went on sorting the cards and other letters, but a small crease of worry appeared at the sides of her mouth. It wasn't like Robin to be secretive and evasive, at least to do it so badly. Usually, when he wanted to keep something to himself, he managed it better. She stole a look at him as he stood at the window looking out at the trees, bare and snow-streaked. Robin's hands were clenched in his pockets. He was just waiting for Linnie to go away, or to be able to think up some valid excuse to leave the room and study this thing calmly and in private.

After a few minutes, when Linnie did not move away from the table, he said, "I'd better go and see if Mama's ready to go into town. I said I'd drive her in this morning, last minute shopping, she said."

"Mama? That's a new one," Linnie said, laughing.

Robin grinned. He said, "Well, Laura seemed too

familiar, and Mrs. too stiff, so we compromised on Mama."

He was smiling as he went out of the room, but Linnie could see that he was not himself. I'll have to find out what bothered him in that messy-looking letter, she thought, I wonder if he . . . could it be a dunning letter? Could he have got into debt? Perhaps that's it? But then she remembered that her brother had asked Robin only yesterday, at the breakfast table if he would like some extra money to buy presents and so on, and Robin had said he was all right for cash, thanks. Linnie looked after her nephew with troubled eyes.

Robin went up to his own room and closed the door. He sat down on the edge of his bed, and took the letter out of his pocket. He opened it reluctantly, half hoping it would not read in the same way as it had downstairs. But the letter was quite plain.

It said: "Mister Bastard, I know who your mother is so youd better think quick. This is to warn you to raise some dough and have it handy if you dont want the news all over the place."

Robin read this slowly, twice; and then with an unusual gesture of anger, he threw it across the room and watched it flutter to the floor beside his desk, face up. He stared at it, lying there, tangible, flimsy, but so strong and wicked. For the first time in his life, Robin Blount felt fear, real fear. The physical fears he had briefly known during his school-days, at sports and in the woods, were primitive and easy to understand; but this was different. It was like a smell, an acrid taste, a sudden and unexpected wound from a rusty blade.

I don't *understand*, Robin thought; I'm like a rat in a trap. I only know one thing, and that is nothing must touch Rowena, my beautiful and perfect mother Rowena. But where did this thing come from? And why now, of all times? Just before Christmas, when we were all so happy.

And then he thought of Hermes. It was odd how his first reaction had been for Rowena; but now he thought of

Hermes, and he went pale again, and his hands clenched. Nothing like this must come near Hermes, not ever. He had faced the fact that what Nigel Passavant had revealed put him and Rowena, and his father into a new situation, but to Robin the knowledge that he had been born to lovers who had not married was merely another fact in his life, nothing to be ashamed of. Rowena and Nigel had told him everything, about Emily and her vanity that had induced John Blount to stage an elaborate farce in order to protect Emily from having to say she could not have a child of her own. Robin had listened to that part of it in astonishment. It seemed to him ludicrous. Why not adopt a child and have done with it? However, he had accepted that part.

Then, when they had gone all tactful and gentle, as he called it, about the fact that he was the son of a married man and a woman who was not his wife, Robin had said, "Don't expect me to bother much about that; I'm so happy you're my mother that nothing else matters."

It was Nigel who had said, gravely, "It doesn't matter to you now, perhaps, but we must all be extremely careful how we handle the whole matter. Later, you may be glad we did."

But to Robin, this seemed the over-caution of an older man, a kindly bit of extraneous protectiveness. However, he had appreciated that, too, and had promised not to tell anyone, not even his father, that he knew.

There was a fellow at college, who was a bastard. He had had to sign some paper or other, about having a broken leg fixed up at the hospital. He had been all in a dither about it, whether or not to tell the truth. You have to put down your name, and your mother's, and heaven knows what else, at hospitals. But Robin had thought the fellow had made one hell of a fuss about nothing. Why not sign the thing and forget it? But apparently some people felt a thing like being a bastard was a slur, something to be ashamed of.

Now, suddenly, Robin thought of the student and the

hospital papers. In life, as you went through, there were plenty of papers to sign—passports, college applications, birth certificates, marriage papers. Marriage papers! Hermes! *Hermes!* And if, when they were married, children . . .

Robin got up, his face suffused with blood, a fury of anger in him against this person whose letter lay on the floor at his feet. He stared down at it. His instinct was to go immediately to his father and have the whole thing out; but he had promised. Until that moment, he had not been really angry with his father for the trick he had played on society. Until now, he had felt sorry for his father, somewhat contemptuous, but sorry.

Rowena had said that Emily was a spoiled woman, but that John Blount had really loved her. She had said, lightly, "He never loved me, you know. That was just vanity too, a young girl's adoration, and I gave him that, and then afterwards he was bored; that was all."

As she spoke, she had turned towards Nigel, her eyes free and frank with trust. One day, Robin had thought, one day, Hermes and I will look at each other like that, after hell and high water have tested us.

That was when Robin had promised not to tell anyone, or at least not to do it before consultation with the Passavants. He stooped and picked up the letter and thrust it into the drawer of the desk, under some papers. Then he saw his cheque-book lying in the drawer, and almost unconsciously, he picked it and opened it to see how much money he had in the bank. "Have some dough handy!"

He closed the drawer hard, leaning on the desk, his heart thudding. For a moment, he had almost considered . . . He put his hands over his eyes. I must get over this confusion, he thought, in desperation, I can't think. It's the first time I haven't been able to think! I've been despising those guys in the Army who betrayed their side under torture, but here I am—I know it'd be wrong, and yet I am considering it!

He looked up and saw the photograph of Hermes hanging on the wall over the desk. Hermes was looking right at him, her eyes sweet and pure, yet wise.

He said, to Hermes, "I've been let off facing evil until now, Hermes darling. I never knew it, but until this minute, I've been one of those protected characters our Red friends get so mad about. Well, I've found out. This is something I must work out for myself. This is where I've got to prove I'm man enough to love you, to have you, to be worthy of you."

He straightened. All the silver cups in the world, all the honor marks, wouldn't help him now. This was evil, the same kind of evil other people had to fight. He wasn't alone.

He closed his eyes, and said, aloud, "O.K., God, thanks for letting me see it clearly, and will You stand by while I fight it out, maybe?"

He laughed. Already, he felt strength flowing into him, a strange strength that seemed part happiness and part excitement. It was heady and strong and good. The cold war between him and this thing was on.

Chapter 22

It was Mrs. Felter-Blount who precipitated Robin and Hermes into it. She began to get jittery about what she thought she saw when they were together. She spoke of it to her husband, but he did not seem to think it was as she described it.

He laughed, and said, "They're in love, why not? They're young, and full of life, and surely you wouldn't want it any other way?"

But Laura Blount said she did not like what she called the "signs," and she continued to worry and to follow Robin and Hermes about when they wanted to be alone, and to interfere with their plans when the plans worried her. For instance, the evening of the Winter Carnival, when Hermes told her mother she would be out late, Laura Blount stiffened, and said, "But you were out late last night; it must have been well after midnight when you came home."

Hermes looked at her mother with the tight-drawn expression that Laura Blount disliked because she thought it a sign of stubbornness. Hermes said, quietly, "I'm nineteen, Mother, and I think you ought to trust me to behave properly."

"But, my *dear*," said her mother, "of *course* I trust you to behave like a lady, what an idea!"

She was so obviously shocked at Hermes' way of expressing herself that Hermes laughed, upon which Laura Blount stiffened still more. She said, "There are certain rules, Hermes, and coming home at all hours at night breaks one of them. A young girl——"

Hermes interrupted. She said, "Oh, Mother, really, it's no use discussing anything with you. First of all, I'm no longer what you think of as a 'young girl,' and secondly, I don't come home at 'all hours' as you call it. I've only been late once this week; and in any case, I'm going to the Carnival with Robin, and we'll be late, so don't sit up, and for heaven's sake, *please* don't fuss."

It was the first time that Hermes had actually flared up in this way, and her mother stared at her with her jaw falling down. Her daughter sounded like Robin; of course, that was it! Robin had told her what to say. Robin had far too much influence on Hermes.

She said, shortly, "I shall speak to your father. I simply will not have you running about at night like any common——"

She stopped, and Hermes said, "I hope you don't call Robin common. After all, he's your husband's son!"

And with this parting shot, she left the room. She thought, what an ass I am to be afraid of her, why, my heart's going like a triphammer. She saw her reflection in the hall mirror and stopped. She wore a dull copper-colored woollen dress that fell softly in well-cut simplicity from her shoulders to slender waist, and then down to a tapering line at her ankles. There would be a dance at the University after the outdoor fun. Hermes looked at her reflection critically. She was not in the least vain, but she saw that she looked quite beautiful, as she would have put it, and she was glad, because this was a special night.

She straightened the gold necklace at her throat, and the topaz on her finger flashed in the light as she did so. She was all gold, from her hair to her bronze slippers. Her fair skin was lightly tanned from week-ends in the Laurentians, and Robin, stopping at the foot of the stairs, was literally blinded by her beauty and by the way he felt at the sight of her standing there, so close to him. Hermes had not seen him, and continued to straighten her necklace.

Robin said, from the stairway, "The lily, all ungilded and in disarray."

She turned, and her expression changed subtly, almost without visible shifting. It was as though someone had thrown a gossamer cloak over her, of joy and release. Their eyes met across the small space of hall, and Hermes said in her light voice with the wit in it, "Oh, Robin, I'm not in disarray. I'm all dressed up, and gilded specially for you."

He came towards her, his arms down firmly at his sides, his hands itching for her. Almost, he could feel the texture of her dress in his palms, the warmth of her slim body against him. He thought, this is getting to be too much, we'll have to do something. And then he thought, I'm jittery. It's this blasted thing hanging over me. He said, "Let's go, beautiful. The fireworks have started already."

They could hear the faint noises they made outside, against the Mountain. Hermes said at once, "I'll get my coat," and ran upstairs, past him, smiling. They did not

touch. It was always like that, delicate and sweet and without anything to spoil it. But Robin knew it was becoming too strong to bear, this way. He wanted her too much to stand it. He thought, if the fellow would only come out in the open, I could tackle him. But the "fellow" kept carefully and brutally hidden, and two more anonymous letters were all that Robin had to go on. He had told no one; and the tone of the letters became more and more threatening and disturbing with each one. They told him of the diary, and its dangerous potentiality, and gave enough data to convince Robin of the genuineness of the threat.

There had been many times, when Robin, in torment, had thought he would have to get advice from someone, anyone; but the only people he trusted to think straight about this were Rowena and Nigel Passavant, and somehow, he did not want to drag them into it. Then there was Linnie, and her husband Trevor Grantly, both of whom Robin knew would be sensible about it; but again, Robin felt that it would be unfair to involve them either. As for his father, that would be a last resort, to go to him. Robin knew exactly how much this would hit him down.

Hermes was coming down the stairs. She had put on a blonde fur coat and fur boots and a soft fur cap. She was more golden and lovely than ever. Inwardly, Robin groaned, but outwardly he grinned.

It was then that Laura Blount came out of the living-room and surveyed them with a cold and suspicious eye. She spoke severely. "Remember what I said, Hermes, about being late."

"We'll be late, Mama," Robin said, trying to be bantering, "let's face it, we'll be late. This is an all-night party, and no questions asked."

But his joke fell on dead ground. Laura Felter flushed, in real anger. She looked at Robin with antagonism, and said, "Please do not speak to me in that way, Robin. I do not like it; and I have told Hermes she must be in by midnight."

Into the sudden disconcerting silence that fell, John Blount's key could be heard in the door and he came in on a blast of clear frozen air. He looked ruddy and handsome and well, standing there. He shut the door behind him, and looked at them questioningly. "Why the statuary? You all look as though something had struck you out of marble."

In relief, Robin laughed, and Hermes dutifully followed; but Laura Blount turned on her husband with flashing eyes.

"This is no joking matter, John. I simply will not have Hermes staying out all night, no matter what sort of party it is."

"Now, now," John Blount said, placatingly. He gave his coat to Pooter, who came out of the shadows to take it. Pooter's presence effectively prevented further dispute.

Robin blessed him. He said, "We'd better get out of this, honey-bunch. And whatever takes the hindmost, I'll get her home safely, Mama."

Robin and Hermes almost pushed past the Blounts and went out of the door, shutting it firmly behind them. They ran. Robin's car was parked at the bottom of the driveway, and they climbed in. The air felt light and exciting, after the somber scene of parental helplessness.

Hermes said, breathlessly, "This is going to be fun, it's a glorious night. Let's just stop thinking about what happened."

"I've stopped already," Robin said, but it was not strictly true. It was always unnerving to run counter to someone else's basic idea and realize that the other person believed in it as firmly as though the idea was universal and acceptable to everyone. It made one see why the world was in such a mess.

He started the car and they drove away, feeling the stony barrier of misunderstanding simmering behind the closed front door of the house.

But the night was young and gay, and so were they; their laughter brought them along the road toward the

Carnival as though the car's power did not exist beneath them. It was a heady feeling, one that left them free of everything except themselves.

The Carnival, with its fireworks and skating and skiing displays was alive with youth and pleasure. Afterwards, at the dance, the fresh air in their lungs diminished slowly. The dancing changed from boisterous boogie to slumberous swing as the evening progressed. Hermes danced and danced. She had many partners, but she was Robin's girl, and no one interfered with the great Robin Blount or anything that was his. Towards three o'clock, they found themselves dancing exclusively with each other. Robin's arms held Hermes lightly, but his lips were tingling from the touch of her lips in the corridor two dances ago.

He thought, she's mine, we both know it. What are we doing here, dancing? Just dancing? We should be—— He held her suddenly with passion and desire, and she felt it. She stirred in his arms, not withdrawing, but changing in mood. She looked up at him, and their gaze locked. It was as though something far too strong to be resisted made them understand each other so perfectly that nothing else existed. They stopped dancing, and went out of the ballroom. In the car, it was cold. Their breath came quickly. They clung together, Hermes as lost as Robin. Her cap fell from her hair, and Robin's hands were buried in it. He could feel its softness on his wrists. He pushed aside her coat, and with a gesture of maturity he drew out her breasts from the folds of her dress, and pressed them in his hands. He kissed them wildly, feeling them swell.

Above him, he heard Hermes' rapid breathing. He raised his head, and looked at her. Her head was back against the seat, and her lips were open. She was completely abandoned to him. Robin's hands shook as he gently pulled her dress back into place, and the coat collar up to her neck and under her chin. She opened her eyes, but he could not see the expression in them.

He said, "We'll remember this time, and it'll be a good memory, something to be proud of."

He took Hermes into his arms and held her close, until both their hearts stopped thundering. Hermes stirred a little in his arms, and he said, "Will you marry me, darling, marry me now, while I'm still at the University? It may mean a fight because Father will think we're too young, but will you do it?"

"Of course, Robin darling," Hermes said, her voice muffled in his chest, "there will never be anyone else for me, so why waste any more time, when we might be together properly?"

When they arrived back at the house, no one was up. There was a light in the hall, and sandwiches and hot drinks had been put out in the dining-room in requisite containers. It all looked orderly and unruffled. If John Blount and his wife had had a set-to over them, there was no sign of it. Robin thought, I guess Father put his foot down. It was a nice thought. He wondered if, after all, he had not better take his father into his confidence about the threat to them all, contained in those beastly letters. And then he thought of Hermes, and his lips tightened. This was something to share with her; tomorrow, he would tell her. Robin's heart lifted with relief. Their kiss, before her bedroom door was pure as Robin wished it to be. He stooped and kissed her hands very gently, and carried her little, wise smile with him into his own room.

Chapter 23

But Robin did not tell Hermes after all. Something stopped him. The letter he had been waiting for came a week after

the Winter Carnival. He found it on the desk in his bedroom, on his return from a hard day of study at the University. It was a cold winter, 1962 and Robin's cheeks were reddened with the buffeting of the wind. He stared down at the now familiar printing on the envelope, and knew that the time had come.

The letter said: "By this time you must of got the dough. (4,000). Put it in small bills in an onvelop and leave it under the TV set at the house at St. August when you leave, and leave the front door on the latch. No tricks or I'll send my old ladies diary to a noospaper."

So the fellow followed their movements, knew they went to the Laurentians for week-ends. It was a clever plan. The house was empty after they left, and however well they locked windows and doors, a real thief, with implements could easily get in.

Robin held the letter in his hand, and knew what he had to do. But was it wise to do it alone? He frowned, thinking. He had no gun, would have to get one somehow. Then there was the hazard of possible accomplices, lurking ready in case Robin did not come through. The fellow was uneducated, that was obvious, and also rather simple, that too was obvious; otherwise he would not have tried to blackmail Robin in such a pedestrian fashion. It's corny, Robin thought, corny, but dangerous too. I mustn't let myself take it casually.

He had no intention of taking chances now. Quite suddenly, he had become valuable to himself, for Hermes' sake. Because of Hermes, the whole of life had slipped almost miraculously into a pattern of forwardness and vitality. Where before, he had felt lost, lonely, frustrated, and uncertain what to do with his life, now everything was clear, and there was so much to go for he hardly had time to fill in the great empty spaces so suddenly erased from the map of his future. Now, it was all he could do to plan things that would be possible, or almost so, of accomplishment with a tremendous amount of hard work.

First, there was marriage. They had decided that; but neither of them wished to hurt their parents. That meant diplomacy and patience because both knew instinctively that the Blounts would oppose it, thinking that Robin should "establish himself" before tackling marriage. Then, after that hurdle had been overcome, there was the matter of money. If John Blount could be made to see the utter reasonableness of their plan to marry, he would probably help them until Robin finished college. Robin had no foolish sense of pride about that. It was, as he saw it, his father's job to help them over this hurdle.

Then, with all that fixed, he would set to work, and he knew he could work. And Hermes would be with him all the way. He would get his Engineering Degree, and then they would go to England, where Robin would take a special course at Oxford. He would then be equipped to dig into Canada's riches in an educated way, a civilized way, and not like the greedy methods so many were using. All ideas of a diplomatic or political career had vanished. Perhaps, one day, after he had earned the right to talk about it, he might write about what he had experienced and how he felt about life; but that could wait. Along the way, he was certain, if he remained alert, his real job in life would take shape and tell him what to do at the right time. One thing was certain—he had decided never to let himself think with the surface of his mind only. There were too many brilliant people in the world doing that already—politicians, business leaders, artists—people with all the equipment necessary to pierce below the surface of mere intellectualism and reach truth—except the courage.

The letter he held in his hand now, the problem it had raised, was a first test of his manhood. He would do his best. He put it down, and started toward the radio at the head of his bed. The tiny jewel-like T.V. underneath the radio, he left off. It had been a present from his father for his twentieth birthday. He lifted the little portable from the bed table, and carried it to the desk and turned it on.

He sat down listening, while he took off his shoes. Someone was talking, and Robin tuned in louder. It was the president of a large Canadian power Corporation in the West who was speaking.

"This year, weather permitting, we hope to produce enough power to start the World Power Corporation on its way. This project has been some time in the making, but we are now ready to go ahead with it. The work on the great plant is almost completed, and very soon the world will feel the impact of the progress man has made in dynamics and in the use of atomic power for peaceful purposes."

Robin sat in his bare feet, thinking, inflamed with the speech and its implications. The world had been waiting for this, the largest power project ever conceived. Robin had not been aware that it was so close to reality. To him, the thing had seemed a little nebulous, if exciting. What was going to be done with all this power? Robin thought, he said "peaceful purposes," but did he mean it? And then he smiled, remembering the words "weather permitting." God had certainly taken His world down several pegs in that way, of late. The weather had been increasingly erratic and strange all over the world. Men of great knowledge had tried, and were still trying to find reasons for it. Men had no sooner begun to conquer disease than this other difficulty arose. Weather. Plain common-or-garden cold and wind and snow and hail and rain, coming in all directions, and at all times, and in places where such conditions had never happened before. Montreal, in fact, had become a foggy, damp place, and chilly in summer instead of in winter. The tourist business had fallen off badly, and even the new traffic tunnels and parkways around the city had not served to attract visitors. The new helicopter airport had brought a crowd at first, of curious people, but the accidents caused by collision between selfish helicopterists who wanted too much of the air, had caused the heli-port to fail. Now it was being reconditioned in a hush-hush atmosphere, for something

that, rumor had it, was a landing for the space ships which the scientists insisted were already hovering in the outer reaches with friendly desires towards man.

Weather permitting! You mean, God permitting, Robin thought. He was smiling. He stopped in the middle of his room with his shoes in his hand, and said,

"Let us suppose I am in that mosque in Asia we visited last year barefoot and, God, will You please continue to help me to know what to do about this guy who wants to make a mess of my life, and of Rowena's and my father's."

He stopped, his smile fading into a grim twist of the lips. I shall have to get a gun, he thought, it's elementary and stupid and like so many of the things we are doing all over the world, peaceful projects like this World Dam thing, with a constant fortress of weapons behind everything we do, and the Russians standing there pointing H-Points at us.

The H-Points were the latest invention of destructive power. They were rumored to be as light as an aspirin pill and about as easy to dissolve. When detonated, however, their silent and grisly work would wipe out millions of square miles in an hour.

Robin dressed quickly, and went downstairs. He opened the door of his father's study and went in. He had remembered the revolver his father kept in the desk drawer. It was there, as usual, and Robin looked down at it thoughtfully. Seeing it there, lying inert and innocent, made what he had to do more concrete. Robin took the revolver into his hand. It felt alien and cold, not useful at all, just a gun. He was a good shot, but this was different. Suddenly, he thought, what am I doing with this thing? This isn't how I want to fight it. He put the revolver back into the drawer. He heard his father outside the door, and he turned to the bookshelf.

John Blount said, "Well, my boy, home early for once? How nice."

He came in, beaming. The marriage to "mama" was

working out beautifully, and John Blount showed it. He looked much, much older, however. He looked like a man who had decided to stop. He came to Robin and put his hand on his shoulder. He was grateful to Robin for not bringing up the question of a too-young marriage. He had sensed Robin's intention, and wished to avoid discussion of it.

He smiled at Robin, and then he saw that his son's mouth was very firm and unsmiling. He looked friendly, but not especially happy. John Blount's smile faded, looking at his son, and an uneasy feeling replaced his geniality. Perhaps Robin was planning marriage after all. Perhaps it wasn't as certain as he had thought that Robin would toe the mark.

Chapter 24

The week-end of February 22nd, was very cold, one of those below-zero winter periods. One's breath caught in the throat, and nostrils jammed up. There was a feeling of lightness which made the warmest coat seem gossamer, and footsteps echoed hollowly on iced pavements and roads. Even in Englewood, New Jersey, the temperature was colder than usual, and Rowena Passavant shivered as she came down to breakfast, wrapping her dark green wool negligee more closely around her. The mink at the neck and cuffs were comforting.

Nigel was already sitting at the table, sipping his coffee, and reading the paper. He wore a silk dressing-gown and Rowena said, "Darling, aren't you being too English for a day like this?"

Nigel looked at her over the paper, and smiled. He

shook his head in answer to her question, and said, "Is it cold?"

Rowena laughed. She said, "Wait until you get that foggy blood of yours thinned out, and then you won't ask such a silly question in such weather."

Nigel had just returned from a trip to England, where his new book was being published. He had retired from active participation in research, and was enjoying something he had been looking forward to for years, writing up his findings.

Rowena sat down, and refused the plate of bacon and eggs that the maid put before her. She said, reproachfully, "Oh, Ellen, you know I said nothing but coffee and orange juice from now on."

The maid removed the plate, looking pained. "I'm sorry, Madam, I forgot your new diet."

Rowena looked regretfully after the disappearing plate. She said wistfully, "I wonder if it's worth it."

But she got no sympathy from Nigel. He said,

"You stick to it, now. The last time, you gave it up too soon."

He had scant respect for people who decided on something, and then betrayed it. He thought Rowena's figure perfect, but if she went on one of these zany diets, she ought to jolly well stick it out.

Rowena laughed, reading his thoughts. Nigel smiled, and returned to the paper, handing Rowena half of it. Rowena, however, did not start reading it. She felt restless, for some reason, not herself. I wonder what I'm fussing about, she thought, wondering what Robin was doing this week-end. Robin had been more than usually in her thoughts the last two days. There was something . . .

She said, suddenly, "I believe I'll call Robin long-distance."

Nigel was instantly on the alert. He too, had been thinking about Robin, and he too had caught a sense of uneasi-

ness from Rowena. He said, "Yes, do," and felt immediately relieved.

This American habit of phoning people on the other side of a Continent, was a constant source of pleasure to him. He found it difficult to get used to it, however. In England, they thought twice before phoning at all, and as for cabling across the Atlantic, or anywhere else, this seemed to be something quite bizarre. In England, even now, they were still looking doubtfully at deep freezers and furnaces, which, they feared, would remove the fog from their chilly houses. "More healthy you know," they would say, referring to the damp.

Rowena was at the phone now, sitting gracefully in an easy chair. She looked opulent and charming, and Nigel put the paper down to watch her. They were still very much in love, and the type of happiness they had achieved they wore like a jewel set deeply into an old-fashioned setting. But there was nothing old-fashioned about their minds.

Rowena was saying in her clear, fine voice. "Oh, I see. When will they be home?" She waited for the answer, and put the receiver back on its hook.

"They've gone up to that place of John Blount's in the Laurentians," she said. "Its name has a saint in front of it like all the French-Canadian places. I believe it's Saint January or Saint June, or something like that."

"Saint August," Nigel said. He laughed. "I remember Robin spoke of it to me."

"What a name for a below-zero place!" Rowena said. She got up and came over to Nigel, putting her arms around him from behind. He smelled nice. She sniffed at his hair, which had a faint perfume on it, and then she put her face against the back of his neck, and stood quite still, her eyes closed. But even Nigel's charm could not lessen the feeling she had, the sense of danger and a nasty fear that it had something to do with Robin.

"I do hope he'll be careful skiing," she said. "He's so good at all these sports, he might break his leg."

"All Robin will break will be another record, or something of the sort," Nigel said, comfortingly.

He drew Rowena onto his knees, and cradled her. Neither of them said what they were feeling about Robin, but the undercurrent was there and remained there all through the day.

Chapter 25

As it happened, Robin did race that Saturday, in a slalom which had been arranged between several Canadian universities. There were many people at St. August, watching. In spite of the intense cold, they crowded up the slope of Hill 70 to see the race. It was very colorful and exciting. The sun shone brilliantly and the brightly dyed woollens and leathers etched themselves into the white background like a many-faceted series of necklaces hanging on a gypsy's chest. The scene constantly shifted, with the movements of the crowd. Overhead, there were a few small, puffy, very white clouds, against a stiffly blue sky.

Robin had bad luck. Just as he came to the most difficult gate, a small child got away from her mother's hand, and darted across the track. Robin made a quick Christie, and shot out of the track, avoiding the child by a hair's breadth. He stopped with an expert abruptness and a spectacular whoosh of flying snow. He looked back anxiously to see if the child was safe. There was a cheer from the crowd, and a waving of mittened hands. Robin saw, with relief, that the child had been removed from the track, apparently unhurt. In fact, her loud shrieks of outrage at being balked made everyone laugh.

The officials were beckoning to Robin to go back and

start again, so he turned and went up the slope to the starting line. He felt tired, but he was on the McGill team and wanted to give it his best. He had made his first run in record time. He braced himself at the top, and started down the track in a swift and beautiful arc.

The wind made his eyes water. He thought, until I get this thing settled, I shall never be at the top of my form. The thought bothered him. At the third gate, he almost fell, but recovered well and finished with his usual brilliance. His time, however, was not as fast as his first run.

On the way home, Hermes said, "What a shame, that child running out like that. And how wonderful you were, turning so quickly."

"Very fine show," John Blount said, from the wheel of the snowmobile he was driving them in. "Very fine show indeed."

Laura Blount and Linnie were muffled up in the back seat of the snowmobile. They were too cold to be enthusiastic.

Trevor Grantly, however, clad in a mere tweed jacket and a woollen cap, and looking quite warm, said, "It was more than that. It was a very expert piece of work indeed, and that damn kid was lucky it was Robin, and not one of the others with slower reactions."

Robin said, "Thanks, old boy." He spoke jocularly, but it surprised him a little that Trevor should know how expert the maneuver had been. It had taken split-second decision, plus all of Robin's splendid physical equipment and skiing experience.

Trevor said, "Not at all, old boy." They were forever joshing each other in an affectionate way. They liked each other immensely, much to Linnie's satisfaction. Trevor launched into a description of skiing in the Alps, and Robin turned to listen, closing the collar of his ski coat as he did so. He had been warm after the racing, and he was cooling off.

He started to say, "I'd no idea you knew so much about

skiing," and stopped before he spoke, realizing that the remark might be considered rude.

Trevor said, "I never won any cups, however." He laughed. The evening before, they had all gathered around the cabinet to look at Robin's skiing cups, and read the inscriptions. There were a great many of them.

Trevor had said, "Poor old Pooter. All that polishing!" They had all laughed.

John Blount drove the snowmobile up the last small slope in the road, and pulled it round in a swift turn, into the driveway of his house. Both Linnie and Laura screamed. In an ordinary car, they would undoubtedly have tipped over.

"Now, now, girls," John Blount said, but he was grinning impishly. He had done it on purpose. Did them good to be jostled about a bit, get them out of a rut.

They climbed out of the snowmobile and into the house. In the big living-room the fire was blazing in the hearth, and in the basement, out of sight, a fine oil furnace kept the house at an even and luxurious temperature.

Trevor Grantly said, "Ah, a fire," and his eyes lit up. He went into the living-room and over to the fire-place, where he established himself in a characteristic attitude against the mantelpiece.

"Oh, Trevor, you look so *English*," Linnie said, teasingly. "You look as though you really believed the house is heated from that nice but useless hearth fire."

She went over to Trevor and kissed him, and he said, "Hey, don't be so Canadian!"

They looked splendid, standing there, arm in arm, Linnie with her cheeks blazing from the cold, in slacks and sweater which showed her slender figure off. Trevor in his English tweed jacket and inadequate overshoes. He stooped now, and removed them. He said, "I say, I do apologize, Mrs. Blount, not taking these off in the hall; but I'm forever forgetting that Linnie's made me wear them."

Mrs. Blount eyed the small trail of melted snow that

had marked the homespun rug. She said, pleasantly, "Very sensible of Linnie to make you wear them, Lord Grantly. I simply cannot see how you manage to keep warm without an overcoat."

"Thick blood," Linnie said, laughing. "It goes with thick head."

It was all very foolish and charming and fun. Robin, divested of his outer clothing, stood in the doorway enjoying the scene. He was thinking that they were a very good-looking and amusing lot, sufficiently individualistic to be interesting.

Trevor said, "Don't you think it's time you stopped calling me Lord Grantly, and found a simpler name? Would it be too forward if I asked if I might call you Laura?"

He looked at Mrs. Blount, smiling. She blushed, and said, "Why, of *course*, I should be honored."

"O.K., Laura, may I get you a drink?"

Trevor joined Robin at the small counter they called the lap-up. It had been given the name by Mandy one day when they came into the house to find that one of the dogs had lapped up the contents of a half-empty beer bottle that he had pushed over. The dog was asleep on the counter when they came in, with his tongue hanging out, and quite, quite drunk.

Trevor mixed a pink gin for Laura, making it pinker than usual, just as a gesture. As he handed it to her, he said,

"Laura, the color matches your hair."

Laura Blount blushed as she took the glass. It was nice to be paid a compliment, and Englishmen did it so charmingly. She looked younger than usual, and pleased.

Robin, standing in the doorway, with his arm lightly around Hermes, bent down and said to her in a low voice, "I feel this is the time, don't you?"

He could feel Hermes stiffen a little, but she looked up at Robin with one of her fighting smiles. She said, "If you feel it, it must be right."

She stood away from his arm, and her shoulder came

up hard against his chest as she turned to face the room.

Robin said, "Hermes and I have something to say to all of you, something very important to us. Will you listen?"

Laura Blount sat more upright on the sofa, and her hand shook a little of the pink gin onto her skirt. She wiped it off, slowly. Linnie and Trevor Grantly stood at the fire-place, arm in arm, looking expectant and friendly. John Blount turned from the lap-up where he had been pouring himself a Scotch and soda, and Robin's eyes met his father's. Then he saw his father's glance go around the room, noting the attitude of the others. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. Robin and Hermes stayed in the doorway. They looked very beautiful. Robin's head topped Hermes' by several inches, but to those who watched them with differing affection, they matched. Hermes' orange-colored jacket under her copper hair, melted into Robin's blue shirt like a jewel in a setting designed especially for it. Their candid young eyes and mouths were firm, and their bodies tensed for whatever conflict might come. They were one.

Robin said, "Hermes and I would like to marry, now, before the summer. I want to finish college, naturally. I've decided what I want to do—I mean what work I want to do—and both Hermes and I want me to finish my education; but we think we are old enough and sensible enough to marry, and that's the way it is."

He stopped, and caught Linnie's eye. She was smiling at him, and her arm tightened in her husband's. Robin said,

"It would be wonderful if we had your blessing, all of you, and your approval, because without it, things won't be half so happy for us."

He turned now directly to his father, and his eyes were pleading. John Blount put down his glass, and stared at the floor for a moment. He had seen that Robin had won his point with the others. He cleared his throat,

"You are both very young," he began, but he did not say "too young."

Linnie came forward in a rush, put her arms around

Robin and Hermes and hugged them. She said, excitedly,

"They're young, but they're wonderful together. I, for one, have my blessing all ready! Why *should* they wait? Life's right here waiting for *them*, and we never know what the next day may bring. I'm all for you, Robin dear, and you're both very, very lucky to have found each other so young."

In her voice was happiness, but there was also wistfulness, and all of them were thinking of her three marriages, and the long and difficult road she had had to travel before finding the man she really loved.

Robin kissed Linnie, and color came into his face. Trevor Grantly came across the room, and shook Robin's hand, hard. He stooped and kissed Hermes on the cheek, and he too was flushed a little, and emotional about it. He murmured something, but it was drowned in John Blount's booming voice.

"I think Linnie's right. By Jove, I believe she's right. We don't know what the next day will bring."

He came across the room toward Robin, and Robin left Hermes' side and faced his father. For years, there had been antagonism between them, underlying their natural affection for each other. There had been the clash between personalities that were not in harmony about fundamentals. Now, as he looked at his father, Robin felt old, much older than his father. He knew, as he stood there, that he would never tell his father about the evil facing him; and more than ever, he knew he must win his fight against it, alone.

His mouth tightened, but he smiled at his father, and took the hand he offered between both of his. John Blount's eyes were full of tears, and he thought, what a blithering ass I am making of myself. But he kissed Hermes warmly, and patted Robin on the shoulder. None of them paid any attention to Laura Blount, who still sat in her corner of the chesterfield without moving.

Suddenly, they all remembered her, and turned towards her. Hermes ran across the room, and dropped to her knees

and put her arms around her mother. Her tawny head went down on her mother's breast.

They heard her say, "Oh, Mummie, I'm so terribly, terribly happy."

Laura Blount's face flushed with the same flush that had warmed all their cheeks, the warm wave of emotion and crisis. Her arms went around Hermes with a fierceness of feeling that surprised all of them. She said, "Now, Hermes, don't make a fool of yourself. Of course, you're happy, and why not, indeed? Robin is a very nice boy."

She held out a free hand, and Robin came over and took it. He stooped and kissed her on the cheek, gratefully, and with real warmth. They all melted together, fell apart, said things, did little things, filling the room with their sense of the preciousness of this moment, and its implications. Trevor Grantly was opening a bottle of champagne at the lap-up, with John Blount looking on, and beaming. Pooter appeared with a tray of glasses, and they told him.

Pooter drew himself up. He put the tray down ceremoniously and carefully, before he walked in a dignified fashion over to where Robin and Hermes were standing. He held out his hand to Robin, and said, "I'm sure I do congratulate you, sir, and you, miss." He bowed to Hermes. Robin saw that two spots of color were on old Pooter's cheek-bones, the same flush.

He said, "Thank you, Pooter. I know you mean it, and we both thank you for all you do for us both."

There was a silence. Trevor had stopped pouring the wine and was waiting for the extra glasses on Pooter's tray. Pooter moved toward the lap-up, and John Blount cleared his throat. He said, "It's getting hot in here. I'll open a window." He and Pooter collided as they both hurried to open a window. Everyone laughed. It was heady and thrilling, and all their hearts, for once, were united in a single unselfish wish for Robin and Hermes.

Linnie said, "Let's send a telegram right away, to Mandy. She'll be so delighted."

Linnie went out of the room to phone in the telegram to Mandy, and Pooter, having served the others, brought two glasses of champagne very slowly and very ceremoniously, to Robin and Hermes. As he smilingly accepted his, Robin thought, it seems impossible, it's just like a dream. But Hermes' hand in his, the scent she wore, her hair at his shoulder, and the green, dauntless, adoring eyes she turned on him, filled him with elation and belief. *It was real.* It must be real. Oh, yes, as real as tomorrow and the day after, and all the fights and successes and victories ahead. Here was something, at last, worth fighting for, something so suddenly precious that Robin's whole being vibrated with the urge to meld himself into life and be part of it.

He looked across the room at his father, who had sat down beside his wife and was talking to her in a low voice. This matter of their children wanting to marry had brought them together more closely. Their heads were near each other, and their hands touched. Robin could see this. Yet not an hour ago, and for some time before that, Robin had been thinking of them as enemies. He wondered now whether, after all, they would have opposed his marriage to Hermes, if he had approached it correctly, explained it to them on their terms.

It was a tricky business, separating enemies from friends, right from wrong, true from false. Perhaps it was all in the approach. Yes, that must be it. And yet, one must fight, but fight what?

One thing he knew for certain; there were enemies, and one must fight them, but it was wrong and unintelligent to fight phoney dragons. Life was too short.

Robin laughed suddenly, and John Blount looked up. He smiled across the room at his son. He did not know why Robin was laughing, but it was good to see and hear it, and good too, to know that he was happy, and young, and ready to tackle life, with fire in his eye, and firmness too.

Chapter 26

Robin had wondered how to manage to be alone in the house after the others left, but it worked out very well. Linnie and Trevor had to go back to town early to catch a plane to New York, and as the day was dull, with no break in the cold and no sunshine, Laura and John Blount decided to go down with them, and see them off at the airport. Hermes, of course, would leave with them. Robin explained, casually, that there was another race in the afternoon, and that he might go to an after-meet party for the university skiers later. He added, also casually, that he might stay at the house overnight, and get an early bus or train in the morning.

They left at eleven o'clock in John Blount's town car, driven by the chauffeur. Hermes and Pooter and the maid went in Robin's small car with Hermes at the wheel. Hermes, seventeen, had just obtained her license. Robin stood in the doorway, and watched them go. Laura Blount said, from the open window of the car,

"And, Robin dear, don't forget, bring down the cold beef and the pie with you tomorrow."

Cold beef and pie! If only those could be all he might bring down tomorrow! He closed the door of the house, and stood for a moment with his back to it, thinking. It had been true about the race. His run had been scheduled for three o'clock; he had not told them, however, that the race had been called off for lack of entrants.

He had the thing fairly clearly in his mind. Before it got dark, he would dress, put out all the lights, and leave as obviously as possible, on skis, carrying a knapsack. He

would make a play of locking the front door, and even do an inspection of window catches and so on. Then he would leave. Luckily, there was no new snow, and his returning tracks, after dark, would not be seen. He would approach the house by a path behind the woodshed, and get in by the back door. Then he would wait, just wait. His mind refused to consider possibilities, in fact, he pushed his imagination away. This would have to take care of itself as it happened. The less he visualized it the better. One thing he felt fairly sure of; the fellow would not come until after dark, although he had probably already seen the others go.

It was still early. Robin went into the kitchen and made himself a sandwich of the beef. He heated a can of soup, and forced himself to eat and drink. After he had finished, it was still early, only three o'clock. He decided to go for a short tramp in the woods, and pulled on his parka. He put on his skis on the back porch, and started around the lake.

The sun hung behind the haze, trying to get through. It was a dull orange color. In the woods, the trees were bare of snow, and the misty shadow from the faint sun made dark patches of blue between them. It was very still and quietly beautiful. Robin decided to go to the end of the lake and back again, remembering that the track on the far side had not been recently cleared. He did not want to tire himself.

It was very still, and so cold that Robin's body felt light. His skis slid without sound, and the sky overhead was dark blue with heavy grey clouds in it. Suddenly, Robin stopped, remembering. He looked at the jetty, piled high with snow, and at the lake which was as still and white as the shore surrounding it. He felt the pent forces at the roots of the trees, waiting for Spring, the aliveness in the water under the ice of the lake. Spring would come, it would come, and he was young and in love. He felt a sudden inrush of strength. He had almost forgotten the dream he had had,

but the ducks were a memory he would never forget. He would never cease, he knew, to wonder and to hope that the hawk had never caught up with them. Now, remembering that day in Autumn, the feeling of the dream came back, and he stiffened, trying to recall more clearly what the man had said; but the dream was misty in his mind, only a jumble of strange thought.

Still, he could recapture, although faintly, the heady exhilaration he had experienced in the dream, the excitement of communication between the man and himself. He remembered that he had cried out, "If you can do it, why can't we?"

Well, why not? Robin stood in the path, the blood rushing through his body. These things should be searched for, held onto, even if they were only dreams. Some dreams were certain, as Daniel had said, in the Bible.

Robin moved suddenly. The warmth had gone, and he felt cold. He maneuvered his skis across the narrow path, and turned towards the house again. He was cold, but his mind was afire with the sure and certain knowledge that there was, in human hearts and minds, a strength which no evil could break.

Chapter 27

Lennie Hander was afraid. It was like a suffocation. He stood in his boarding-house room in the little village of St. August, and trembled. He held a flask of cheap Scotch in his hand, but he did not drink any of it, because it would be necessary to keep all his wits about him from now on. He looked longingly at the flask and put it down on the

table with a shaking hand. What am I in a tizzy about? he thought. It's a cinch. It's a pro job, strictly a pro job.

Even the news he had recently heard, failed to give him the extra punch he needed. I don't know what's the matter with me, he thought, angrily. He decided, after all, to take a swig, and picked up the flask and took a gulp out of it without bothering to pour the liquor into a tumbler. It made him feel better. Yes, that piece of information he had had just before leaving for St. August had bucked him up in his determination and in his hot desire to get back at Robin Blount for being what he was.

The information had come from his erstwhile pal-in-crime Mat. It was about one of the gang, who had been killed, quite a while ago, a kid called Minty. He had held up a house at Benton a few years ago, and got killed by one of those crumby people in the house. Mat told Lennie Hander that Minty's body had been in the morgue for identification and that some of the gang had recognized it. He had held up a relation of Robin Blount's, an aunt, they thought, dame by name of LooGuaj.

The information had stiffened Lennie, and hot language poured out of him in a vindictive stream. Those guys, thinking they could go around killing poor little kids like Minty! And all he'd done was hold them up. His gun hadn't even been loaded!

Lennie felt cold. It was well below zero outside, and he had hung around the house in the valley for quite a while after the two cars had left, hoping that the guy Robin whatshisname would get going; but all he'd done was shimmy off around the back of the house on skis, obviously not expecting to be gone long. Lennie began to worry. Maybe the guy wasn't leaving after all. Maybe his threats to hurt the people Robin loved were going to fail. Lennie had learned this particular form of attack against an enemy from the Bolsheviks; they always held the welfare of people close to their captives over their heads. It was a swell idea, Lennie

thought, although there was no one in his own life that mattered enough to him to make him do anything he didn't want.

He had hung around to see if Robin was coming back to the house, and sure enough, he came back; and then in half an hour or so, he mushed off with a pack on his back, and locked the door carefully after him. Watching Robin do this had given Lennie a heady sense of power, over Robin and over the whole damn, blasted world. Rotten place that it was!

He'd show them, he'd show everyone. When he felt sure that Robin had really gone, he went back through the woods to his boarding-house to get his things and check out. After he got the dough under the T.V. set, he was going to take a bus back to Montreal.

He picked up the flask of Scotch and took another, smaller drink from it. The liquor coursed through him, warming and tittilating him. He suddenly got going. He stuffed the few things he had brought with him into the top of his knapsack, and pulled on a warm woollen cap. He was ready. He had paid his small bill, and everything was set. The copy of his mother's diary was safely in the bottom of his knapsack, in case the guy pulled any trick and needed to be shown. But Lennie thought not. He was sure Robin had gone. Those guys had no guts; a lot of lily-livered he-bitches.

He walked through the village and out at the far end. The road was chock-a-block with cars going back to town, and Lennie had to keep well at the side of the road. At the turn, there was a small hot-dog stand, and he decided to go in and get a snack before he started up the side road. He would not admit to himself that this was a subterfuge, an excuse to put off what he was going to do. For some crazy reason, he was still scared and unsure, not at all the way he knew a pro ought to feel.

The hamburger went well with the Scotch, and again

he felt warmed and encouraged; but there was still a core of panic somewhere at the bottom of his stomach. He walked quickly, keeping to the side of the road and walking in the soft shoulder to prevent the noise of his own footsteps.

On this side road, there was little traffic. The Blount house was the only one on it. Lennie passed the one hazard, where he did not want to be seen. It was the cottage that John Blount had put up for his servants, at the entrance of the driveway. Lennie skirted this, but there was no light, and he remembered he had seen a girl driving the second car with what looked like butlers and maids in it. He kept in the shadow of the woods all the way to the house, and when he reached the front door he realized that it was dark. Night had fallen. Well, might as well get at it. He moved cautiously toward the door, his ears alert for the slightest sound. There was none. It was bitterly cold and damp, and Lennie's breath came out of his mouth in a steady hiss of steam. He stooped to the lock of the door, and something made him stiffen. He straightened up, listening. But it was only the faint stir of the wind in the barren tree branches.

Lennie got the door open in no time. He turned the knob and the door went away from him easily. He stepped into the warm hall and closed the door. He knew where the living-room was, and the T.V. set. Several casings of this particular joint had made him familiar with most of the inside of the house on the ground floor. Several evenings of staring into the empty house in the light of his flashlight had hardened his resolve to get even with these Blounts. The silver cups in the cabinet in the hall, shimmering through the open door of the dining-room; the rich carpets; the opulent furniture; the expensive gadgets, ash-trays and such, strewn carelessly about. All this had made Lennie Hander's teeth grind in a sort of impotence that was new and bad and made gum of his sinews.

Inside the hall, with the front door shut, he stopped for

a long moment, listening, sensing. He could not understand why he felt so jittery. There was obviously no one there, and as obviously, the guy had given in, as Lennie had thought he would. He had gone back to Montreal, leaving the dough as Lennie had ordered him to. This Blount guy had no idea, Lennie gloated, that once he gave in, it meant more and more giving in. This was a sure and swell soft way to easy money.

He felt for his flashlight, and then he thought he could quite safely turn on the hall light, which he did. There were the silver cups again, hard and sure and arrogant, shining with lackey's elbow-grease. Cups! For what? Tennis! And such other sissy stuff! He turned toward the living-room, and suddenly confident, walked to the doorway. He reached for the switch, and turned on the light. His eyes dilated. His hand reached for the switch again and in a split second, he had turned off the light; but as he did so, the lamp on the table came on with a sharpness that blinded Lennie. He stared at the lamp, his sinews gone to dust and his mouth dry. He stared into Robin's eyes, and saw that Robin's hand, leaving the lamp-switch, was empty. Lennie's eyes went, in panic, to Robin's other hand, and saw that it too was empty. The guy wasn't armed. He didn't have a gun, for Jeez' sake! Confusion swept through Lennie Hander. Here was the guy, having outsmarted Lennie, standing there just looking at him, kind of sorrowful, with no defence, or movement. In the guy's eyes, there wasn't anything that Lennie would have expected, no anger, no fear, no expression of anything Lennie recognized. It made Lennie's blood crawl. It threw him, completely. His mouth dropped open, and his hand shook as it darted inside his coat for his gun. He got it into his fingers. But before he could draw it, Robin was across the room, and had pinned his arms down.

"Drop your gun on the floor," Robin said calmly.

The rovolver fell silently onto the thick carpet, and Robin kicked it away with his foot. He released Lennie's

arms, and stood back, between Lennie and his gun. Robin stooped quickly, picked up the gun and put it into the pocket of his ski-pants. It all happened in a split second.

"Now," Robin said, "let's discuss this thing quietly, shall we?"

It wasn't because the guy had his gun, no, it wasn't that. It wasn't anything that Lennie could put his finger on. It was a sudden, queer feeling of relief, as though something had happened that was meant to happen. It was like that. It was, by Jeez, yes, it was like that. He *liked* the guy! Lennie gave a short bark of a laugh. That was the one thing anyone could do to get the better of him, make him laugh, and by Klondike, this Blount guy had made him do it!

Chapter 28

Lennie Hander's wrung smile interested Robin, who did not quite understand it, however, he put it carefully into the back of his mind. At the moment, there were other matters to attend to. He kept a watchful eye on Lennie, who had dropped into a chair, and was leaning back in a pose of half-defiance and half-wariness. Robin took out the revolver from his pocket, and emptied the cartridges onto the table. They fell into one of the ash-trays with a clatter, and Robin went to the window and threw them outside. The action cleared the air. He returned to the table, and looked down at the helpless gun.

It was good to have that settled. He said,

"Guns are no good, you know. It's too bad you seem to think it's necessary to have one handy."

He looked at Lennie, studying him. This fellow who had already caused him so much misery, was a pale type,

with an undeveloped body and a nondescript expression. His light brown hair was badly cut, and his complexion unhealthy. The clothes he wore were more or less the same as those of any week-end traveller to the Laurentians—a pair of ski-pants, a jacket, and woollen cap. His hands were rough and too white.

Lennie tried to sit still under Robin's look, but he could not. He said, belligerently,

"Talk won't get you nowhere with me. You got my gun, but you ain't got away with anything else. I know what I know."

Robin said, "What you know about my birth cannot possibly be of any value to you, you know. If you choose, you can possibly make some trouble for a lot of people, but in the long run it won't do you any good, and will possibly do you harm."

His voice sounded calm. To Lennie Hander, with his plans in ruins, it was maddeningly self-assured. He flushed. He said, "Oh, no?"

It was a threat and Robin recognized it. He was glad he had not relaxed after the fellow's queer sudden laugh.

Lennie said, "If you don't give me the dough I told you to get, I'll go to a newspaper I know'll give me plenty for what I got on you."

"I see," Robin said. He fought off a sudden stab of fear and something more, disgust and recoil. There was something here that he did not recognize at all; it was like diving into deep water and finding strange shapes and sliminess. This thing was strong, he felt that, strong and elastic. It wasn't something to trust to stay down.

He said, "Let's get one thing straight, once and for all. You won't get any money from me, or from any member of my family. I can guarantee that. If you choose to rake up something that should be left alone, that's your business; but that will be the only satisfaction you'll get, for what that's worth."

He saw the fellow squirming around in his mind on that

one. He saw the flush die, and pallor take its place. He saw the softness of the mouth, and the wavering shadows that filled in the outlines of this personality that threatened him. He stiffened everything in himself to cope with it.

He said, "I'll make you a proposition. If you'll stop threatening and blustering, and tell me what you know, perhaps I might be able to help you in some other way. We might even find a friendly basis to go on."

"Who? Us?"

There was the sudden bark of a laugh again, this time with more real mirth in it. But it was spontaneous, and Robin saw that the fellow was not so bad, just a chivvied human being, with no clear road ahead.

He said, "I've got all night. Take your time."

It was obvious he meant what he said. He sat down gingerly, watchfully, his hands ready.

Lennie Hander thought, the guy's too big for me, without my gun. What'll I do? He said,

"My mother was the nurse that knew all about you being a bastard."

"She knew?"

"She's dead, but I got her diary, and I aim to use it."

At once, Robin saw the picture. The diary was the thing, the concrete threat. He said, "Where is this diary?" and saw the sudden slyness come into the other's face. Lennie said, "I got a copy with me. I got a girl I know to copy it. The diary's where you can't get it."

"Let me see it," Robin said quietly.

There was a small silence, and then Lennie Hander said, "Well, O.K. But no tricks, mind."

He got up, and so did Robin. They stood for a moment facing each other, and then Lennie turned and went into the hall and stooped over his knapsack. He seemed to know that Robin would not offer him violence. He fished in the bag, and brought up a package of manuscript from the bottom. He looked at Robin over it, and Robin put out his hand

to take it. For a brief second, both of them thought of violence, a sudden move; but neither of them did anything. Robin took the package, and went back into the living room.

He said, "It would be better if you would leave this with me. You say it is only a copy, in any case. Why not do that? Then we can both think what to do later on."

"You read it now, it ain't long." Lennie sat down again, on the edge of a chair near the door. Better sit safe, able to get out quick if the guy got mad at what the diary said. He watched Robin sit down in his own chair, and open the cardboard cover of the typed manuscript. He started to read it rapidly.

Robin kept his face mask-like, and his hands from gripping the paper. He read on quickly, holding the paper in hands that did not shake. The young man across the room from him could not tell what he was thinking. It was infuriating. Lennie could not put his finger on what made him so mad about Robin, when he liked the guy, underneath.

It took Robin about ten minutes to grasp the main points of the diary, the telephone conversation the nurse had overheard, the name Rowena. When he came to that, he looked across at Lennie Hander, his face suddenly grim.

He said, deciding on a lie, "You mentioned in one of your . . . er . . . notes that you knew who my real mother is. That isn't true. I don't know who she is myself, and I do not propose to try to find out."

"I know all right," Lennie said, but there was no real conviction in it, and Robin could see the fellow did not know. It was a tremendous relief. Then there was only Hermes to protect, and his father. Yes, but once the fellow gave this paper to an unscrupulous newspaper, they could ferret out about Rowena. They seemed to be able to get at anything, by fair means or foul, these days. Anyone would sell his soul for money.

He went on reading, but less quickly. The whole thing took him about fifteen minutes, during which Lennie sat

back in his hard chair near the door and smoked a cigarette, dropping the ashes on the rug. It gave him a sense of satisfaction to do this. From where he sat, he could see the silver cups shining behind the glass in the cabinet. He tried not to see them, but they fascinated him. He found it confusing. He knew they meant achievement of no mean order. He had tried his hand at one or two ski races himself, and got nowhere. These things needed training, time, money. In spite of himself, however, he could not help yielding Robin reluctant respect because of those cups, so many of them, and so concrete.

Robin looked down at the end of the diary for a few minutes, after he had finished reading. He was thinking, hard and rapidly. He stopped for a moment, and said, "God, please. Let me do the right thing here."

He had no particular sense of goodness in himself, or of any special quality with which to fight this thing. However, he would try.

He took a breath like a sigh, and said, "Well, that's quite a record." He looked up and smiled. "But, you see, no reputable newspaper would print such a thing without verification; and all we would have to do would be to deny it. My father is a pretty powerful man to attack."

It sounded fine; it almost convinced him. But Lennie Hander through his cigarette smoke said, cynically,

"Yah? It's those guys like your old man people like to get at. And like I said, I know who to go to."

This rang true, and inwardly Robin shrank. He knew those rags, those popular poison-spreading papers. More than ever, in this year of ungrace 1960, these wicked things were in the saddle, and the wicked men who lived off them full of terrifying power. Groups of sensible people who tried to push away the virus from their children got nowhere. It hung over everything, polluting and doping. Program in theatre, radio, television. Paper-covered books, cartoons, post cards. These things littered homes and deafened ears longing for quiet hours of creative entertainment.

Robin rose, with the diary in his hand. He said, "You'd better take this with you. I'm not interested."

It was final, and a wave of hatred and rage and impotence went through Lennie Hander. His face flushed. His mouth twisted in fury, and he spluttered as he said, "You'll regret it, you'll sure regret it."

There was no liking for Robin in him now. He put out his hand for the diary and Robin gave it to him. For a moment, they stood close together; then Lennie turned away and went towards the door. Robin moved slowly forward, following. The fellow was leaving, and nothing had been accomplished, nothing. The thing would hang over all their heads. Perhaps it would have been better to risk getting the police into it. He had not done this, because he felt there might be a leak there that even his father might not be able to stop. What the fellow had said was true, it was men like John Blount that other less fortunate folk wanted, always, to get down. And once the thing came out . . .

Robin watched warily, as Lennie stooped with his back to Robin and put the copy of the diary into his knapsack. He picked up the bag and his woollen cap that lay on top of it. He said,

"Hey, what about my gun? Lemme have it back."

Well, he had better let the fellow have his gun. It wasn't loaded now anyhow. Robin half-turned to go back into the living-room for the gun. His left side was towards Lennie. He felt the blow as a knock, rather than a stab. The knife glanced off something in Robin's breast pocket and entered his body, deep and clean.

He heard Lennie's sobbing cry, "This'll learn ya. Bloody bastard! This'll learn ya not to monkey round with a guy like me."

As Robin fell, Lennie Hander stepped over him, ran into the room and retrieved his gun. He could see the dark stream of blood on the rug in the hall, as he ran out of the front door, and shut it behind him. As he did this, the telephone on the table just above Robin's head began to ring.

It rang and rang. There was a pause, it began again, ringing, ringing. The sound penetrated into Robin's consciousness. He moved, groaned, and focussed on the bell. He remembered now. All the time, the fellow had this knife, ready, poised, waiting. You can't traffic safely with evil; you can't trust it to bury itself in a nice parcel of forgotten malice. Evil merely goes somewhere else, to wait and brood.

Robin made a tremendous effort, and raised himself on his right elbow. His hand could just reach the phone, and he pulled it down onto the floor. He lifted the receiver and said, on a heavy coughing sigh,

"Hello, bring help quickly. This is Robin Blount speaking."

As he fell back into unconsciousness, he carried with him the faint sound of Hermes' terrified voice, calling him, calling him.

Chapter 29

The police got there quickly in reply to the Blount call for immediate action. They brought a doctor. An ambulance from Montreal was on its way, and the doctor worked over Robin until it came. They got the ambulance going along the icy road, and the police, alongside, helped with their sirens, to clear the way. They took less than an hour to reach the huge hospital at the turn of Cote des Neiges Road.

At the entrance, John Blount, with Laura and Hermes, was waiting. John Blount looked flushed. His heart was pounding. He looked down at Robin's pale face on the stretcher and his eyes filled. His wife put her hand on his arm and pressed it, but he was too preoccupied to notice.

Hermes stood quietly at one side, her face as pale as Robin's. She pushed past the small crowd at the stretcher, and stood firmly there. She held Robin's right hand tightly, and once she lifted it and kissed it.

She murmured, wildly, "Darling, darling, don't go, don't go. Oh, God, let me keep him."

The orderly was touching Hermes' shoulder gently. He held in his hand a small photograph in a plastic container, backed in copper. The orderly said to Hermes, "It was your photo, Miss, that saved his life."

Hermes took the case in her hand, and then she saw that John Blount and Laura were crowding up to the stretcher, almost jealously, so she stuffed the case with her photograph into the pocket of her mink coat. Color had come into her face, and a light into her eyes. She went along the corridor, holding her place beside Robin, holding his cold hand with strong tenderness.

They took Robin into the operating-theatre. After an hour or so, the verdict was brought to them by a smiling surgeon. The knife-blade had been deflected away from the heart by something in Robin's pocket, they supposed; in any case, it had merely penetrated the tissues surrounding his heart. It was a clean wound, and would soon heal. Robin was in splendid physical condition. A matter of a few weeks, that was all. Laura Blount burst into tears, an unusual thing for her to do. John Blount gathered her comfortingly into his arms. He was grateful to her for loving his son.

He said, "Now, now, dear, now, now, dear."

It wasn't until they told him that nothing had been stolen from the house at St. August that John Blount began to wonder about the affair. As soon as he knew that Robin would be all right, he started going into it; and then they found the cartridges in the deep snow outside the house! Why were they there, and who had put them there? It was time to question Robin. John Blount asked the doctor about

this, before he decided to ask Robin to tell him about what had really happened. Until now, Robin had been very casual about it, almost evasive. He always managed to be tired, or in pain when his father broached the subject. But now, he was much better, sitting up. In another week, he would be coming home, to convalesce, and start working again. In two weeks, he would be able to go back to the University. Yes, it was time to ask him what had happened.

John Blount chose a Saturday morning, the day before Robin was to leave for home. It was sunny and much warmer, with a hint of Spring, the sort of day that February, with its bitterness, refutes.

Robin had had a trip to the X-ray department, for a final check-up, and was back in bed. He could see at once that his father wore his most "I intend to get what I want" expression. He thought, I expect it would be better to tell him the whole thing.

He said, "X-ray test O.K. The wound is practically healed, and unless I tear it doing something idiotic, I ought to be playing hockey by next month."

"I hear you're a good patient," John Blount said. He settled himself firmly in the hard chair by Robin's bedside, and cleared his throat.

Robin said, "I've got something to tell you, Father, something quite difficult to say, so will you let me tell it in my own way?"

John Blount took out his cigarette case, and lit up. "Mind?" he asked.

"As long as it doesn't make me cough," Robin said, smiling.

John Blount waved the smoke away from the direction of the bed, and then he put out the cigarette in an ash-tray containing some grey-looking pills. He said, "Better not take any chances of coughing." His expression had become more benevolent, more gentle. Robin pulled himself up carefully in the bed. John Blount said, "Shoot."

Robin remembered the effective way Nigel Passavant had broken the news to him, with "If I were to tell you that my wife is your mother." He said, "If I were to tell you that I know who my real mother is, would it upset you very much?"

There was a long silence. John Blount leaned back and looked at the ceiling. His face was calm, but Robin saw his hands go tense on the arms of the chair. He said,

"When did you find this out?"

He brought his eyes down to Robin's, and to Robin's relief, there was no sign of anger in them, or resistance to what Robin had said.

"It was something that happened at Biddeford Pool two years ago." Robin said, "She, my mother, Rowena, went down there especially to meet me. She felt, well, she thought it the right thing to do." He stopped, and brushed his fingers over his eyes, remembering the beach, and the fluttering scarf as it wafted toward him.

"And then?"

John Blount's voice sounded strangely human, different from anything Robin had experienced in him before. It was like a young man being suddenly told something about someone he had forgotten, someone he had felt deeply about. Robin did not look at his father. He wanted to get this over, without sentimentality. He felt strongly that sentimentality would only clutter things up.

He began to relate what had happened, concisely and sensibly. He told it well. John Blount interrupted him only once, when he got up abruptly in the middle of Robin's description of the moment when Nigel Passavant had told him about Rowena being his mother.

He said, "This Passavant fellow, what's he like, a good type?" He went to the window, before Robin could answer, and pushed it up a little. "Stuffy in here," he said.

Robin said, "Oh, a very good type indeed, the best. He's just what Rowena wanted."

He realized it sounded somewhat brutal, but he felt that his father ought to be told exactly what the truth was, no more and no less.

Suddenly, his father whirled on him, from the window. He said, "Why didn't you tell me all this before?" His voice was accusing.

Robin looked straight at him. He said, in a voice he tried to keep perfectly emotionless, "I thought that as I happened to be the victim of all this, I'd better keep my feelings to myself."

There was another silence. In it, long-dead emotions writhed around, hoping vainly for exit from both of their minds. Robin, with his superior imagination, was remembering especially the times he had tackled his father about the woman at his christening, the woman he had remembered sensing, the woman in a greyish dress.

Finally, he said, "Let's get on to the week-end affair, at St. August, shall we?"

"I expect that would be better," John Blount said. He sat down heavily. Suddenly, he looked older, and Robin saw lines around his eyes he had never noticed before, lines of self-indulgence.

I wonder if the old boy still hits it up, on the Q.T., Robin thought. He said, "Well, it was like this."

He started telling the story of the threatening letters, and the plan he had worked out, to outwit Lennie Hander. In the end, he said, "All we have to go on, is that the chap's name is Lennie Hander, and that his mother's maiden name was Travers, and that she's dead. There's this diary, this nigger-in-the-woodpile, and there's this attack on me which shows he's the type that might act up at any time, cause trouble, the untrustworthy kind of guy."

He stopped, and said ruefully, "I made two mistakes; number one, thinking I could down the fellow by myself, and, two, when I went back to get his gun, I was quite certain I had got the poison out of him, and that he'd be a little woolly lamb in my hands from there on in."

"One thing you did right," John Blount said, admiringly, "and that was to tell him we would never give him any money for the filthy thing."

Robin said, slowly, "Oh, it's not so filthy. It's only the straight truth, that diary." He put out his hand. He said, "I'm sorry I said that, Dad. It's no use being bitter about it. I was, for a while; but I've got over it. The thing is now, what to do about it?"

"I'll have to think about that."

John Blount got up again, staring out of the window at the panoramic view spread out below, the city, the river, the spires and buildings, all etched against a bright blue sky without a cloud in it. It was a fine city, his. And he had a fine son. Tears came into his eyes as he looked. He closed them, hoping that Robin would give him a little time to recover. He heard Robin get out of bed, and the rustle of his robe. He felt Robin's uninjured arm around his shoulders. It was damn good to have a son like Robin. He put up his hand and brushed away the wet from his eyes, blinked it away, drove a smile to his lips. He said, "You're a better man than I am, Gungha Din."

"Oh, Jeepers," Robin said, "now what?"

They both laughed, and Robin's arm came away from his father's shoulder. It had been a fine moment, one to remember, a moment that wiped out bitterness, and old grudges and misunderstandings forever.

They began to discuss the menace that threatened them from a practical point of view, coming slowly and mutually to the conclusion that it would be best not to drag the police into it, but to stick to Robin's original story that he had surprised a thief in the house, and had been caught unawares by the knife. The heap of cartridges in the snow, they proposed to ignore as irrelevant.

"I'll put one of our company dicks on it," John Blount said, in the end, "see what he can ferret out without the police getting wise. It's best that way."

Both of them fully realized how uncomfortable it was

going to be, with the diary and its damning social implications hanging over their heads indefinitely.

"I have a feeling it will iron itself out some way," Robin said. Sharing it with his father had made all the difference. That was one lesson he proposed never to forget in all this. He said, thoughtfully, "It's nice and noble thinking you can buck everything by yourself, but maybe the sanest way is to admit that everyone needs some help at times."

John Blount got up from his hard chair, slowly, stiffly. He went to the dresser where he had put his hat and coat, and started to wind his scarf around his throat. His back was to Robin. He said, slowly, "I suppose she never wants to see me again."

It was less a question than a cry from somewhere deep in him. It surprised Robin. He thought, gee, what'll I say, and he said, quietly, carefully, "Well, I think it'd be best not to stir up anything."

John Blount had put on his coat. He turned. He looked very handsome, and assured and rich and like a small boy. He said, "She was the only woman I——"

And then he suddenly remembered Laura. He waved good-bye at Robin, and went out of the room. There were two spots of color on his cheek-bones.

Chapter 30

"The charge would be 'assault with intent to kill.'"

Lennie Hander was listening to the radio, and after he heard that, spoken coldly, in the announcer's even voice, he got up and turned it off. His face was pale. It was several weeks now, since that week-end at St. August, but the

Blounts were news, and the police kept on plugging at it. They had followed several hot tips and false clues, none of them getting near to Lennie Hander. But Lennie Hander never felt safe; he wasn't the pro type after all, he decided; and that diary of his mother's was dynamite. If he ever got caught, the diary would prove motive. Maybe, he'd even get twenty years. He sat and shook, but he hadn't the nerve to go to the railroad station and get the diary out of the locker he had hired for it. What if the cops trailed him there, and nabbed him before he could get rid of the thing?

After a while, he thought he had better go out. His funds were running low, and he was hungry. Maybe, he had better go and see Ellen. She bored him, but she loved him, and she made good money at the Insurance Company. He knew she would marry him if he asked her, and her old man had offered him a job, once. Maybe, if he dolled himself up, had a shave, got a new hat . . .

"This is how I see him," Robin was saying, to Hermes.

They were sitting in the basement play-room, where their wedding-presents were gathered. Paper, boxes, and ribbon were strewn about, and tables overran with silver and glass and jewels. Robin and Hermes were making lists of notes of thanks to be written, and there had been much young laughter.

Robin said, now, with his arm around Hermes as they sat, resting, "Now that you know everything about it, I can tell you what I think. I see him ten years from now, in some town, say Vancouver. He's married, with two kids. Both kids have eyes set too close together and sly mouths. His wife loves him, in spite of knowing what he is. He has some sort of a job that leans to the shady side, like a bookie, or maybe a government employee."

Both of them laughed again, and Hermes gave Robin a little push. She said, "Robin, you shouldn't, really you shouldn't, say these things."

"I give respect where such is due," he said, "for instance, here."

He drew her close, and kissed her. Then he said, "Let's not bother about the guy any more. I've ceased to be afraid of him."

"I'm still scared," Hermes said. "Not of him exactly, but of all those like him. They're so, so *sad*."

She threw her arms around Robin with one of her sudden passionate movements.

"We must never, never, be sad," she said, muffled against him. "I mean the sort of sad that hits out at innocence."

"Oh, Hermes," Robin said, "how could anyone be that kind of sad with you to help him!"

They looked at the river of wedding-presents, but neither of them saw it. Inside their eyes was a dream, of a place of quietness, a place of laughter, a place of love. And work to do, above all, exciting work to do, and the world their oyster. If there was an answer to the distress in the world, these two would find it.

"Here we come," Robin said, "make way for us!"