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The extremely well ordered life of Martin Pryor misses total perfection in only one simple way. He has murdered his wife and somebody knows it. Not just anybody, but one of his close friends in the exclusive suburban community of Alden Park. An anonymous blackmail note of annoying flippancy and familiarity has just arrived in the morning mail.

Exhilarated rather than frightened, and sure of his superbly logical mind, Martin patiently set about narrowing down his list of suspects to five people he knows well.

Thus the scene is set for the dangerous and carefully calculated contest between blackmailer and murderer. Martin plays his hand with unusual thoroughness even for him, and only becomes alarmed when he realizes he is really falling in love for the first time in his life—and with one of his principal suspects. His clear headed thinking is threatened, his motives confused.

But even worse is the awful shock to his pride—he is facing the humiliating situation of admitting to himself that the blackmailer may be cleverer than he. The reader is cunningly drawn into an almost satanic sympathy with the hero-villain, and as the scene darkens the

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suspense becomes almost unbearable. Values change quickly, hidden motives are exposed, and you find yourself in a ringside seat for *The Perfectionist's* great climactic tragedy.

Here is sheer entertainment all the way, a novel of mannered revenge, drawing its power from Lane Kauffmann's brilliant analysis of the lethal potentialities within the most everyday personality.

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THE PERFECTIONIST

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THE PERFECTIONIST

BY LANE KAUFFMANN

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA AND NEW YORK

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CHAPTER 1

As he plugged in his electric razor and let the softly purring machine begin to trim away a night's accumulation of whiskers, Martin Pryor took a sleepy satisfaction in the knowledge that his morning bathroom ritual was quite secure from interruption.

It was a pleasant line of thought. He dressed quickly in grey flannel slacks and a paler grey silk shirt while complimenting himself on having achieved, in a matter of eight weeks, a state of serenity and complacent routine which other widowers might need as many years to attain. Of course, he admitted in strict honesty, this shouldn't be attributed solely to his fine discipline of intellect. Perhaps he should allow for a certain opportunity of anticipating and planning for the renewed tranquility of life alone.

Still, such discipline and such planning were undeniably well rewarded. As Martin descended the stairs, surveying the trigness of his small domain and delighting in the thought of the mannered tidiness of the day before him, he savored the artistic functionalism of a household ordered to serve the wishes of a single master.

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And all in all, as he sat down at his prettily arranged breakfast table and touched the bell that would summon his chilled orange juice, he was suffused with a gratifying sense of his own superiority as a human being. For superiority consisted not in any remarkable talent (because Martin presumed to do several things passably well but no one thing superlatively) but simply in ordering one's life in such wise as to make the utmost of one's capabilities and amusements.

And that he had surely done. A full life: stimulating, energetic, entertaining—yet disciplined as a superior person's life should be. After breakfast he would retire to his study, devote himself first to whatever bill-paying or correspondence was necessary (his replies to the many letters of condolence had been attended to as fast as they arrived), and then the rest of the morning would be free for research and note-making toward his long projected biography of his grandfather, a gentleman whose sterling record as Senator and Governor would have been crowned by a place in Bryan's cabinet if an ignorant electorate had not seen fit to elect Taft to the presidency in 1908.

This part of the daily routine was already sacrosanct; the remainder was designed for a charming, though limited, flexibility. Since today was a warm autumn day, and his prostrated grief over Grace's death had been replaced by a spirit of 'carrying on,' he would play golf in the afternoon. In poorer weather there was the card room at the Country Club, or the squash courts at the Harvard Club in town. The evenings were left for social intercourse of one sort or another. This evening, for example, there would be bridge at Bill Benson's. All very satisfactory.

"Professor Benson called," Mrs. Hodges announced as she put the icy orange juice in front of him.

"Oh, damn," said Martin. The one thing wrong with a well

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planned life was the casualness with which other people could upset the plans.

"He said to tell you he's caught one of those virus things so he'd have to postpone tonight. He said somebody-or-other could make it for next Thursday and you should call him."

Martin glowered at Mrs. Hodges' plump, retreating back. No doubt her principal reaction to Benson's illness was mere concern about whether she'd have to stay and get dinner instead of being able to leave after lunch. But no, that wasn't fair. She would probably welcome the extra work if it meant that Martin stayed home. She disapproved of his gadding about. She never tired of telling how she hadn't set foot out of her house for nearly six months after her adored Willie had died.

Well, she would have her evening off nevertheless. Martin had determined on going out for the evening, and go out he most certainly would. He was not dependent on Bill Benson for entertainment. If he wanted bridge, there was always a game to be found at the Club. Or, for that matter, he might go into the city. . . .

He had not been there, in any sense of an excursion for pleasure, since Grace's death. Or for several months before. Surely there would be no harm in it now, even if he were seen. And it was most unlikely that he would be. He had a good assortment of night spots which were quite unknown to fellow suburbanites from Alden Park.

No, the problem was no longer one of being seen, but whether, after so long an absence, he would be likely to find suitable companionship. Would Diana or that little blonde girl—Denise—(what quaint names the little dears did give themselves!) still be available? And if not, was he in the mood to take a chance on some new girl? They were usually pretty enough as to face and figure, but all too inclined to be indif-

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ferent company, at best, across a table, and equally indifferent company in bed until he had schooled them a trifle. That Diana, though, had been a real jewel. . . .

Mrs. Hodges returned with the toast, and declared that she supposed he wanted her to order something for his dinner. "The lamb chops that Jensen sent for your lunch are nothing but fat. He hasn't sent us a decent piece of meat since Mrs. Pryor passed away."

Martin gave thirty seconds of silent tribute to Mrs. Hodges' passive euphemism for a death that had been both bloody and violent, and then said, No—she needn't worry about his dinner, he would probably be going in to New York to do some . . . research. As for the lamb chops, he was sure that in her capable hands they would be superb.

Mrs. Hodges was not to be baffled by compliments. She felt it necessary to press on him the information that butchers were apt to be dreadfully lax unless there was a mistress of the house to keep after them all the time. She, Mrs. Hodges, did her best, as Mr. Pryor surely knew, but they just didn't pay any attention when a mere servant complained. . . .

Martin's attention, as frail as any butcher's, strayed. He glanced at the morning paper, neatly folded beside the butter plate, its headlines partially obscured by the morning mail. And it was then, for the first time, that he noticed the letter.

It attracted Martin's attention at once simply because he could not imagine who had sent it. Bills, business correspondence, and advertisements always clearly, sometimes ostentatiously, announced their source; letters from his few distant friends were invariably recognizable. Some weeks back, to be sure, there had been many unfamiliar-looking letters, but those had declared themselves as notes of condolence by the feminine, personal stationery and the fact that they were ad-

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dressed by hand. This was a plain white business envelope, and the address was typewritten. Martin idly turned it over in search of a return address but there was none.

"Mrs. Hodges," he interrupted, "surely you can see that I cannot call up a butcher whom I have never spoken to before and complain about faults in his meat which—due to your superlative cooking—I have scarcely noticed. Wouldn't it be better if you just told him I had been disappointed?"

Mrs. Hodges said pessimistically that of course she would do her best, and went away.

Thinking that perhaps the letter might be a remarkably quick reply to his advertisement, which had appeared in last Sunday's literary supplement of the *New York Times*, requesting documents and memories relating to his grandfather, Martin slit open the envelope.

The salutation "My dear Martin" immediately disposed of that guess. Piqued by the anonymous familiarity, he turned to the last page for a signature, but there appeared to be none.

So he began again, and after the first few lines his eyes raced on to the end without faltering, except once to let him put down a piece of toast he had been holding in midair for fully sixty seconds.

"My dear Martin:

"It must be nice to be so clever and so sure of yourself that you never have any uncertainties like the rest of us. I'm sure that a little thing like having evidence of a murder wouldn't bother you for a moment—you'd think of something clever to do with it. But somehow I doubt if you'd take it to the police. That would be much too obvious. Martin is never satisfied with being obvious, Grace used to say. Poor Grace.

"I expect you found her pretty irritating. I did myself, at

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times. Not to the extent of wanting to kill her—but then I wasn't married to her. You were, and I can believe that you may have had good reasons to wish her out of the way. I don't approve, exactly, but on the other hand I can't see any cause to fear that you would ever be likely to kill again—at least as long as you don't know who I am.

"So there would be no profit in it for anybody if I went to the police. Having committed your crime, you must now be even more self-satisfied than usual.

"And you should be.

"Grace's income added to your own must have left you most agreeably well-off. With more than enough, say, to indulge all your pleasures and hobbies. I envy you this, frankly, because I have more interests than I can comfortably afford. For example, photography might easily become a hobby of mine if all the equipment I should like weren't so fearfully expensive. It seems rather a pity that the only opportunity I have had to fool around with a telephoto lens was with a borrowed camera. But fortunately, at least for me, I chanced to do my experimenting on the crest of a hill overlooking Prospect Drive on the very afternoon that Grace had her tragic "accident." Too far away to prevent you from carrying out your plans, but close enough to get astonishingly clear pictures of the entire episode. Considering the unfamiliarity of the equipment, I am proud of myself. I trust I shall soon be able to afford a telephoto lens of my own.

"But there is no hurry about that. First of all I have to think of a way to have you deliver money to me without discovering who I am. For I know I am even more of a novice at blackmail than you are at murder, and I don't wish to tempt you into a repeat performance.

"You needn't fear, by the way, that I will be greedy. Try to think of me as a modest excess-profits tax. You will hear

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from me soon again, after I have given the matter more thought."

And that was that.

With a less than steady hand Martin picked up his newspaper and the remainder of his correspondence and retired to his study, leaving his breakfast virtually untouched.

He was not afraid, not really. Not with the cold, unreasoning fear which had gripped him briefly after the murder. Unreasoning, because he simply didn't overlook vital details . . . at least predictable ones. Unreasoning, too, because the police simply wouldn't suspect a husband of independent means of murdering his wife—even if her income *was* three times the size of his—unless there were another woman in the case. And there wasn't. Diana could scarcely be considered "another woman": he was merely one of her several patrons, and, besides, she was quite happily married to a salesman who had to be out of town most of the time.

So that fear had faded into the most trifling background nervousness, and eventually, when the police had proved most sympathetic and helpful, had vanished altogether.

Now, for the first time since then, the possibility of discovery had reappeared, but he was not afraid. For the whole tone of the letter so clearly showed that the writer was a reasonable being that Martin saw no cause for anxiety. It was perfectly true that he could afford to pay a modest blackmail. If necessary, he would. Cheerfully.

Well, perhaps not cheerfully. The condescension of the letter raised a smart which was aggravated by the truly baffling problem of who its writer might be. Was it possible that one of Grace's stuffy, conservative, fatuous friends, whom he so despised, was actually masking such an amoral intelligence

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and sense of superiority as the letter revealed? A frightful thought. Yet the only alternative was that one of his own intimates or acquaintances treated him with affection and respect while covertly holding him in the malicious contempt which the letter throughout displayed. Yet one of these two possibilities must certainly be the case, for the letter gave every evidence of a familiarity with the Pryors which no one outside their respective circles could possibly possess.

It was an unpleasant problem.

And as soon as he began to recover from his initial astonishment, Martin realized that it was a problem which he must solve. Not merely because blackmailers notoriously grew greedy with the passage of time, but because it would be intolerable to go on, year after year, ignorant of who was bleeding him, laughing at him. His peace of mind, which he had taken such a risk to achieve, would be gone.

The problem would have to be solved. And he must learn to think of it not as an unpleasant problem, for that would make him over-anxious, but as a fascinating puzzle, even a stimulating one. A challenge to his wits. And in a contest of wits with anyone in Alden Park, Martin could not doubt that in the long run he was sure to win.

A puzzle, then, and he enjoyed puzzles and was good at them. Such was the superior discipline of Martin's mind that with no more ado, and in much the same mood as of a Sunday he would settle down to a cryptogram or a crossword puzzle, he leaned back in his easychair, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the game of guessing who his blackmailer might be.

Faces and names chased through his mind.

It seemed as though an astonishing number of people fell under the heading of friends. Of course, most of them were Grace's, not his. He chose his intimates with some discrimination; she with none. She had lived in Alden Park all her life;

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her parents had been among the first to establish the area, moving there from some inner suburb which had been overtaken by tradespeople. So Grace had counted as friend virtually everyone in the vicinity of any social standing, and she'd had remarkably few preferences among them. She had been fond of saying that there was some good to be found in everyone, and though "everyone" to her had had a fixed minimum of breeding and income, still she had been diligent in finding the good. Anyone who was not openly vicious had been a "lovely person" to Grace. Brilliance at conversation and the successful production of offspring had been equal accomplishments in her generous eyes, and she had always been sweetly and exasperatingly cordial to any old bore who chanced to be about. She'd had a few favorites, perhaps, but they might as well have been chosen for the color of their eyes as for any other attribute which Martin had been able to distinguish.

There would have to be some way of narrowing down this horde, some systematic process of elimination, but for the moment none occurred to him. And in the meantime there could be no harm in speculating about one or two of the possibilities. . . .

For obvious reasons, the first person who popped into his mind was Dennis Morley. Dennis was the one man in Alden Park of whose animosity he felt quite certain.

The antagonism which had sprung up so quickly between Dennis and himself was originally caused by Dennis's moustache. It was a quietly bushy sort of moustache which made Dennis look most dignified, and that doubled its offensiveness in Martin's eyes. Moustaches are rare in Alden Park and such communities, at least among youngish men, and Martin had felt free to generalize about them, and had even gone so far

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as to hone his generalizing into the form of an epigram. "In the present day," he had once remarked, after forcing the occasion for the remark, "in the present day, unless a moustache conceals a disfigurement, it may be considered a declaration of imbecility."

This pronouncement had seemed to him both elegant and true. In his experience, moustache-sporting men were apt to be the dreariest fogies, too fatuous to understand why the day of hirsute blandishments had passed.

So when he first had encountered Dennis and his bushy moustache, Martin had acted on his generalization and been more than a little patronizing. Dennis was a fool, no doubt, but not the sort of fool one could patronize successfully. For he was the one radical element of Alden Park, and he thrived upon condescension with the maddening complacency of the good-natured iconoclast.

In a community where government ownership of the Post Office system was regarded as a drastic socialistic experiment whenever the matter was considered, Dennis was an anomoly. He contributed literary reviews to the liberal magazines, he came right out and *boasted* of having voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and he undeniably had read *Das Kapital* for he was constantly trying to persuade apoplectic old gentlemen that it was not the communist manifesto they believed it to be. He was eloquent in support of labor unions, socialized medicine, and limited incomes; eloquent in disapproval of strike injunctions, big business, and inherited wealth. (This last was especially incomprehensible, for his main income came from the depression-shattered remains of a fortune built up by his father and grand-father.) His eloquence was consistently intolerable: whatever he approved of was "good sense"; whatever he disapproved of was "fascism."

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Yet—Dennis was popular.

Even the old gentlemen, after they had recovered from their apoplectic reactions to his arguments, acknowledged that "you can't help liking the boy."

While this attitude begged the question of Dennis's age, which was thirty-eight, just five years younger than Martin's, it was an honest testament to the fact that Dennis had inherited, along with the remains of a fortune, quite a lot of the fabulous Morley charm. (Mention of Dennis's father, dead these many years, could still evoke a nostalgic sigh from ladies of appropriate age.) Moreover, as earlier aristocrats had enjoyed the reflected glory of a pet poet or a tame philosopher, so these modern aristocrats of Alden Park cherished an illusion of their own tolerance and cosmopolitanism and boasted of having attended the cocktail party Agnes Herndon once gave for a Negro contralto. Dennis was their tame radical. It gave them a sense of broadmindedness to have him to their parties, and a sense of assurance to see him nibble a canapé so elegantly. Besides, when he wasn't being political, no one could be so charming . . . so they said.

This charm dented Martin not at all. The juvenile radicalism could be expected from horn-rimmed glasses and crewcuts, not from conservative-looking moustaches. Martin had despised, and openly. And, equally, Dennis had despised Martin's own rational philosophy of enlightened self-interest. Dennis had dropped the word "parasite"; Martin had mentioned "a phase which most people outgrow before they're twenty"; and the battleline had been established.

The trouble was that if Martin was impervious to Dennis's charm, his friends were not, so meetings were unavoidable and even frequent. Since neither could banish the other, the mutual hostility had deepened behind the façade of amiable

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social insult—that cocktail-party shuttlecock which is supposed to signify camaraderie, and in actuality all too frequently exercises genuine hatreds.

So there was no doubt in Martin's mind that Dennis would distinctly enjoy having him at a disadvantage.

But would Dennis's idealism and high principles permit him to stoop to anything as dirty as blackmail? Martin decided that they would. For all Dennis's high-minded theorizing, no one had ever caught him giving any of his time or all too slender income to the causes he championed with so much verbal energy. He even avoided giving to charity by contending that it was "against his principles." In other words, like most self-proclaimed liberals he was just as selfish as the next man where his own money was involved.

So Dennis couldn't be eliminated. Quite the contrary: he could use the money very nicely. . . .

And that brought to mind one way of narrowing down his list of possible suspects: the richer of his friends, or Grace's friends, would have no temptation to blackmail. Only the relatively poorer ones would have the incentive.

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CHAPTER 2

Martin ate his lamb chops with good appetite, and drove over to the Country Club. The sky had clouded over, and an occasional rumble of thunder discouraged the thought of golf; besides, he wanted to be among people, probing at them. This early in the afternoon the card room was nearly empty. Alec Frobisher and Wally Herndon greeted him with delight.

"I think I saw Finletter about," Wally said. "He'll make a fourth till someone else comes along." And he trotted his gross body up the stairs.

Alec's lean, misleadingly ascetic face crinkled into a smile and just the suggestion of a wink. "I wonder what Wally'd do if he came here some afternoon and there was no one to play bridge with," he remarked genially.

This was just the sort of remark that had always made Martin despise Alec. Not because it was either unkind or untrue. Wally would have been the first to acknowledge his passion for bridge and his dependence on the game. He would not, in fact, have been able to deny them if he wanted to, for he was generally the first to arrive at the card room in the afternoon and the last to leave it in the evening . . . and no one who

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knew his wife could blame him. Agnes Herndon was something of a terror.

So Wally's understandable infatuation with bridge was a phenomenon that would have impressed itself upon even the stupidest child, and even the stupidest child would have accepted the fact and dismissed it. Not Alec. The obvious had an endless fascination for him, and the more obvious something was, the more inescapable Alec's comment. Drenched pedestrians would be informed that it was raining, suffering snifflers that they had quite a cold there, and bereaved relatives that death must come to each of us sooner or later.

So it was with considerable chagrin that Martin found himself chuckling amiably and agreeing that Wally would certainly be lost without his daily bridge game.

And this inanity of his, Martin realized even as he was committing it, was solely the result of the fact that however much of a bore Alec might be, he was surely no blackmailer—for he was one of the richest men in Alden Park. Nor had his wealth been inherited. Despite his conversational fatuousness, there was a streak of brilliance in the man, and an uncanny grasp of stock-market fluctuations. Martin had never clearly understood what position Alec had held in Wall Street before his retirement some years back, but had long since discovered that it was profitable to consult Alec before tinkering with his investments.

In any case, Alec could not be deemed a suspect. His friendliness could be taken at its face value, and credited with as much sincerity as could be expected of any such relationship in a community founded on an affinity of incomes rather than of interests.

So the untainted simplicity of Alec's friendliness was justifiably relaxing, and Martin realized that in responding to it he had not been a hypocrite after all. For until the black-

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mailer was found, he knew now that he would be wholly comfortable only with such men as Alec, whose innocence was unquestionable. The prospect was mildly dismaying, but for the moment Martin was content to chat good-naturedly with Alec until Wally came down the stairs with Dr. Finletter in tow.

As always, on entering the card room, the clergyman wore an air of heavily feigned furtiveness, and voiced the hope that his bishop wouldn't catch him. "In any case," he said, "I'll have to cut out as soon as someone else comes."

Dr. Finletter was a lanky man, with the sad, naked face of an un-made-up clown, and enough nervous mannerisms to serve three laymen. When he had first come to Alden Park (so older residents had informed Martin), he had had evangelical tendencies and a deep consciousness of Sin. But he had been a young man then, and as malleable as he had been enthusiastic, and the oldsters had tolerantly taught him what was expected of him. Nowadays he was social and hearty, and more apt to draw his lesson from the good and faithful servant who multiplied his talents than make embarrassing observations about the difficulties a rich man might encounter on trying to enter the kingdom of God. In fact, he seemed to have modeled himself after Shakespear's curate: "A marvelous good neighbor, faith, and a very good bowler."

"Who will have the bad luck to play with me?" wondered the clergyman, facing the knave of diamonds with a gesture that nearly sent the card shooting off the edge of the table. Alec also cut high, and Martin was bored by finding himself paired with Wally Herndon. Wally's penchant had not been rewarded with skill. He called himself a "sound player," which meant that he could be counted upon always to do the orthodox thing, even when it was wrong.

Alec dealt, and the game was on. Dr. Finletter made a part

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score, and then Wally went down at three no-trumps after carefully having gone out of his way to avoid a winning finesse. "I hate taking finesses," he explained solemnly to Martin. "It seems almost like cheating when they work."

Martin smiled, where with another partner he would have been irritated. It was very nearly impossible to be irritated with Wally. He had a genuine sweetness that was irresistible, and a gentle wit which was never directed against anyone except himself. The result was that he was easily the best liked person in Alden Park, just as his wife was easily the most disliked. Actually, Agnes probably contributed to Wally's popularity, since her very existence lent his unfailing good-nature a more-than-human heroism.

So it was with some reluctance that Martin forced himself to consider the possibility that his partner's round, cherubic countenance—so crammed with kindliness that there was no room left for character—concealed the soul of a blackmailer. Certainly the Herndons could be said to "need" the money: Agnes never tired of complaining about how little they had left after they got through paying income taxes, and everybody knew how ill they could afford the socially essential gesture of sending their youngster to New England's most exclusive preparatory school.

On financial grounds, then, Martin could conceive of Wally committing blackmail, if only to pay for his bridge losses—but surely it would be a gentle, apologetic sort of blackmail, not the nasty, gloating blackmail of the letter-writer. Besides, it was impossible to think of Wally toiling that great bulk up a steep hill just to play with a camera. Both physically and temperamentally, Wally was incapable of the role. Agnes, perhaps; but not Wally.

Martin beamed fondly at his partner.

Several hands had been passed out, and now Martin found

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himself bounced into a shaky small slam, and much to his own surprise brought it home. Then the opponents became vulnerable, and the struggle for the odd game dragged on and on. Dr. Finletter kept glancing at his watch with increasing impatience.

"I hope somebody comes along soon," he remarked finally. "I have to leave here at three at the very latest."

Wally made a protesting noise.

"I really do," Dr. Finletter said. "The rehearsal of Phyllis Bradley's wedding is set for three-thirty, and I have to stop by the rectory first."

"Martin!" exclaimed Alec Frobisher. "Is something the matter, man?"

"No," said Martin dazedly.

"You look as if you'd seen a ghost. Cut the cards, will you."

The wedding, of course! How could he possibly have forgotten that it was on the way back from Ann Cameron's wedding reception that he had murdered Grace?

Indeed, planning the murder for a day when he and Grace were otherwise socially involved had been a most important part of the cleverness of Martin's scheme. For the average thoughtful murderer, he had reasoned, striving to anticipate every conceivable eventuality, would assuredly select a moment of predictable privacy for his killing. Yet such an approach somewhat defeated its own ends, for sudden death under such circumstances would certainly attract at least a degree of suspicion.

And suspicion was always dangerous. Martin had the greatest respect for modern criminological methods; it had seemed obvious to him that the best defense against such investigation was to make sure that nobody ever had the slightest reason to suspect that a murder had taken place.

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What could be more innocent-seeming than an "accidental death" on the way to or from some social function? If one had the patience to wait for the perfect moment, and the foresight to have anticipated it when it arrived, one could combine all the advantages of both premeditation and impetuosity, and avoid the disadvantages of either.

With typical indifference and lack of imagination, Grace had shown an unquestioning acceptance of his sudden willingness to accompany her to the various socializings he had formerly shunned.

Before each such excursion Martin had examined in detail the various opportunities for murder that the outing might provide: perilous staircases, trafficky intersections, lonely spots where violent ruffians might possibly lurk—each had received due consideration in advance. Unfortunately, unlike the accommodating victims of detective fiction, Grace did not suffer from a weak heart; on the contrary, she was irritatingly healthy. She could not be conveniently frightened to death; some quite real act of violence would be necessary.

It seemed to Martin, when he came to examine the matter, that the inhabitants of Alden Park lived lives that were pusillanimously free of the opportunities for violent deaths. True, they might drown in their tubs or break their necks on cellar steps, but such accidents seemed to him unprepossessingly domestic. There was little point in forever rendering such simple acts as taking a bath, or visiting the wine bin, pregnant with morbid associations; quite apart from the fact that homely tragedies inevitably aroused homely suspicions.

So gradually he was driven back on one of his original notions: a contrived and fatal accident.

For a time he toyed with the sporting idea of himself driving the car into a calculated smash-up, relying on his forewarning to escape unharmed himself. There were certain ad-

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vantages to the idea, chief of which was complete safety from suspicion. But after giving the matter deep thought, and coming to the conclusion that it was possible to achieve the same effect with no personal danger at all, he decided that in such a matter as murder there was no point in being unnecessarily sporting.

Methodically Martin scouted the neighborhood for likely spots for a crash. He found three, and easily the most suitable of these was a lonely and tricky stretch on Prospect Drive. The community had occasionally brooded about one particularly dangerous corner, and spoken of guard rails, but nothing had ever been done about it.

However, Prospect Drive was not a route commonly used by Grace or Martin, and several weeks went by, which Martin put to thoughtful use, before a plausible excuse presented itself. This excuse was an invitation from the Camerons to attend the wedding of their daughter, Ann, and the reception afterwards—and the Camerons' place lay in such a direction that it would be natural enough for the Pryors to take Prospect Drive. Even Grace had been surprised at the delight with which Martin greeted an invitation to celebrate the nuptials of a girl he had so frequently denounced as an impertinent and disrespectful brat, and Martin had to exaggerate outrageously Joe Cameron's taste in champagne to get himself back in character.

Actually Martin scarcely tasted the champagne—though he worked hard at creating the illusion of downing numerous glasses and exuberantly encouraged Grace to overindulge. He chose the moment of their leaving, early enough to avoid the rush of departures; invited Grace to drive back, and suggested Prospect as a pleasant route; and at the preselected spot produced the plausible reason for her to stop the open convertible just there.

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He walked around to Grace's side of the car, looking about to make sure the coast was clear—(who could anticipate an idiotic camera enthusiast on the opposite hill?)—and stood over her for an instant, reviewing his plans. She looked up at him inquiringly with those dull, doggy brown eyes, just as he took her head and with all his strength brought it crashing down on the rim of the steering wheel. He didn't pause to learn if she were dead or merely unconscious, but released the handbrake and with the ferule of his umbrella prodded the accelerator—first gently, trotting beside the car, and then sharply to give the car impetus to send it hurtling well out over the edge and down the thirty-five-foot drop.

The smash was most satisfactory. He hurried down the slope, and was delighted to detect, on approaching the wreck, the heavy reek of leaking gasoline. Quickly he lighted the screw of paper intended for just this eventuality, and tossed it where a trickle of gas was visible. A blast of flame drove him back, but he remembered to toss the umbrella into the fire. Since there was still no sound of an approaching car, he hurried back up to the spot where the convertible had gone off the road.

This was the unpleasant part of his plan. The spot he had selected for his fall lay more than fifteen feet down and to his right, and from this vantage point it looked anything but soft. Yet a fall, mussing himself up and even hurting himself a bit, was essential to complete the picture of his having been thrown free of the car in its flight.

In midair he had time to wonder why he was holding his breath, and this thought distracted him from his intention of relaxing as he had read circus acrobats did. So he landed stiffly and heavily on one heel, off balance and further forward than he had intended, so he doubled over and rolled and skidded the rest of the way down the slope. Something gave

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his shoulder a terrific blow; something else clawed at his face and neck. When he stopped at last he was slightly stunned, and until he identified the roaring in his ears with the blazing car, he thought he was worse hurt than he really was. Groggily he sat up, and assayed the damage. One ankle was badly sprained and already swelling; his shoulder hurt like fury. His clothes were obviously effectively torn and filthy. One trouser leg was half ripped away, and the shin had an ugly scrape, and when he touched tentatively at the painful spot on his left cheek his hand came away bloody. Most artistic, he decided; even better than he had hoped for.

Awkwardly he hobbled over to the burning car, that there might be traces that he had tried to go to Grace's aid and found it hopeless, and then in considerable pain he crawled back up to the road again. At this point the loneliness of Prospect Drive had ceased to be an asset, for he had had time to lurch with what speed he could muster fully half a mile toward the village before the wide-eyed delivery boy had picked him up and rushed him to the nearest telephone, where futile assistance might be summoned. After all the appropriate gestures had been made, Martin had let himself be taken—protesting brokenly—to the hospital.

But from there on his role, carefully planned in every detail, had been ridiculously easy to play. His injuries, though superficial, had been real enough and honestly painful enough to substantiate his story, and he had cleverly declined to say whether he had leapt or been thrown from the car, lest some shred of evidence arose to contradict him. He had simply insisted unhappily that he could remember nothing from the instant the car went over the edge till he had found himself lying some distance from the wreck. As for the cause of the accident, he had offered nothing except the fact that as they had come over the crest of the hill, the late afternoon sun had

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greeted them glaringly, and he could only suppose that if there were nothing the matter with the car Grace must have been momentarily blinded, for she had not been driving especially fast. This touch had been the last offering of his foresight, for he had even anticipated that they could calculate from where the car had landed that it had not been traveling at any great rate of speed.

As far as he knew, no one had ever thought to question the accident, and as no one had had the slightest reason to believe that his and Grace's marriage had not been one of the happiest, he had only had to lie back gloating secretly and accept the sympathy that flowed in upon him in tiresome abundance.

The Cameron wedding, because it had merely been the means to an end, had quite slipped from his mind. Doubtless people had sensitively refrained from mentioning it in his presence.

But now he was glad to be reminded of it, because it provided a second means of weeding out suspects. Obviously no one at the reception could have been picture-taking out on the hill opposite Prospect Drive. . . .

Wally enthusiastically bid up to a game that probably wasn't there, and Martin prepared to lay down a dummy that would almost certainly be found wanting.

Gerald Marshall came bounding down the stairs with an unnecessary exhibition of youthful muscular tone. "Good, good!" cried Dr. Finletter. "You can take my place as soon as this rubber is over. I have to go anyway. It shouldn't be more than a moment." In nervous haste he threw out a card at random. Alec Frobisher winced at the sight of it.

Somewhat more hopeful, Martin spread out his hand. Then, for lack of other employment, he considered Gerald Marshall as a possible suspect.

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First of all, had Gerald been at the Cameron reception? Yes, he undoubtedly had, and for an instant Martin thought of striking him out. But then memory came back to him: Gerald had been there, but had talked of having to leave early because he had something he wanted to do, and when Dr. Finletter had left after making his courtesy appearance, Gerald had begged a ride with him.

That had been a good hour and a half before Grace and Martin had left—and the "something" which Gerald had wanted to do might easily have been a matter of photography before the light faded; he hadn't specified. As for Gerald's financial position . . .

Penniless in his own right, Gerald had married, at twenty-six, Barbara Chernet—whose first husband had inherited and enlarged the Chernet steamship millions. It had been, seemingly, a successful marriage, and for fifteen years Gerald had lived high. Then Barbara had died. Naturally the steamship fortune, the income from which had been Barbara's in her lifetime, had passed to the Chernet children, who had a cordial dislike for their stepfather. Their family pride enabled him to keep up appearances, but their antagonism was such that their generosity stopped dead short when appearances were satisfied.

For this antagonism their mother had been largely to blame. A good-hearted soul who hated to refuse anyone anything, yet dutiful to her first husband's theories of the value of a spartan upbringing, she had dodged the problem of disciplining her children by thoughtlessly blaming any necessary punishments on Gerald. Presumably the consequences of this strategy in the event of her demise had never occurred to her; and Gerald had been too little interested in the children to notice what was happening, or too shortsighted to protest if he had noticed.

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So once again he had found himself "penniless." Not, perhaps, in the sense he had been penniless in the days when Barbara had found him life-guarding at East Hampton, for she had been able to leave him an income of two or three thousand a year in his own right. But after a decade and a half of having a fortune at his disposal, this seemed less than the pittance which he had once earned by blowing his whistle at venturesome adolescents.

A less sturdy spirit might have crumbled in the face of Alden Park's knowledge of, and sly delight in, his downfall. Not Gerald. He had maintained his self-respect by reverting to the natural athleticism which had originally given him the superb physique that had been the undoing of numerous impressionable virgins as well as the more mature Barbara Chernet. Even before he had become a widower his golf game had been one of the best in Alden Park; since then he had diligently made it the very best. His *raisons d'être* had become the Handicap Tourney and the Frobisher Trophy, and the fact that he had won both of these now for three years in succession had given him the satisfied air of a local celebrity. Every morning that was not too inclement he was out on the golf course improving his game; the afternoons and many evenings he devoted to playing bridge for stakes that would have been far too high if he lost with any regularity. . . .

With ingenuous pleasure Wally brought home his undeserved game. The scores were totaled and settled, and Dr. Finletter left in a flurry of smiles and jerky wavings that were like unfinished benedictions. The cut for partners took Wally to Alec, and brought Gerald to Martin with the deal. Gerald looked pleased, but Martin assumed that the pleasure was at having avoided Wally rather than at acquiring him.

"I feel lucky," Gerald announced to the table as he leisurely dealt out the cards. "I got a birdie on the seventh hole this

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morning, and whenever I do that I feel lucky. And I think I've found a new way of tackling the dogleg on the twelfth. If you—"

Once again Martin examined his partner with some curiosity. Gerald had opportunity, motive and temperament to be a blackmailer; here was the first real suspect Martin had met in the flesh since that dreadful letter had arrived in the morning mail. The man seemed quite as usual—but this meant nothing. Whoever was clever enough to have written the letter would be equal to socializing with Martin with unaltered countenance and behavior.

No, all that had changed was Martin's attitude toward Gerald, and this not because he had any reluctance to welcome the man as a suspect. Martin had never liked Gerald. On the contrary, he had despised him as only the amateur gigolo can despise the professional. Martin's income (in his own estimation at least) placed his marriage to an income three times as large on the dignified footing of a marriage of convenience; Gerald's had been that of a common fortune-hunter.

But previously Martin had been content to dismiss Gerald as a fool. An amiable fool, so that it was possible to suffer him affably, if not gladly; but a tiresome fool, with his constant enlarging on his adventures on the golf links. Now it was necessary to consider the possibility that underneath the tiresomeness might lie unsuspected reserves of malice and shrewdness. It was by no means inconceivable.

". . . a chance of avoiding the sandtraps even if your approach shot is short," concluded Gerald, rapidly sorting out his hand. "Two spades. See, I said I was feeling lucky!"

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CHAPTER 3

With a distinct feeling that the gods were on his side again, Martin slammed the car door and climbed the steps to Bill Benson's front door. For several days he had been racking his brains for some plausible reason for dropping in on Sally Teal, the least familiar of his five suspects, and then Benson had invited him over for the evening and mentioned in passing that Sally, among others, would be there.

A fortnight had gone by with no further communication from the blackmailer. Martin had quietly pursued his investigation with much the same scholarly detachment as that which he had formerly brought to the biography of his grandfather, Governor Pryor—a work which had recently been suffering from neglect.

Grace's telephone book and his own had yielded a lengthy list of names. He had crossed out all those belonging to people whose financial position seemed to put them above suspicion. This was by no means as easy as it might sound. It was traditional in Alden Park that one kept up the strongest possible front until the petition of bankruptcy was actually filed; but, even so, it was rare that such an extremity was reached without some rumor leaking out.

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Then the remaining names had been checked against the guest list of the Cameron reception. Since the newspaper list was doubtless unreliable, being based on invitations rather than acceptances, this had meant a tedious and very difficult afternoon with Helen Cameron, who had persisted in trying to change the subject tactfully at every opportunity. He had got his way finally, though he had doubtless left behind an impression of brooding morbidity.

And then Martin had narrowed the list still further on purely geographic grounds. He had decided that the hill opposite Prospect Drive was not sufficiently elevated, nor did it afford such scenic possibilities, to entice a photographer from any distance. Surely it would occur to no one from the other side of the village to seek out that wholly undistinguished eminence to take pictures from. Martin had obtained a scale map of the township and drawn a circle to include only those houses within a mile of the hill.

He had been left with five names.

Gerald Marshall.

Dennis Morley, of the moustache and the radical tendencies.

Agnes Herndon, Wally's difficult wife.

Bill Benson and Sally Teal.

On this list, which now existed solely in his own mind, there were question marks after the last two names. After Benson's because Martin considered him a close friend, and after Sally Teal's because she was more or less of an unknown quantity.

She was a poor relation of Alec Frobisher's, a second cousin, or something of the sort. Alec had brought her to Alden Park two or three years ago, and had given her the guest house in the corner of his estate. From report, Martin knew that Sally had turned some part of the house into a studio, and made

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some kind of pottery, doubtless very bad. Grace had early adopted her as a lame dog, had sponsored and befriended her, and had her to all the larger parties at which Martin had always made only the most perfunctory appearances. Rather to his surprise, Benson seemed fond of her too, and Sally came fairly regularly to his small, conversational gatherings, which Martin found so much more entertaining than most Alden Park parties.

She had been content to stay on the fringe, taking little part in the conversation that flowed around her, so naturally Martin had paid her no more heed than he had at Grace's functions. But now he had to recognize that her silent presence implied interest or curiosity, and that she had had ample opportunity for observing and reaching judgments about the people, including himself. Martin's part in the conversation was usually an active one; from the sidelines Sally would have listened to him, formed an opinion of him, come to understand him.

It was very much like being spied upon, and for the first time Martin had found a flaw in his habit of paying as little attention as possible to people who failed to amuse him.

However, he was on guard now. He was the watchful one, the hunter. It was not an enjoyable situation at all. It meant that he could never relax in public. It meant that he must devote himself to five people, only one of whom he liked. It meant that he had to be constantly self-vigilant, and forever playing a role of naturalness which he couldn't feel.

And this matter of straining at seeming natural led to excesses—such as the burst of unwonted cordiality he unleashed on Eve Benson when she came to let him in. He could see she was surprised, but she couldn't help responding to the attention, which was natural, since for the rest of the evening she would be relegated to the silent mixing of drinks and serving

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of coffee. Only newcomers incurred Benson's displeasure by trying to draw his wife into the general conversation, and they quickly learned that she had a nervous fatuousness which could reduce the most stimulating discussion to a shambles of inanity. Martin despised her whole-heartedly, and rarely troubled to conceal it; now she took a feline revenge by interpreting his amiability as a sign that he had changed since Grace's death.

"We never know what happiness is until it's gone," Eve informed him.

Martin nodded solemnly, thinking that for once there was more to one of Eve's little homilies than she realized.

"But you mustn't brood," she said. "Grace wouldn't have wanted you to."

"I doubt if she ever gave the matter much thought," he said crushingly. Then, feeling that he had restored things to a normal footing, he fled to the more congenial atmosphere of the living-room.

"Ah, there, Martin," said Benson, waving with his black-rimmed spectacles. "You're the last to arrive. Pull up a chair. We've been discussing blackmail."

Among the many contrarinesses of human nature is the one which demands that a person be prouder of a doubtful accomplishment than of a genuine talent. The financier's heart is won if you compliment him on his perfectly ordinary *sauce béarnaise*, the prima donna boasts of her indifferent petit point and the statesman of his mediocre paintings.

So it was with the inhabitants of Alden Park. Passing over all the things of which they might justly be proud, they erected their snobbery on the "exclusiveness" of Alden Park. This exclusiveness derived, presumably, from the elaborate covenants which demanded of a prospective neighbor such

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essential virtues as Anglo-Saxon ancestry and respectability of income. When adolescent children, with the cynicism appropriate to their age, questioned the purpose of this exclusiveness, they were treated to a lecture on the importance of tradition in a world of debased and vanishing values, and told that when they grew up they would discover how much it meant to come from a community of only the very finest people. Usually the matter ended there, but occasionally one of the more difficult youngsters would ask: "The very finest people like Professor Benson?"

There was no dodging the fact that Benson was an embarrassment. Newcomers who had surmounted the obstacles to residencehood were especially dismayed by his presence. Yet nothing could be done about it, for the Benson family far predated any other in the community, and indeed had once owned much of the land of which Alden Park was comprised. Until recently it had been a family of the utmost respectability, if of little eminence. "Good yeoman stock," Grace's father had called them, with more condescension than justice. Benson could number several ministers and one very minor astronomer among his forebears—but no one (and perhaps this was what Grace's father had meant) with any talent for money. Benson's father had had ambitions in that direction. He had sold off his land with enthusiasm, and invested the proceeds in stock which could not possibly fail to make him as wealthy as his new neighbors.

Fortunately Benson's mother had had a small income of her own; enough to keep the household going and to put Bill through college.

Bill proved a prodigious scholar. He took his B.A.; polished off his M.A. while his parents were still arguing about whether they could afford the extra expense; easily got an instructorship to support him while he disposed of the Ph.D. A born

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scholar and pedagogue, his varied interests might have led him in any of a number of directions. But an early understanding of his own temperament, which was intensely disputatious, and the knowledge that teaching would have to supply all his livelihood, indicated some field where his eristicism could not harm his academic security. He settled on Medieval History, and by and large it was a sensible choice. To be too outspokenly accurate about the Crusades, the Inquisition, or some of the early Christian heresies, may evoke the Vatican's official disapproval, but otherwise the controversies of the Middle Ages agitate only scholars no trustee has ever heard of.

At an unusually early age Benson had been offered a full professorship at one of the four universities which Alden Park considered suitable for its male offspring, and he had remained there ever since. His eminence in his field would have made him an asset to any institute of learning, so the university chose to turn a blind eye to his extracurricular eccentricities.

For, as if the exercise of discretion in his profession had exhausted him of that quality, he elsewhere gloried in perversity. He adopted Bierce's definition of orthodox as "an ox wearing the popular yoke," and proceeded to belabor the ox enthusiastically and even joyously.

For instance, he advocated the legitimization of prostitution, arguing that making it illegal had deprived women of the one creative outlet for which they had any natural ability; and in the face of criticism insisted that this was complimentary rather than disrespectful to his wife, Eve.

He urged the introduction of knighthood into the United States as a means of making the spoils system less expensive.

He denounced all religions as irreligious, and contended that atheism was the opiate of the intelligensia.

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Politically he epitomized the Opposition. He called himself a "middle-of-the-road non-Aristotelian anarchist"; since nobody else seemed to occupy this position or even understand it, he had an unassailable base from which to launch his polemics against all other political shades, left or right. He had strong opinions on every social and economic problem, and not a little of their strength was derived from their inconsistency.

Somewhere along the line he had gone to war with Alden Park. Once upon a time he had been backed into a corner and forced to defend his attitude; he had replied with a savage attack on the sort of social system which permitted parvenus to snub the man who taught their children what little they would ever know. Evidently he later decided that this was an undignified position, for he never again would admit that there was any attitude to defend. "I just don't pay any attention to the rest of Alden Park," he would insist gravely. "This is my home; I go my way, and they are free to go theirs."

The more paranoic of his neighbors felt that Benson's way was a calculated affront.

Alden Park was a suburb of pastel, modern houses with trimly landscaped lawns and flower beds. In the midst of these squatted the Benson Victorian monstrosity, painted an uncompromising, ugly dark brown—and generally in need of paint. The grounds were a squalor of vegetable plots, connected by patches of grass which was invariably uncut for Benson's only interest was in the vegetables. Biodynamic gardening was his hobby; his compost pile was the child of his heart—and an offense in the nostrils of his southeast neighbor, whose protests were coldly overridden by lectures on the iniquities of artificial fertilizers.

Something of a dandy at the university, at home Bill wore aged huaraches, filthy corduroys held up by a length of

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clothesline, and shirts of vivid and uncomplementary colors. Occasionally he omitted the shirt while working around his place—especially on afternoons when the Garden Club was having tea on Mrs. Mitchell's lawn.

And as if these indignities were not enough, he wrote of Alden Park (for he was a frequent contributor of witty and contentious articles to the "class" magazines) as if it were a private zoo. He called it "the middle-class suburb where I spend my summers" and retailed the habits of his neighbors in the manner of an aristocrat describing a rustic frolic, if he were being witty; or, if contentious, like an anthropologist analyzing a savage ritual.

The most maddening part of it was that the details on which Benson erected his structures of sarcasm were invariably accurate. For Alden Park did not offer a united front against the professor: there were those who found him entertaining company, sought entrance to the circle around him, and paid their way by tattling on their friends and neighbors.

Gossip aside, conversation tended to be reasonably good at the Bensons', mainly because it was a major fetish of Bill's. "People complain that conversation is a dying art and go back to their television sets," he would say. "Actually, what is dying is original thinking, which was all that ever made conversation an art. Nowadays people read the same newspapers and magazines, go to the same movies and plays, let their books be chosen for them by the same clubs. After a while, with the inconsequential exceptions of politics and religion, they think the same thoughts. By the time they're twenty-five, they are bored by their friends, and by the time they're thirty they are bored by themselves. Who can blame them?"

If the dying art found shelter in the Benson salon it was a restricted shelter, fenced about with rules and regulations initiated by Benson himself "to keep the talk from degenerat-

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ing into nonsense." And if these rules not merely excluded Eve but seemed designed to let Bill indulge his fondness for monologue, it couldn't be denied that he did his very best to provide both wit and variety, for the monologues ranged from the odd corners of his own special field, to almost anything under the sun . . . including, evidently, blackmail.

"Blackmail?" inquired Martin.

"Martin is surprised," Benson informed the others. "He pictures some overmarried businessman paying out money to suppress the evidence of a sexual indiscretion, and wonders why we are discussing anything so squalid."

"Why *are* you?" Martin asked.

"We aren't, of course," Bill said crushingly.

Martin pulled out a handkerchief to dry his palms, and sank into an overstuffed armchair. Belatedly he nodded to the others in the room. The Hollands were there, and the Wallaces. And, curled in one corner of the sofa, Sally Teal. But he had never paid her any attention before, and now contented himself with a fleeting smile of greeting.

"It is probably the fault of detective novels," Benson digressed, thus flouting one of his own rules, "that if a word has a criminal meaning this is the one we invariably think of first. Which is absurd. Now, in medieval Scotland, for example, blackmail meant the tribute that the small border landowners paid to the chiefs for immunity from being plundered. It was a sort of tax, collected by extortion, of course, but there wasn't anything criminal about it."

With renewed suspicion Martin was reminded of the last time he had encountered the comparison between blackmail and taxation.

"We weren't exactly talking about border landowners either," Myra Holland said with sly triumph. She was the

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clever one of the couple, a former academic star fighting against the stagnation of suburban housewifery.

"We were not," Benson agreed, "but we might have been. As it happened, we were dealing with the non-financial variety: social blackmail."

"Bill was saying that society couldn't get along without it."

"Not exactly," said Benson. "I said that it was one of the two basic methods people have of getting what they want from other people. Bribery is the second. But bribery offers a real reward and implies a certain superiority of briber to bribee; its frequency is limited by a natural scarcity of people who have anything worth while to offer. Blackmail, on the other hand, is a tactic of weakness and inferiority, and is therefore quite common. The blackmailer needn't have anything to offer, he merely threatens—and who is so weak as not to have a threat handy? The wretched old lady keeps her adult children in line with threat of a heart attack, the meek wife threatens with her weeping and the child with his tantrums. Every profitable social relationship exists either on—"

Benson's voice had the arresting flexibility of a trained speaker's, but when you were waiting to insert an important question it was as maddening as the dreariest drone. His gestures were restrained to a constant fiddling with his black-rimmed spectacles, which he used much as a hypnotist's bauble, till the raising of the shafts could produce the erect emphasis of a couple of exclamation points, or the abrupt resettling of the glasses upon his nose an intimidating effect on anyone who might be thinking of replying to a rhetorical question. He was a spare, meticulously graceful man in his fifties, with a mobile, thin-lipped mouth, deep-set eyes, and a shock of grey hair cropped close to his head in scholarly parody of undergraduate style.

Myra Holland and Charlie Wallace listened with a ferret-

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like intensity, alert for a point of dispute that might show off their own cleverness. Their spouses listened in wary earnestness, ever determined to maintain their sophistication in the face of Benson's flippant perversities, and rarely succeeding. Eve, as always, seemed the perfect audience, alert and perceptive; it was only when she talked that she appeared a fool. And Sally Teal . . . ?

At last Martin allowed his attention to fasten surreptitiously on Sally.

And he was at once taken off guard by the irrelevant discovery that she was lovely. It wasn't surprising that he had never noticed this before; unlike virtually every other woman in Alden Park she made the least, instead of the most, of herself. Her orange-blonde hair was pulled straight back into an untidy bun. Her pale eyebrows were left without assistance, and her lipstick seemed to have been applied more in anger than in vanity. Yet it was a lovely face—a sensitive and sensual face—the face of a passionate patrician.

She was sitting in a corner of the sofa, schoolgirl fashion, with both feet tucked under her. Her figure was slender and long legged; her breasts were high and small. Her hands, lying passively in her lap, were rather large and knuckly, with short, unpolished nails. She was wearing a pale blue frock with an unbecoming neckline and a row of ugly yellow buttons down the front; her only jewelry was a Mexican bracelet of silver and turquoises.

She attended Benson's onrolling sentences with easy tranquility. In repose her face had a certain blankness, so that Martin might have thought she was bored or thinking of something else, but for the occasional shy, secret smiles that appeared in response to Bill's better turns of phrase. Each smile was the merest flicker of intelligence, vanishing in an instant to be replaced by enigmatic expressionlessness.

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Martin was intrigued—and attracted. He decided that it might be a pleasure getting to know Sally better, and hoped that that face was not the face of a blackmailer.

Benson's voice swooped to a full-throated and doubtless well-expressed conclusion. Ascertaining that nobody was about to leap in with rebuttals, Martin seized the opportunity to insert his question.

"How did you get off on this subject?" he inquired. "Blackmail, I mean."

Benson pulled his glasses down on his nose and peered at Martin over the rims, as if searching for cryptic significance in the question. Martin knew that the gesture was pure affectation—Benson was half blind without his glasses—but consciousness of ulterior motive made him nervous in the face of that shrewd inspection.

"How did we get off on this subject?" Benson repeated vaguely. "These things can be so difficult to retrace. Didn't you raise the matter, Sally, my dear?"

Martin snubbed out the cigarette he had just lighted.

Sally was flushing at finding herself so suddenly the center of attention. "No, I didn't," she protested. "You did."

"Did I?" mused Benson. For an instant his questioning gaze flicked back at Martin, and then returned politely to Sally.

"I was just telling what Dr. Finletter had said about Cousin Alec," Sally said. "You were the one who called it blackmail."

"That's right, I did," Benson admitted.

"The rectory is just opposite my place," Sally explained to Martin. "Dr. Finletter often drops over to watch me work. Something he said the other day—though I know he didn't mean it that way—made me think that Cousin Alec's kindness to me might have come more from fear of public opinion than from affection for me. That was all I said. And then Bill

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started talking about blackmail."

"And I was absolutely right," Benson said. "You used the fear of public opinion to blackmail Alec Frobisher into giving you his guest house to live in. It wasn't the least bit like him to do it. Normally he doesn't give anything away that he can't deduct twice over from his income tax."

"That isn't so," Sally said. "He's very generous. And I certainly didn't *intend* to blackmail him."

"You certainly did," Benson said, "though I'm sure you didn't think of it that way. Most social blackmail is more or less unconscious."

"Don't pay any attention to Bill," Martain said, explaining to himself that if he wanted to get to know Sally better there could be no harm in coming to her defense. "He'd probably just been thinking about what he calls social blackmail and used what you said to launch into one of his lectures."

"Nothing of the kind," said Benson, charging happily into battle. "I was quite accurate. Alec is only Sally's second cousin. She'd never met him in her life until three years ago. When she had finally been—"

Sally looked anguished, but it was Eve who interrupted warningly: "Bill!"

"Quite right, my dear," Benson said. "When Sally was in some difficulty," he continued, shying away from whatever confidence he had been about to disclose, "there was no one else she could turn to. But people don't usually rush to shower kindnesses on unknown second cousins; particularly people like Alec. In this case, though, if Alec had declined to come to her rescue he would have felt like a dreadful stinker, and he knew it. Sally must have known it too. It's nothing that she should be ashamed of. She'd have been a fool not to take advantage of the only weapon she had."

"I've paid back every single penny," Sally said defiantly,

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looking as though she were having considerable difficulty keeping from bursting into tears.

Martin held down his curiosity, and stepped in heavily to change the subject before Sally got any more upset. But despite all his efforts on her behalf, when later in the evening he gallantly offered to drive her home, she said indifferently that the Hollands had to go right past her door, and they would drop her.

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CHAPTER 4

It was on Friday of that same week that Agnes Herndon baffled the fifth in a series of Martin's most plausible reasons for calling on her by the simple means of not being home when he arrived. In some irritation he pressed the novel which Agnes simply *had* to read into the hands of the pimply-faced Herndon heir and retreated to his car with a profound conviction that Agnes was deliberately avoiding him.

The afternoon was wasted.

But inspiration seized him as he swung out of the drive, and he decided that there was a chance to retrieve the day after all. His way home went directly past Sally Teal's place, and there was no reason why he shouldn't simply drop in. True, there was no reason why he *should*, but by now Martin was thoroughly tired of trying to think up ingenious pretexts —which usually failed anyway—for every call he made on one of his suspects. Other people paid purely social calls; why not he?

The Frobishers enjoyed the isolation afforded by four whole acres, and their house was located, or rather concealed, in the center of this ground. The driveway was guarded by

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Sally's cottage, formerly the guest house—which the Frobishers quite seriously called "The Gatehouse." Martin parked in front of the cottage, and took the flagstone path up to the front door at a saunter calculated to give him the air of an offhand visitor. Several unrewarded assaults on the doorbell were beginning to make him think that his afternoon was indeed wasted when Sally appeared around the corner of the house. She was wearing soiled dungarees and a man's shirt with the sleeves rolled up; her hair was caught back by a rubber band.

"I thought I heard someone ringing, but I wasn't sure," she said. "Most people come straight back to the studio because that's where I usually am."

"Do you mind visitors when you're working?" Martin asked as he picked his way across the lawn. "You said the other evening that Dr. Finletter often comes over, so I thought you might not."

"No, no. Come on back," and she turned to lead the way. Her manner was perfectly matter of fact: she didn't seem in the least surprised at seeing him, nor pleased nor annoyed.

The studio had originally been a two-car garage. The big doors had been sealed off, and a large window let into one wall. In front of the window stood what obviously was a potter's wheel . . . and seated on a stool in front of the wheel, very much at his ease, was Dennis Morley. "Hello, Martin," he said pleasantly enough.

It was with some difficulty that Martin managed a polite smile and a hypocritical inquiry into the state of Dennis's health. The presence of the bemoustached radical was unexpected but not really surprising, for he lived close by, but to Martin it was even more unwelcome than usual. From the very first his resolve to see as much as possible of his suspects had been qualified by the thought that it would be nice to

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eliminate the other four names and have Dennis's left at the end.

Sally swept assorted objects off a kitchen chair and pushed it in Martin's direction. Then she returned to the task from which his ringing had evidently called her: wrapping chartreuse dishes of some sort in newspapers and packing them in cartons with the aid of excelsior from a large packing case.

Martin eyed the chair dubiously. It was quite dusty, and he very much wanted to wipe it off before sitting down. But the studio had such an air of messy and filthy functionalism, such an atmosphere of absorbed and dedicated toil, that he felt a display of fastidiousness would seem out of place. So he sat down firmly, and looked at Dennis with an expression that was intended to reveal his hope that the other would go away.

Dennis fluffed out his moustache with a gentle forefinger. "How is your book coming along?" he asked Martin.

Sally looked up from her work with more interest than she had ever shown Martin before. "Do you write?" she asked him. "I didn't know that."

"He's writing a biography of his grandfather, Governor Pryor," Dennis said. He took out a pipe and began to fill it from an oilskin pouch. It was a part of his homespun pose: a pipe to go with the moustache. "Governor Clarence W. Pryor," he mused aloud. "He was the one who called out the state militia to break up the strike at the Jordan Tool plant. Five of the strikers were shot."

"Yes, it was all very tragic," Martin said easily. "Of course, in his old-fashioned way my grandfather thought he was doing the right thing. He didn't realize that his actions would be judged by the socialistic standards of fifty years later."

"Is it socialistic to regret that five men were wantonly killed?" Dennis asked.

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"Everyone regretted it," Martin said. "Especially my grandfather."

The pipe seemed to need the most careful attention. "When you come to that part of the biography, Martin," Dennis said, "are you going to point out that the governor's wife, your grandmother, was a stockholder in the Jordan Tool Company?"

Martin glared at Dennis in disgust. Out of sheer, spiteful malice the man had been prying. "The muckrakers of the day made enough scandal out of that wholly irrelevant coincidence," he said stiffly. "It seems better forgotten. My grandmother had quite a few securities which she'd inherited from her father; I doubt that a list of them would make particularly interesting reading."

"Don't be too sure," Dennis said. "Anyone interested enough in your grandfather to read a whole book about him would surely be interested to know that he had five men killed in the course of protecting one of his wife's investments."

"That's a vile way to put it!" Martin snapped, finally outraged. "You radicals act as though you had a monopoly on love of humanity, but you can never think of any motives but vicious ones. The whole thing was just an unfortunate coincidence."

Dennis had been engrossed in lighting his pipe. Now he looked up at Martin and smiled sweetly. "I may not have much of a reputation for it," he said in his most patronizing manner, "but I *am* a professional critic. And if I might give you a bit of professional advice, it would be to bring such coincidences out into the open. Explain them away if you like, but don't try to keep them concealed. Reviewers are often better informed than you might expect, and omissions make them suspicious."

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He stood up, still smiling in the face of Martin's momentarily inarticulate fury at such presumption. "Bye-bye, Sally."

"You off?" she asked over her shoulder.

"I'd best be running along," Dennis replied. And he drifted out the door, leaving a swirl of aromatic smoke behind him.

"You mustn't let Dennis upset you so," Sally said soothingly, though without turning around.

"I know I shouldn't," Martin agreed. He realized that he had not cut a very impressive figure in his clash with Dennis, and he would have liked to shrug the whole episode away with some clever jibe at Dennis's expense. But his sense of outrage was too great for cleverness. "He's so utterly *unfair,*" Martin complained.

"Dennis can be frightfully tactless."

Martin bridled slightly at the suggestion that he needed to be treated with tact. "He certainly can, but I'm willing to overlook *that,*" he said magnanimously. "It's his unfairness that I can't stomach. My grandmother's holdings in the Jordan Tool Company amounted to about five percent of the outstanding stock; that scarcely made her a major stockholder."

"I see," Sally said.

"My grandfather was a man of remarkable integrity who would never have let his private interests influence his public actions."

"I see," Sally said.

"When he became Senator he was responsible for some legislation that was considered quite advanced for its time. But you notice that Dennis didn't say a word about that."

Sally finished with a carton and paused for a cigarette. For the first time since Dennis had left she was looking at Martin. "Your grandfather sounds like a fine man," she said seriously. "Do you remember him well?"

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"Reasonably well," Martin said. "I was nearly eleven when he died."

"Was he very fond of you?"

"No, I don't think he liked children much, so he used to give me silver dollars by way of apology." Sally seemed interested, so he went on. "He was tall and very erect and I think he wore a corset. He had a white spade beard and bushy white eyebrows and very gentle blue eyes. I know it's a cliché, but when I was small I used to think God must look exactly like grandfather." Martin found that his anger was gone and he was much more relaxed now, and realized that Sally had brought this about quite deliberately. "No, of course I don't remember him as a real person," he said, smiling at her, "but from all I've been able to find out, he really *was* a fine man."

Sally laughed one of the friendliest laughs that he had ever heard from a woman. "I'm sure he was," she agreed, and then turned back to her work.

Martin marveled at her unquestioning acceptance of his presence. He had strained at excuses for coming, and she seemed to find it natural that he had come without one. He decided that she must be so accustomed to having people drop in on her while she was working that she simply didn't think anything about it.

Undistracted now, he looked about him curiously. The floor was a seeming chaos of crates, boxes and tins, many of them covered with sheeting against the dust. The long wall where the doors had been blocked off was composed entirely of shelves, holding the results of Sally's labors. The light there was dim, but Martin could make out that at one end the pieces stood separately and were the color of pale clay; presumably they were drying or waiting their turn to be fired. At the other end, murky splashes of color indicated pieces finished and glazed, and these were sometimes piled in stacks. Along the

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window wall, to the left of the potter's wheel, was a long work table, the far end of it laden with a surprisingly tidy array of jars, bottles, paper sacks, assorted unidentifiable equipment, and three mortars. On the end of the table near the window stood three or four finished pieces of green or purplish glaze. Martin marked these out for examination since he could see no way of reaching the shelves without stepping over Sally.

"You and Dennis don't get on very well, do you?" she said. "I've noticed that before."

"Oh, we're always at each other's throats. I suppose it's mostly my fault, but he irritates me so with his juvenile theories on politics and such."

"You think his ideas are ridiculous?" Sally asked.

Martin realized that he hadn't the faintest notion what Sally's opinions might be, and if she tended to agree with Dennis he didn't want to offend her. He got up and walked over to the window, groping for some way to temporize without actually contradicting anything Sally might have heard him say in the past. In the garden across the street Dr. Finletter pottered about in the bright autumn afternoon, bringing vast energy to small deeds.

"These socialistic ideas are all very fine in theory," he said finally, "but it's just foolishness to try to apply them to the world as it is today. People just aren't that advanced yet, and probably never will be."

"You don't think very much of people, do you?"

"I suppose I don't, by and large."

"Don't you think that maybe progress comes out of people trying to pretend that they're better than they really are?" Sally asked. "After all, if you pretend something long enough it can become true just out of habit."

"You may have a point there," Martin said, but he hadn't

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really been listening. He had picked up one of the pieces he'd spied from his chair and was examining it with considerable surprise. It was the head of an African warrior, about twelve inches high including the pottery base, with a deep purple glaze that was somehow at once dull and lustrous. The features were exquisitely done, to such an extent that one could find in them a wealth of character. The expression was one of stern sadness, yet there were traces of sensuality, mockery, cruelty, and an almost feminine sensitivity. It was a beautiful work of art, one that Martin would have liked to own. He wanted to know the price of it, but shied away from the indelicacy of asking. But he had to revise his opinion of Sally on the spot: she was unquestionably an artist, and a fine one.

For most of an hour after that they chatted about nothing in particular, and Martin found that he enjoyed himself thoroughly. When he left, Sally complimented him prettily on having been her first visitor who hadn't badgered her with questions about her work.

She didn't ask him to come again, but she obviously took it for granted that he would.

On his way home, Martin remembered the way Sally had soothed his ruffled feelings after Dennis had left. It had been done quite deliberately and quite effortlessly. Someone, virtually a stranger, had been upset, and Sally's instinct had been to repair the damage. And she'd done it.

Grace never would have done such a thing.

Perhaps Grace couldn't have done it so skillfully if she'd tried, but it never would have occurred to her to try. Even with her own husband, much less a comparative stranger.

Once when he had been moody and shaken, after a rare outburst of temper provoked by the stupidity of one of her friends, he had suggested to Grace that the slightest effort

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on her part could have averted the storm. She had gazed at him in total incomprehension. He was a grown man, she had pointed out, and if he wanted to let himself get so upset over nothing she couldn't imagine what he expected her to do about it. Which was perfectly just—but who on earth wanted perfect justice from his wife?

Grace's appearance had promised an emotional generosity, but through no fault of her own the promise had been a lie. She had seemed both intensely feminine and deeply sensitive —but she certainly had not been sensitive, and Martin had never even been able to determine how feminine she actually was.

He had seen her first across an exceedingly crowded room, and a noisy one as well. The Barnetts, who lived in bohemian casualness in the Village, had been giving one of their periodic brawls. Martin had then had an apartment, which he studiously called a "flat," in the East Fifties, because he preferred a good address to more expansive living in a less expensive neighborhood. But he took his social life where he found it, and the Barnett cocktail parties were not to be missed. He had picked up several charming and accommodating girls there at one time or another.

He had spotted Grace as a newcomer as soon as he arrived at the party. Undeniably it had been her body which had first attracted his attention: a full-breasted, voluptuous body, and her stance—she had been posing by the fireplace—had shown it off superbly. Her vis-à-vis, a goggle-eyed young dancer, had been even more goggle-eyed than usual in his efforts to peer down the low-cut bosom of her dress.

The dress was a black cocktail frock of that deceptive simplicity which is popularly supposed to indicate a Fifth Avenue exclusive and which nowadays is just as apt to mean medium-priced Madison. But Martin knew more about wom-

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en's clothes than most men—he had had brief but educational affairs with two fashion models and an editor of a fashion magazine—and he knew the real thing when he saw it. This frock was the real thing. So was her jewelry, of which she was wearing just a trifle too much.

The crowning touch, which he noticed last of all, was the almost remarkable homeliness of her face, set off by the carriage and comportment of a reigning beauty.

Obviously here was none of the Barnett's theatrical riffraff, however accommodating, and Martin hastened to make inquiries.

He learned that her name was Grace Blanchard, that she lived in a suburb not ten miles from his own birthplace, and that she had come to see a former schoolfriend who was staying with the Barnetts and in whose honor (as if an excuse were necessary!) the party was being given.

With this information in hand Martin cut away the young dancer, introduced himself as practically a former neighbor, and within five minutes had trotted forth the names of half a dozen acquaintances who were also friends of Grace's. He had found her cool, self-assured, witty and charming. By the time he got home that night, after dropping her at her station, he had already half convinced himself that he was in love.

Of his infatuation in the ensuing days of courtship there could be no doubt whatsoever. Grace was temperamentally incapable of the simplest dissimulation; he could never blame her for having assumed the virtues which he had seen in her then.

He had bedded her two weeks before the wedding. The voluptuous body had proved somewhat of a disappointment: without confinement the full bosom was a little on the saggy side, and a ragged appendectomy scar offended Martin's fastidiousness. But of the strength of Grace's passionateness

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he could make no complaint. It was crude, to be sure, and misdirected, but he had no doubt that under his expert tutelage she would make an excellent lover.

It was discovering the fallacy in this blithe assumption which had otherwise opened his eyes. Grace hadn't the slightest interest in becoming an excellent lover. She obviously felt that to place a well-sexed body at his disposal should be enough for him, and concentrated on her own satisfaction, enjoying him for his endurance rather than his finesse. He was to be a tame stallion, not a tutor.

And this was quite typical of Grace. Under her façade, which was simply the habit pattern established by what is called a "good up-bringing," she was a monstrously self-satisfied and self-centered woman. She had no warmth, only gregariousness; no sensitivity, only a certain shrewd acuteness. Her good taste was simple snobbery, and what Martin had taken for a rather charming lack of possessiveness was really indifference.

His disillusionment was not quite complete: Grace's money was real enough. And since the money had been a considerable part of her charm, Martin had honestly tried to make the best of the situation. If he had failed, it had surely been largely Grace's fault. After a time, living with indifference and insensitivity could do terrible things to a man's ego. Not that Grace would have understood this. If a flash of foresight had somehow seized her in that moment before Martin had struck the fatal blow, she would have stared in innocence and most probably asked: "But what have I done?" For by her standards she had done nothing wrong.

In fact she had often remarked, in the course of bringing her own style of incomprehension to bear on somebody else's fall from virtue, that she herself had never done a single thing in her life of which she had cause to be ashamed. And it was

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probably true. But Martin sometimes wondered if it would have shamed her to understand that a reasonably kindly and well-meaning person, who had once loved her, could murder her in cold blood and never once feel a qualm of conscience afterward.

A few days later Martin saw Sally again—at Agnes Herndon's cocktail party.

Under ordinary circumstances this was the sort of function that Martin avoided, but he assumed that most of his suspects would be there, and that meant that he had to go. The more he saw of them, the greater the possibility that someone would let something slip. And Martin had a little trap he wanted to try out.

His assumption proved correct. Bill Benson, who was never invited to such parties, was missing, but the rest of Martin's suspects were there. So were a great many other people. Agnes's parties were a tradition. Given with little enthusiasm and attended with still less, they existed, as do most traditions, on sheer social impetus.

She gave two parties each year, one in the spring and another in the fall, and obviously felt that they satisfied obligations contracted during the rest of the year. In reality they satisfied nothing but etiquette. Hostesses who suffered Agnes for Wally's sake throughout the year suffered her parties for the same reason, and dragged their husbands along to share the suffering. Logic had nothing to do with the matter.

The canapés were done by the same couple who catered almost every party in Alden Park, so there could be no complaint on that score. But on the liquid side there was the invariable bowl of punch, where citrus juices struggled to conceal the inferiority of the liquor. Agnes looked surprised and hurt if you asked for a highball instead, even if you'd been

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making the same request twice a year for the past decade.

Martin, whose record for absenteeism was exceeded only by two indomitable husbands who had lived in Alden Park longer than he, had no standing at all, and Agnes simply overlooked his plea for scotch. She told him firmly that she had simply adored the detective novel he had lent her, except that the victim reminded her so much of poor dear Grace, and with equal firmness that he had to try the punch—she was sure he'd like it. And she filled a cup for him herself and stood watching until he'd downed the first swallow, as though that would alter his opinion.

Across the room he noticed Dennis and Gerald Marshall talking together, and deciding to kill two birds with one stone he headed in their direction. He was stopped several times by kindly old ladies who patted his hand and told him encouragingly how wonderfully well he was looking, and how glad they were to see that he was getting out a bit, but the two men were still together when Martin reached them. Gerald had trapped Dennis with some story of a triumph on the links. Martin waited politely till the nineteen.foot putt had miraculously fallen into the cup, and then broke in quickly, to gain as much advantage as he could from the element of surprise.

"You're just the two I've been looking for," he said with what sounded in his own ears like very false enthusiasm. "I've been thinking of getting myself a really good camera, and I want some advice. I think you're both devotees . . . ?" It was his plan to observe whatever reactions he might evoke, and make what sense he could of them later on.

Dennis looked at him oddly, denied knowing one end of a camera from the other, and seized the opportunity to escape.

Gerald, on the other hand, pounced on the chance to show off an area of knowledge, and proceeded to deliver himself of an exhaustive technical lecture, wholly incomprehensible

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to Martin, on the relative merits of the new Japanese cameras as compared with the German models from which they were derived.

Before Martin could act on his instinct to flee a new idea came to him, and he summoned up reserves of patience. When the lecture showed signs of running down, he introduced the subject of telephoto lenses. And since the lecture had shown that Gerald's knowledge of Japanese cameras was based on covetousness rather than possession, Martin inquired specifically if Gerald owned a telephoto lens himself.

"Two of them," boasted Gerald. He indicated that they had both been presents from his darling Barbara, and sighed a nostalgic sigh for the vanished days of affluence. But they were lovely lenses, and he had kept them in perfect condition. He went on to explain the advantages of each. At great length.

Martin sustained his expression of intelligent attention and inwardly considered the information he had gained. The blackmailer had expressed a yearning for fancy lenses; Marshall was obviously well supplied. The blackmailer's remark conceivably might have been intended to mislead, but Martin was sure that it hadn't been. The hill opposite Prospect Drive offered nothing to attract anyone blasé in the matter of telephoto lenses, but might easily have been chosen by a novice eager to experiment.

So the very best brand of logic supported Martin's conviction that Gerald lacked the wits to carry off such high-powered duplicity as he would now be engaged in if he were the blackmailer. Marshall was out, one of the five suspects was eliminated—which was all to the good even if it were a somewhat unexpected result of his little trap.

As soon as he decently could he thanked Gerald for having been a great help, and drifted away. Sally was momentarily by herself on a love-seat, looking very fetching in a dress of

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pale green linen, but somehow less natural than she did in her working costume. He hesitated between joining her and hunting out Wally, who presumably knew where the scotch was hidden, and decided that the scotch could wait.

"I didn't expect to find you here," he remarked, dropping into place beside her.

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I wouldn't have thought it was the sort of crowd you'd find amusing."

Sally looked back at the shrill crowd swirling in front of them. "Do people always have to be amusing?" she asked finally.

"Well, at a cocktail party it helps."

"Agnes has been very kind to me," Sally said, and it was meant to be an explanation. "She can be, you know. And besides, I like watching people. The way they stand and move and gesture; their expressions. It's the sculptress in me, I expect. Look at Cousin Alec over there with his head thrown way back. He looks so fierce and proud and noble—and actually he's just looking at Dennis through the bottoms of his bifocals. Someday I may want to do a cinnamon bear at bay, and then I'll remember Cousin Alec's expression."

Martin smiled and tried to see the over-populated room as he supposed Sally must see it: as lines and curves, postures and poses. But he couldn't do it. All he could see were the same old tiresome faces, the quick, exaggerated smiles and the empty gestures. It would be nice to have a way, as Sally did, to make them seem interesting. He was so tired of them as they were, and especially tired of envying them the complacency that made them blind to his contempt.

"Do *you* find them amusing?" Sally inquired.

Whatever a petard might be, Martin felt hoist by his own. He groped for some way of accounting for his presence that

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wouldn't sound too frivolous. He was rescued by their hostess.

Agnes had been prowling through the party trying to look like a capable hostess on whose ministrations the success of a party depends. Now she caught Martin's eye and came toward them, shaking her dyed red head and wagging an appallingly roguish finger.

"I'm ashamed of you, Martin Pryor," she announced. "Grace is scarcely three months in her grave and here you are chasing the pretty girls." She pretended shock, then smiled brightly and wandered away on some new errand of unconscious destruction.

Which was just like Agnes.

Martin did his best to act as though nothing had happened, but somehow the tête-à-tête had been spoiled.

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CHAPTER 5

Mrs. Hodges never said Good morning, but she always had a remark to bring in with the orange juice. Today it was: "You haven't had anyone in of an evening since Mrs. Pryor passed away. Not once."

Martin concluded that either Mrs Hodges's calendar of respect for the dead now permitted a little private socializing, or that she had some scheme of her own. Possibly both. But he had already noticed among the morning mail an envelope that was certainly a second communication from the blackmailer, so he merely agreed, "I haven't, have I?" and declined to enlarge on the matter despite Mrs. Hodges's interested stare. Temporarily baffled, she retreated to organize her next assault.

He was in no hurry to open the letter, but sipped his orange juice tranquilly and considered blackmail in general and his own personal puzzle in particular. By the thoughtful logic in which he took so much pride, he had reduced his suspects to four: Sally and Agnes, Benson and Dennis Morley. The problem now was to eliminate three of these.

It was gratifying that the camera "trap" had removed Gerald Marshall from the list, but no further result could be ex-

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pected from this approach. Dennis's protest of ignorance Martin discounted, and he had learned that the other three dabbled slightly in the art. As for the matter of getting samples of various typescripts to compare with the letters, this scarcely seemed worth the bother. Martin was not disposed to place too much faith in such physical clues, and was prepared to concede that a passably sensible blackmailer could avoid any of the tangible errors beloved of Sherlock Holmes.

But to remain anonymous, the blackmailer had to write letters, and in those he could not help but leave traces of his character as individual as fingerprints. These were the clues Martin was counting upon: psychological clues that he would pounce on and put to use, just as he had so ingeniously used one already.

Of course, ingenuity was all very well, but he had to be grateful for having been given an opportunity to exercise it. He had been lucky that the blackmailer had not confined himself to a bare statement of the facts; if he had, then Martin would have been stopped before he had even got started.

A simple statement would have sufficed—yet the blackmailer had rambled on, showing off, giving himself away at every turn. Was there some significance to be gleaned from this? Was the blackmailer naturally a garrulous person? Or was he normally uncommunicative, and here was trying to hide behind a smokescreen of words? There was no way of telling, but Martin felt confident that, whatever inspired them, words were bound to be revealing.

He reached for the second letter, hoping for new revelations, but was interrupted by Mrs. Hodges with waffles and a determined air.

"I was thinking," she announced, "that Thursday night would be a good time, if you wanted to have someone in for dinner. I could stay late to clean up, *this* Thursday night."

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"You could?" Martin asked, patiently awaiting developments. Mrs. Hodges never went at things head-on, but resented being hurried through her circumlocutions.

"And I'd like Friday off, if you don't mind," she added artlessly. "My sister and I want to get in town for some shopping and the new show at Radio City."

"Of course," Martin said, amused at this confirmation of Benson's theory. In her own fashion, Mrs. Hodges was distinctly a strong personality, and her technique of getting her own way had always been one of straightforward bribery. "Well, perhaps I'll take advantage of your suggestion. I've been thinking of having the Bensons in for bridge. Let's say dinner for four, unless I can't round up a fourth."

As soon as Mrs. Hodges had left the room he slit open the envelope. Four photographs tumbled out; Martin inspected them curiously. One, somewhat blurred (as if the photographer had been agitated), showed Martin at the edge of the road looking down on the wrecked car; the next two showed him standing near the blazing wreck, and beginning to climb back up towards the road again; and the last looked much like the first except that the car was burning. Martin puzzled over this last one, since he didn't remember having paused to look back at the scene of his crime. Then he realized that the pictures were out of order: this last should really be the third, and it showed him just before he had jumped down the face of the hill to make it appear as if he had been thrown free of the car.

Martin realized that he had been very lucky. The photographs were excellent substantiation for a story—but without the photographer to tell the story and explain the order in which the pictures had been taken, there was nothing that Martin couldn't explain away. The pictures alone might embarrass him, but they would never hang him.

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Somewhat relieved, he turned to the letter, which was considerably shorter than the first.

"My dear Martin:

"I've never envied you that smart-alecky cleverness you're so proud of, and which you use mainly for sneering at other people and for finding new ways to make fun of old virtues. But I admit I could use some of that cleverness now to help me find a completely safe way to bring about a certain exchange of money. It's not an easy problem at all, and you can't blame me for being cautious.

"But I doubt if I can expect you to sympathize. Never mind, in time I will find a solution. And in the meanwhile you might as well be collecting five hundred dollars in unclean bills of small denomination.

"This will be a quarterly installment. Two thousand a year seems a modest demand, and one that should not seriously interfere with your present way of life, which you certainly enjoy, but which seems to me uncommonly useless even by the standards of Alden Park.

"I enclose a few photographs that may interest you."

Martin grinned coldly at the letter. It contained several points that would merit considerable thought, but above all it had reminded him of one characteristic of the blackmailer's which he had tended to overlook. "He doesn't like me one damned bit," Martin murmured to himself. "In fact, he hates my guts." It would be good to remember that when he had found out who the blackmailer was, and it was time to consider what to do about him.

They had coffee in the living-room, so as to leave the dining-room free for Mrs. Hodges to clear away. In one corner

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the bridge table was already set up, with green suede cover and fresh cards, a portent of things to come.

Sally evidently found it an intimidating sight. "I'm afraid I'm going to be dreadfully rusty," she told Martin. In his quest for a fourth it had occurred to him that she might play, and after some protests she had allowed herself to be persuaded.

"Now don't be coy," Benson said. "You're probably much better than Martin deserves. He wouldn't know what to do with a first-rate partner."

"But really, it's years since I've played," she insisted. "I simply haven't had the time."

Martin winced inwardly. In the most innocent fashion Sally had a way of making him feel thoroughly frivolous. "It's just a game," he said insincerely. "There's no need to take it so seriously."

"That's right," Benson said to Sally. "You'll find that Martin takes the game quite light-heartedly—as long as he's winning."

"Oh, stop trying to frighten the girl," Martin said. "I had enough trouble persuading her to play at all."

"Well, we need some sort of handicap," Benson explained. "Eve is cracking up. The other evening, against the Wallaces, she missed an absolute baby end-play."

"You've been rubbing that in for days but it isn't true," his wife replied. "The end-play would have worked, as it happened, but Charlie hadn't bid so how was I to know he had all the cards?" In her indignation she had lapsed into a whiny twang, but now she caught herself and resumed her usual super-elegance of diction. "Keep tokking," she said threateningly, "just keep tokking and I'll trump ev'dy ace you hold this evening."

This wildly affected accent of Eve's had long since led Martin to the conclusion that Benson had married far beneath

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his level. Blonde rinses and careful make-up preserved the remains of what once must have been an exceptional prettiness, and Eve still displayed, to the world at least, a figure that Aldous Huxley would have called "pneumatic." But nothing could conceal the fact that she talked like a fool, if allowed a chance to talk at all. Apart from her inflection, she clothed her drab ideas in an archly ponderous vocabulary that displayed an incurably provincial notion of how a professor's wife should talk. Whatever his friends might think of this mismating, Benson seemed perfectly content with it, and his unfailing courtesy towards Eve was the one sign of good breeding which his enemies would allow him.

But if Eve was a total loss conversationally, Benson's position in Alden Park was such that he could cope with that problem very neatly. If you went to the Bensons', and conversation was the order of the evening, Eve was tacitly reduced to the status of a caterer. But if the evening were to be devoted to bridge (and if you invited the Bensons out it was always for bridge), then Eve was permitted to shine. For she was one of those people with an uncanny flair for cards, even though hopeless in all other respects. Eve was probably the best bridge and canasta player in Alden Park, and as such was welcomed to card parties in homes where her husband was anathema.

To Martin, who hated above all things being bested at anything by someone he despised, Eve represented a source of continual frustration. He enjoyed playing against her, horribly resented losing, yet could derive no real sense of triumph from the occasions when he won. It was an ideally unsatisfactory relationship.

As they moved to the bridge table, Martin watched for the hundredth time, but with undiminished awe, the transformation that Eve achieved in the space of a few feet. There was

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a perceptible shift of personality: she arose from the armchair in futility, she sat down at the table in competence.

"A fifth of a cent?" Benson inquired.

Sally's dismay was evident. "I think Sally would prefer to play for a twentieth," Martin said firmly. "I'll carry the remainder." From Sally's expression it seemed likely that she would have preferred to play for nothing at all, but she made no comment.

She was as rusty as she had warned, but her visibly determined, almost school-girlish concentration kept her from making any bad blunders. The cards were running their way, and Martin bid in such fashion as to see to it that he played most of the contracts.

Eve had been looking about her in a vaguely perturbed fashion between hands, and finally announced that the room looked different. "The breakfront!" she exclaimed a moment later. "Grace's beautiful, beautiful breakfront. You've moved it."

"I always thought it made that wall look awfully cluttered," Martin said.

"But where did you put it?"

"There wasn't any place to put it. I sold it."

Eve looked stricken. "But Grace was so fond of it," she mourned. "It belonged to her great-grandmother."

"I know," Martin said shortly. The sarcasms which leapt to his mind were repressed out of sheer habit here in his own living-room. Grace had made such an issue of the way he treated Eve: "How can you possibly enjoy tormenting anyone so defenseless?" she'd asked one time.

"It's not that," Martin had said; "I just can't stand her sly delight in pointing out my mistakes at the bridge-table."

"What would you expect?" Grace had demanded.

"I doubt if she understands half the things I say," he'd

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retorted, surprised that even Grace would think otherwise.

"She can understand your tone of voice," Grace had said; "and, anyway, it makes *me* uncomfortable." And eventually he'd learned to desist, at least in his own home, not from any eagerness to spare Grace discomfort, but simply because she'd nagged at him. Now it annoyed him to have Eve nag him about Grace. It particularly annoyed him to have it happen in front of Sally—to have Grace even *mentioned* in front of Sally—which was preposterous, but that was the way he felt.

Benson crashed in with the statement that he'd never thought much of the breakfront—it had just been another antique; and the game was suspended for a few moments while the old argument of modern furniture versus antiques was dusted around a bit.

Late in the evening, when the game was breaking up, Sally remarked to Martin that she hadn't seen him since the afternoon of Agnes's party. Martin mumbled that he had been busy, and added quite inaccurately that he had been meaning to drop in at the studio when he had a chance.

Actually it had taken considerable strength of will to keep himself from dropping in at the studio. What had stopped him was the recognition that there had been more than a little accidental truth in Agnes's tactless gibe about his chasing after Sally. There was no doubt that he was much attracted by her. And he didn't want to be, not now. Sally was a suspect. It did terrible things to his vanity, which was shaky enough at the moment, to contemplate getting himself involved with the person who was blackmailing him.

Martin's vanity, of which he was perfectly well aware, consisted solely of a conviction that he was a superior human being . . . and in a number of respects he undoubtedly was.

To begin with, if doing a number of different things passably well was any criterion, his vanity was not misplaced.

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He played a good game of bridge, and when one considers how many people play the game badly, the talent is worth mentioning.

He played the piano well. Not exceptionally well; not a cut below concert level, but several cuts below. Yet on his music rack there was a copy of Debussy's *Children's Corner Suite;* most amateurs could only hack their way through it, and Martin could play it well enough to give pleasure to a critical ear.

He wrote well enough that his biography of his grandfather, if he ever finished it, might prove to be dull, might prove to be stuffy, but would be written in nicely polished English.

And he was technically most proficient in bed; a quality which wives will testify is not to be sneezed at.

Four major talents, besides a number of lesser accomplishments: not a bad showing at all. Most people could probably not claim so much. On that ground alone Martin could have maintained a fair justification of his superiority.

But apart from these considerations, Martin's consciousness of superiority rested on an instinctive recognition of a profounder talent than all the others. Man's superiority to the other animals lies chiefly in his unique ability to mold his environment, instead of being molded by it, and Martin was something of a genius at doing exactly that. Out of the environmental materials at his disposal he had built for himself a life perfectly suited to his own character. His methods may have been ruthless, may have been viciously selfish, but they undeniably had been—*up to a point*—completely successful, which was the same as saying that they were survival-methods.

Up to a point—there was the catch. For the act of murder had modified his superiority to that of a predatory creature,

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and the law of the jungle says that a predatory animal must be entirely successful . . . or dead. There was no longer such a thing as a partial success.

So there could be no peace in Martin's own private universe till the blackmailer was ferreted out and dealt with. Until that was accomplished, it was obviously essential that he devote his attention to nothing else, and that he keep a clear head, undisturbed by irrelevant emotions. Even if Sally was not his unknown enemy (and all his instincts assured him that she was not), it would be foolish in the extreme to let himself get involved with her now.

Besides, it would be ridiculous to slip into any sort of interesting relationship until he could give his whole attention to it.

Yet, when he was driving Sally home and she mentioned that she had just finished a new piece, wanted his opinion on it, and why didn't he drop around tomorrow afternoon? he could not find in him the strength of will to resist the temptation. It seemed a dismally long time since he had driven along moon-dappled streets, conscious of an attractive and desirable woman at his side, and he reveled in the innocent delight. It was an adolescent boy who said, almost shyly, "Of course, I'd like to come."

And when they stopped in front of her house, Martin was taken with an adolescent urge to try for a good-night kiss. But Sally forestalled him, perhaps unconsciously, by saying "Good night" briskly and slipping out of the car before he could think of an excuse to detain her.

"Usually I've decided on a glaze long before I've finished a piece," Sally explained the next afternoon, "but not this time. What would you suggest?"

The figurine, about a foot high, was that of a coquettish-

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looking colt. Martin thought it disappointingly commonplace, especially after the other things he'd seen, and couldn't feel that it mattered much what color it was glazed. But since something was expected of him he said: "Green? Maybe a sort of turquoise green?"

"Perhaps," Sally said doubtfully. "We'll see what Dennis suggests. I've asked him over, too."

"Oh," said Martin, doing his best to keep the outrage out of his voice.

Sally blandly overlooked the fact that Martin's best had been quite inadequate. "I suppose the reason it doesn't suggest a color is that it's so damn' conventional. That's not my fault; it's part of a special order. One of my best customers wants some animals and specifically asked for a cute colt. This should please him. It's so cute it's nauseating."

"Dennis will probably like it," Martin said.

"Dennis's taste is every bit as good as yours," Sally said. She smiled up at him, and for the first time Martin realized that underneath the seriousness she had quite a bit of the imp in her. "In fact," she added, "that's why I decided to see if I couldn't get the two of you together without any squabbling. You really have a lot in common."

Normally Martin would have been furious at the thought of anyone presuming to tamper with one of his animosities. But there was a truly charming innocence about Sally's approach that took him completely off his guard, and before he recovered it occurred to him that he had very practical reasons for wanting to establish a less contentious relationship with Dennis. So he merely murmured a noncommittal "Do you think so?" and returned his attention to the figurine. "If it's a special order, I'm surprised your customer didn't suggest a color himself."

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"Oh, they never do that," Sally said.

"Why not?"

"Glazes are so unpredictable that it's simpler for them to wait and see what I've sent, and then plan their color schemes." Then she noticed Martin's very blank expression, and went on to explain. It seemed that whereas she did a certain amount of conventional stuff ("junk" she called it) which was sold in some store, these figurines were her specialty (and main source of income) and went only to interior decorators. Each figurine went with a bowl or ashtray in matching glaze; every pair was unique; and they were known to the trade as "Teal Conversationals." (Sally winced when she came to that part of the explanation.) Evidently they were very much in vogue, and the decorators who used them built their color schemes around them.

"How much do they sell for?" Martin asked.

"I never know," Sally replied. "Whatever the traffic will bear, I expect. I get two hundred a pair; sometimes two-fifty. It all depends."

Martin was impressed. He was quite aware that her output must be limited, and that she doubtless had to work like a beaver to show a profit at the end of a year. Nevertheless, it was impressive that she was able to command such a sum. But he hadn't much chance to dwell on it, for just then Dennis slouched in. As soon as he spied Martin he reached for his pipe.

"Hello, Martin," he said. "Hi, Sal."

She beckoned him over to the window with one imperious finger, and then pointed at the figurine. "It stinks," Dennis said promptly.

"Never mind that," Sally said. "What color?"

Dennis thought about it for long enough to fill his pipe and

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set it going. "Dark red," he said finally. "That very dark Chinese red. It's the only thing that will give this coy beast any distinction at all."

Sally nodded slowly. "I think you're right."

Martin was annoyed at himself for having thrown out his answer in such an offhand manner. There was no special virtue to dark red, but at least Dennis had taken his time, treated the question seriously, come up with a thoughtful suggestion. Martin felt that he had lost face, and fumbled for a way to reestablish himself. He thought of disputing Dennis's suggestion, but that seemed futile now that Sally had taken a view. So he looked for another direction in which he might take the offensive.

"I don't entirely agree with you, Dennis," he said, "but I'm not able to differ with you."

"An impediment in your perversity?" Dennis asked solicitously.

"Never that," said Martin. Feeling that Dennis had thrown away his advantage by rushing to commit the first hostility, Martin made his own good temper all the blander as he continued: "No, it's just that Sally is determined that you and I must become friends."

The situation he had created delighted Martin. His headlong approach had a ring of manly forthrightness to it, and also left him in a position of sophistication that Dennis would have difficulty duplicating. It was gratifying that Sally seemed amused rather than appalled by the line he had taken, but he was disappointed that Dennis gave no sign of being in the least discomforted.

"She is always in favor of peace," Dennis remarked.

Martin threw his last bombshell: "She insists that we have a lot in common, you and I."

Dennis considered the notion with an air of faint distaste,

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and then shrugged. "I've learned the hard way that Sally is usually right about people," he said. "I wouldn't dream of contradicting her until I'd heard her reasons."

Sally was laughing at the two of them. "In a lot of ways you're so much alike it's funny," she told them.

"That doesn't mean that we have anything in common, though," Dennis pointed out.

"Oh, but you do," Sally said. "Quite a bit. You'd be surprised how much alike your tastes are. But you found one little thing to disagree about and you're both so pugnacious that you've been fighting about it ever since."

"Surely you don't expect us to agree that politics is just a 'little thing,'" Martin said.

"And that shows how much alike you are," Sally retorted. "You disagree, but you both take your politics so seriously as to go on fighting over them, even though neither one of you has any expectation of converting the other."

Dennis and Martin looked at one another. They agreed silently that Sally had a kind of point—and agreed, too, that there were some things you just couldn't expect a girl like Sally to understand: that a conflict of politics on their level meant a clash of two utterly opposite basic philosophies. . . .

"You're both so sure that you're right," Sally continued, "that each of you assumes the other must be a different breed of animal to be able to disagree."

Dennis had a vaguely guilty expression, as though he were renouncing male chauvinism forever, and Martin imagined he must look the same way.

"Which is just silly," Sally said. "I'm not saying for a moment that you could ever become good friends, or that there's any reason why you should. But if you stay away from the things you clash over, I promise you'll find enough you can agree on to get along perfectly well in one another's company.

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And you won't make other people so uncomfortable."

Martin gamely maintained his position as the large-minded sophisticate. "I'll try anything," he volunteered. "Will someone suggest a non-controversial subject?"

"Gossip," said Sally firmly, and started to busy herself about her work. "I'd be willing to bet that you dislike all the same people and would enjoy hearing each other tear them apart."

And to Martin's unpleased surprise, she was absolutely right.

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CHAPTER 6

"Martin?" Sally's voice crackled in his ear. "You have to help me."

Her tone was not urgent, simply matter-of-fact. Martin was charmed. He found most appealing the non-flirtatious fashion in which she had calmly accepted his presence in her life, even to the extent that she felt free to call on him for help. "Of course," he said warmly.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a dreadful bore for you." She didn't bother to thank him; she had obviously taken it for granted that he would help. "I'm awfully sorry . . . but there's no one else. I've tried Dennis, but he's tied up this afternoon."

But this was *too* matter-of-fact. Martin let himself sound hurt: "You should have called me first. I'll be delighted to do anything I can."

"No, you won't," Sally told him. "But it's a situation, and I'm no good at coping with situations by myself."

Martin found that difficult to believe, but mumbled sympathetically into the phone and reached for a cigarette.

"Agnes is being patronizing," Sally explained. "Some old school chum, obviously very rich, is staying with her and

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Agnes is dragging her over here to show her my stuff. With the transparent intention of getting the friend to buy. Agnes has been kind to me—I can't stop her from coming, but she simply refuses to understand that I will not sell my own stuff. Under any circumstances. Ever."

"Mmmm," Martin contributed.

"In the first place, I'm under contract to the store and under obligation to the decorators to sell only through them. In the second place, I just plain don't want to."

"I see," said Martin.

"Well, Agnes doesn't. She probably thinks she's doing me a great big favor, bless her foolish heart."

"But what can I do?"

"Come and give me moral support," Sally said. "Distract Agnes's attention while I explain to her friend where she can buy my stuff if she really wants to. And sit on her, I mean Agnes, if she tries to explain to me in front of her friend how I can charge a whole lot more when I sell direct to a customer."

"I'll do whatever I can," Martin said. "What time are they supposed to be coming?"

"You're a dear. About four, Agnes said."

Martin got to the studio at a quarter of, and his greeting was, "But *wouldn't* you make more of a profit if you sold direct?"

"You can't make things and market them too." At the moment she was making dust-raising efforts to tidy the place a bit, and looking very annoyed about it. "This ruins my whole schedule for today."

"I suppose your regular customers wouldn't like it if you competed with them," Martin mused.

"There's that," Sally said. "But I think it's mostly a matter of temperament. I just haven't the sort that would enjoy hold-

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ing up something I'd made and saying, in essence, 'If you want this beautiful object, give me lots and lots of money for it.' Oh, damn. There they come."

With friend in tow, Agnes came breezing in, radiating good will. When she spotted Martin her eyes brightened, and too late he realized what interpretation she would undoubtedly put on his presence. But, surprisingly, she held her fire for the moment, and introduced him simply as a dear, dear friend —though of course she could not refrain from mentioning Grace and her recent death.

Her friend, Mrs. Hudderfield, was a plump, short woman wearing a grey business-suit and a fur-piece of a manginess which only the very wealthy can afford. She had small eyes and a small mouth, and a very loud, positive Texan voice. Martin would have felt sorry for Mr. Hudderfield, except that Mr. Hudderfield was doubtless a Texan too.

"I just had to bring Lizzie over here to see your work," Agnes told Sally. "She's so interested in . . . well, in modern art."

"In everything modern," announced Mrs. Hudderfield. "We don't care so much about traditions out in the Southwest. It's a big, vital country, and we're only interested in what is alive and vital." She looked doubtfully at Sally, as though uncertain of the girl's vitality. "Well, why don't you bring some of your things over here by the window where there's more light. I'm particularly fond of modern pottery."

Agnes drifted over to where Martin sat. "Are you particularly fond of modern pottery, too?" she asked. "Or just of the potter?"

"I'm here to give Sally moral support when she tries to explain that she never sells stuff herself," Martin said.

"Oh, I don't think Lizzie will want to buy anything. She's filthy with money, but she hates to spend it. I suspect she's

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staying with me just to avoid paying a hotel bill."

Mrs. Hudderfield was examining the coquettish colt, now glazed a rich, deep red. "This is a very pretty horse, my dear," she informed Sally, "but it has no roots at all."

"No roots?" Sally asked faintly.

"I am not one of those people," Mrs. Hudderfield declared, "who think that something is good just *because* it's modern. That is every bit as foolish as thinking that a painting is good just because the painter has been dead for three hundred years. Don't you think so, Mr. Pryor?"

"Well, yes," Martin said, but only because he could think of no rational way to disagree.

"After all," continued Mrs. Hudderfield in forcefully reasonable tones, "everything that is made today is modern in a sense. But to be worthwhile, a work of modern art must have more than modern feeling behind it—it must have cultural roots as well."

"But I thought out in the Southwest you disapproved of traditions," Martin said.

"Traditions are the dead branches of the tree," Mrs. Hudderfield explained. "Roots are what keep it alive and vital. As I was telling Aggie, my husband and I have spent the last few summers in Santa Fe and Taos. Have you ever been to New Mexico, my dear?" she asked Sally.

"No," said Sally.

"Perhaps you should go. Such enchanting art colonies; the atmosphere is positively *vibrant* with creativity. The work is so modern, so vital! And do you know why, my dear? Because the artists there have so *many* cultural roots they can draw strength from. The Spanish . . . the Indian. . . . And the American too, of course. There's one young potter there whose work would interest you, I know. He takes his designs

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from the old Indian sand-paintings, but he modernizes them by—"

Martin drew Agnes over to the door, ostensibly for a cigarette. "Has she always been like this?" he murmured.

"Lord, no. I haven't seen her in twenty years, but she was my best friend at finishing-school. In those days she was a perfectly nice girl from Maplewood, but then she married a Texan and went native. I'd pity her husband, except that every time he digs a divot, oil gushes out. She's shown me twenty-seven pictures of him, and in every one of them he's wearing a Stetson. They have three children, and the children all wear Stetsons too."

"She's really something," Martin said almost admiringly.

"Isn't she a terror?" Agnes agreed happily. "She's going up to Boston tomorrow, but she'll be back the end of next week. I'm taking her to the Frobishers' cocktail party." And she looked up at him mischievously.

Underneath Agnes's mop of dyed red hair was a face that was easily subject to misinterpretation. Her brow was wide and clear, and her wide-set, dark brown eyes gave an immediate impression of candor and intelligence. It took a better acquaintance to understand that the intelligence had expended itself in futility, and that the candor was not a virtue.

And that large mouth, so often grinning—surely there was humor there, and a lot of it? Well, in a sense there was, but in Agnes humor was anything but a saving grace.

When he first came to Alden Park, even before he met her, Martin had heard a great deal about Agnes. The women were frankly terrified of her. They exchanged stories about her ("She told Dr. Finletter right to his face that the *Song of*

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Songs was a sex education in itself!") not in the manner of doting parents recounting the outrages of their *enfants terribles*, but rather as condemned prisoners might relate the past exploits of the public executioner. After he had seen Agnes in action a few times, Martin could appreciate their attitude. Convention, propriety, even simple good manners—none of these meant a thing to Agnes. She spoke out whatever came into her mind, and her wit was sufficient that whatever came into her mind was likely to be outrageous by the tactful standards of Alden Park.

Martin had leapt to the conclusion that here was a true individual, an original mind, someone worth cultivating. In a community where predictability was valued for its comfort, and people exhibited their individuality, if any, only in their dress, Agnes appeared a personality, and Martin rejoiced in her. Only gradually had he discovered, through the absence of any consistency in Agnes's attitudes, that his first impression of her had been wrong. The shocks she gave were not by-products of original thinking, but deliberately calculated effects.

Yet there was no malice in her. It would have been easy to say (and many *did* say) that she outraged for the sake of being outrageous, yet that was not true. Her intent was essentially innocent. She aimed at humor; that she missed was primarily the fault of her up-bringing. Agnes was just a certain type of spoiled brat who had been allowed to grow up without the brattiness ever having been jarred out of her. In early girlhood she had stumbled on a shock-technique of wit which had delighted her contemporaries and, what was worse, vastly amused those adults who encountered it. Thus encouraged, the technique faded into a habit—almost a reflex action—and in time acquired the stature and standing of an eccentricity.

But what can seem funny in the mouth of a dewy adolescent

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is frequently tiresome or worse when it comes from an adult, and as her audiences showed less and less enthusiasm, Agnes unconsciously strove to refine the formula which had served her so well, honing her wit and enlarging her outrages—and never entirely understanding why she wasn't the popular figure she once had been.

Considered in this light, Agnes was an object of pity, and whenever he had all his patience about him, as he did this afternoon, Martin tried to be as nice as possible. So he refrained from commenting on the now obvious fact that Agnes had inflicted Mrs. Hudderfield on Sally only for the selfish reason of sharing her misery. Instead, he considered the problem of how to come to Sally's rescue.

Mrs. Hudderfield was rattling along at a rate that defied interruption, but her expansive gestures gave Martin an idea. He suddenly shouted "Careful!" and plunged across the studio to snatch up a vase which had stood in no danger of being knocked over.

Mrs. Hudderfield was properly startled, and murmured with vague apology that she'd had no idea.

Martin fondled the vase and smiled with gentle reproach. "I expect that coming from Texas it's difficult to remember how cramped we are here in the East," he said, and then, as Agnes glared at him, wondered if he'd gone too far.

But Mrs. Hudderfield, doubtless brooding over the thought of having to pay for anything she broke, just nodded absently and said that she did get carried away sometimes. Then she pulled herself together, and said, "Well, Aggie, I don't think we should keep this child from her work any longer." She thanked Sally effusively for having let them barge in, told her firmly that her work was very sweet and *very* pretty, and that she really must try to get out to Santa Fe some time. Then the two women left. Mrs. Hudderfield's voice trailed

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behind them: "I did like the head of that nigger, but the lips were much too thin. . . ."

Chuckling, Martin turned to find that Sally was distinctly not amused. "That wasn't nice," she told him.

Martin gaped at her in astonishment. "But she'd have bored you silly if I'd let her rattle on indefinitely."

"I know," Sally said. "She's an idiot. But she meant well."

"So did I, for that matter."

"Of course you did!" Sally exclaimed ruefully. "You were a darling to come, and you really were a great help. I'm just upset at having my schedule knocked into a cocked hat." She patted his arm. "Now be a perfect angel and run along and let me see what I can do to retrieve it."

Martin had done very little day-dreaming of late.

This was unusual. Day-dreaming had formerly been one of his major pastimes. In his latter days in New York, when he had been living on the ragged edge of what he considered adequate comfort, many of his happiest hours had been spent conjuring up pictures of the way he would like to live. And though the dreams had gradually taken a somewhat different direction, the habit had persisted into his married life.

But since the murder he had discovered that any reverie tended to slither imperceptibly into speculation about the interesting old problem of the immortality of the soul. In killing Grace, had he utterly extinguished her ego, or had some part of it survived as a soul? Did she, in other words, realize that she had been murdered, and by whom? If so, there was the possibility (for by no stretch of the imagination could Martin accept the existence of a Hell) that he might encounter her in some future life. Martin had made one attempt to visualize *that* scene and thereafter had left the matter alone as morbid and unrewarding.

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Nowadays, however, the temptation to day-dream about Sally had become irresistible, and Martin yielded cheerfully, although he soon discovered that Grace intruded upon these reveries with tactless persistence. Grace's effortless, though unsummoned, appearances had made him realize that in one sense at least she had surely survived: as long as he lived she would have an entity of sorts within his mind.

On the last occasion, when Martin had been imaginarily baring his complex self to Sally's understanding, and Grace had intruded, he had amused himself by comparing the two women, seeking the one detail that epitomized the contrast. Physically they were of opposite types, of course, but Martin had made love to enough women in his life to be relatively indifferent to the gulf between Grace's dark homeliness and Sally's blonde beauty. There was a more pertinent difference in their bodies—Grace's voluptuous curves; Sally's slender boyishness—because Sally's body was somehow the more feminine for being the less female. But it was on their hands that Martin had finally settled. Grace had been very proud of her hands, which in truth had been lovely: small and pink and delicate, with carefully tended, painted, pointed nails. Whereas Sally's hands were broad, with blunt, knuckly fingers and nails bitten down to the quick. It had pleased him to contrast Grace's strongest point with Sally's weakest—for Sally's hands were deft and competent and gentle, whereas Grace's had been soft and futile and quite without character.

On this particular afternoon, when Martin would have devoted a reverie to Sally, Grace came instead. It was really quite maddening: was there no being rid of her?

"Why do you waste so much of your time thinking about Sally?" Grace wondered. "She quite disapproves of you, you know."

"I know," Martin replied.

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"*I* never disapproved of you. I was perfectly satisfied to take you as you were. But Sally isn't."

"Of course she isn't. The young have a strong sense of the importance of a man's amounting to something in the world. I don't, so naturally Sally disapproves of me."

"That's not the only reason," Grace pointed out.

"Very well, it isn't. She thinks me frivolous and rather cruel, and disapproves of both those attributes in me. Quite properly. But despite that—or, possibly, to a certain extent because of that—she is attracted by me."

"You're not sure of that."

"Not absolutely, no. But with my experience, I'm not likely to be mistaken. She *is* attracted by me; I'm almost positive of it. And that's what counts, after all."

"Not necessarily," Grace replied. "I'll bet I was a lot better in bed than she could ever hope to be."

"You weren't all that wonderful," Martin told her. "You never found out that there is a distinction between passion and impatience. As for Sally, I suspect that you're quite mistaken."

"Flat-chested little thing."

"There you *are* mistaken. Besides, that has nothing to do with it. You big-bosomed women are always prone to assume that there's some connection between sexuality and sheer mammary capacity. It just isn't so."

"And look at the way she walks. She's as flatfooted as any man."

"If you'd ever come down from those four-inch heels you'd have walked exactly the same way, except that your behind would have jiggled more just because it was a lot bigger."

Grace ignored his rudeness just as in life she had always ignored his rudenesses—as a way to avoid scenes which she considered a waste of nervous energy. "You've just been

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leading a celibate life ever since . . . well, for the last four months, and Sally is the only half-way attractive unattached girl around. So you find all sorts of qualities in her that really aren't there at all. She's undoubtedly frigid, and will raise all sorts of hell if you're ever such a fool as to make a pass at her."

"I'm not so sure. As I was forced to remind you altogether too often, a person as conscious of his vanity as I am isn't too apt to be deluded by it. I am not credulous in believing Sally is fond of me, nor vain in inferring, from the rapidity with which that fondness appeared, that she is attracted by me. After all, however unpleasant you may think me underneath, you know perfectly well that I am not unattractive."

"Too well," said Grace.

"When I say that I know there is passion in her, I am as sure of it as when I knew the same of you, and I have no less confidence in my ability to evoke that passion. That superficial placidity of Sally's is sitting on top of a smouldering temperament, and there is sensuality in every line of her face . . . and that adds up to as much latent sexuality as any man could ask for. Anyway, I have every intention of finding out personally whether I'm right."

"Blackguard," Grace said unemotionally.

Usually it was difficult to separate Sally from her work in the daytime, but, as it happened, Martin was lucky. She had just finished firing, and had nothing to do till the kiln cooled down in its own good time. And she would love to drive down to Philadelphia with him—especially if he would help her find a good art-supply store.

Undeniably it was a dull drive and much pleasanter with company. He found her store, attended to his own business and then picked her up and took her to lunch at The Bellevue. They found a movie they both wanted to see in the neighbor-

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hood, so it was late afternoon when they left the city, and the heavy traffic slowed them down. At Martin's suggestion they stopped for dinner at a good roadhouse some distance short of Alden Park.

It was a gay, pleasant-looking place with a great barn of a room, one end of which was a dance floor. There was also a small, dim, secluded dining-room, but at Sally's suggestion they took a table in the main room. Martin was uncertain whether this indicated a preference for the chaperoning public eye, or simply a desire to dance.

They had cocktails, several of them, and Sally began to glow appreciably. With their insubstantial dinner, Martin expansively insisted on a bottle of wine, and later brandy with their coffee. And in the midst of all this he realized with amusement (though he did not then pause to analyze the matter) that his expansiveness was animated not merely by an innocent curiosity to see what Sally was like when she was a little tight.

After dinner they danced.

To Grace, dancing had been a social exercise, to which she had brought all the competence of one who had attended dancing-school as a matter of course, and all the lack of verve of one with no instinctive sense of rhythm. She never refused an invitation—but after a time Martin, to whom dancing had once been a major joy, had given up asking her, and had come to think that in any pleasurable sense his dancing days were over.

Sally instantly dispelled that attitude. She was the perfect partner, following so lightly and easily that she seemed to spur on his own enthusiasm. He found himself trying more and more complicated steps, and even a few dips—old-fashioned now, but still so satisfying to execute. When they returned to their table he was puffing slightly, but feeling

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absurdly pleased with himself.

Without consulting Sally, he ordered scotch-and-water for them both. She was already obviously feeling the effects of the alcohol: she was a little flushed, a little more talkative than usual, and just the least little bit kittenish, though in a thoroughly attractive way. She had never seemed so appealing, and Martin unimpatiently savored his desire for her. In a few hours he would take her home—and now his eyes and his imagination dreamily anticipated the love-making which would occur then.

It was only after he had ordered the second round of highballs that he suddenly began to understand the implications of the fact that he had been trying, semi-unconsciously, to get Sally tight. For this was most unlike him. He was not one to take any pleasure in making love to half-drunken women. The few occasions when something of the sort had taken place had been so distasteful that Martin had restricted himself to the most abstemious of seductions.

Yet here he was feverishly plying Sally with liquor, just like any unimaginative businessman on the make! And now that Martin had paused to examine this curiosity, he soon realized to his horror that he was, for the first time in as far back as he could remember, wildly unsure of himself.

The cause, when he came to look for it, was not difficult to discover: this was a direct result of the seven years of his marriage to Grace.

When he had come to see that he was not in love with Grace, and had determined to make the economic best of a romantically bad bargain, there had been one law that he had created for himself. Or not so much a law, perhaps, as a point of honor. And this was that whatever extra-marital dalliance he might get involved in must be entirely divorced from Grace's social circle.

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If he'd loved her, then it would have been different. If he'd really been deeply in love with Grace then he might have had a casual affair with one of her friends without it having meant a thing, even if Grace had found out about it. Because loving her would have reduced the affair to the status of an itinerant passion, and accordingly meaningless.

But not loving Grace, yet enjoying the benefits of her income, put him in her debt—a debt which he could repay only by seeing to it that under no circumstances did he damage Grace's social standing by letting it become known that her marriage wasn't of the happiest. As matters had stood, a casual affair which had become known would not have been an infidelity but a betrayal.

This point of honor, which Martin had observed scrupulously, had had the result of sending him, for the first time in his life, to girls who made a profession of their sex. Through an acquaintance of his bachelor days he had located a discreet procuress in the city, and had confined his adventurings to the young ladies she provided.

But now Martin apprehended that this course of action, which had seemed so logical when he first embarked upon it, had certain unforeseen disadvantages. For seven years he had made love only to women whose willingness to go to bed with him could be taken for granted in advance. Not once in all that time had he been in a situation where the outcome was doubtful; not once had he offered a caress which stood a chance of being rebuffed. And his point of view had altered. There had been a time when the first tentative approaches to a romance had been a challenge and an excitement; when uncertainty had been an added spice. This was true no longer. Now the thought of making an undesired advance, of exposing himself to the humiliation of being refused, was anything but appealing.

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Martin rarely thought of how old he was but now, quite abruptly, he acknowledged middle age. The joy in taking chances was gone; the love of security had set in. This was natural enough, of course. But now that he understood it, he despised this yearning for security for having tried crudely to insure Sally's compliance by liquor. This was simple cowardice, and he refused to give in to it.

Accordingly, in that instant of self-understanding, Martin revised all his plans for the evening.

When, in the future, a suitable occasion presented itself, he would risk a rebuff. But he would never, for the sake of his own self-respect, risk the suspicion that Sally had let him make love to her just because she had had too much to drink.

So in due course he paid the check and took her home. He saw her to her door like a goddamn little gentleman; claimed one casual and insignificant kiss, and then drove home. On the way it struck him as terribly funny that an uxoricide should have such delicate scruples—and his laughter, perhaps because he himself was not entirely unaffected by the liquor, was just a bit hysterical.

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CHAPTER 7

It was Martin's dearest belief that although he might make occasional errors of judgment he never made stupid mistakes. Therefore it came as a particularly nasty shock when he discovered that he had made a *very* stupid one. In his relief at finding how much less incriminating the photographs were than he had feared, he had unthinkingly thrown out the envelope which had contained the blackmailer's second letter, and he had never even glanced at the postmark. It had not occurred to him that there might be anything to learn from it . . . until now.

October was nearly over, and that meant that colleges had been in session for over a month. During the academic year it was Benson's practice to drive to college each Monday morning. He kept very modest quarters on campus, and had arranged his schedule so that he had no duties after noon on Thursday, when he invariably drove back to Alden Park for a long weekend. Obviously, if the letter had been mailed locally on either a Tuesday or a Wednesday, it was at least most unlikely that Benson had mailed it. And now Martin would never know.

Although perfectly aware that it was most improbable that

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the postmark would have revealed anything, Martain brooded greatly about his error. For some time now he had been conscious of the strain of his position, and this mistake seemed proof of the extent to which it had affected him. He had already lost weight, and now he was committing stupidities.

All his adult life he had aimed at, and striven towards, a tranquilly comfortable and self-sufficient existence, and it still was as elusive as ever. He had glimpsed it in the two months between Grace's death and the arrival of the first letter. But since then, life had been sheer hell. Except for Sally, of course, and she had been a distracting influence at a time when he couldn't afford to be distracted. He had been in a constant turmoil of confused emotions, and for someone who preferred his emotions tidy and under good control nothing could be more unpleasant.

For one thing, he had come to hate Alden Park, and the essential irrationality of this emotion made it no easier to bear. He was morally certain that the blackmailer was one of his handful of suspects—so why did he regard his other neighbors with a faint suspicion and distrust that made him uneasy with all but the richest and dreariest of them? The truth was that the existence of the blackmailer had forced him to think like a murderer again, instead of the contented widower he had wanted to be and expected to be. What had been simply consciousness of success had been transformed into consciousness of guilt and awareness of danger. Instinctively he examined innocent remarks for implications that weren't there; instinctively he weighed his own every utterance to make sure of its innocuousness. This wasteful sharpening of his acuteness had so dilated every inanity, so exaggerated every fatuousness, that he had become irascible. But there was no escaping into unsociability when kindly idiots credited him with excessive grief and strove all the harder to "keep him from brooding."

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And to an extent their impulse was right, for left to himself he tended more and more to slip into fits of depression because he seemed to be getting no closer to the solution of his problem.

Yet if extraneous company was a strain, that was nothing compared to the agonized concentration which he brought to each encounter with a real suspect (except Sally, of course), and which left him quite exhausted afterwards.

The strain was telling. Even his simplest pleasures had lost much of their savor. Absentmindedness had done dreadful things to his bridge, and nervousness had so affected his golf that instead of enjoying the course he fought his way around it.

In short, he was getting disgustingly little enjoyment out of life. In one of his fits of depression he had even seriously wondered if there might not be an abstract justice after all, if he might not be being punished for his crime—a line of thought that would have thrown him into a spasm of sophisticated laughter just a few months before. Even now he could sneer away the idea as one that his father would have expounded with solemn piety . . . but it shook him more than a little to be reminded of his father in such a connection.

When he had first started the game of hunt-the-blackmailer (which was to have been merely a stimulating puzzle) Martin had urged haste on himself because of the possibility that some accident might befall the blackmailer, and the incriminating evidence come into other hands. Since he had seen the photographs he had forgotten this fear, yet the need for haste had not lessened. If anything, it had increased, since he had already reached the point of committing stupid blunders. Just two months of pressure had had this effect; what would it be like if it went on indefinitely, year after year?

With good reason, Martin refrained from examining this prospect. His father, too, had suffered from fits of depression.

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At various stages of his adolescence Martin had had various ways of accounting for his father, each of them depending on what he had been studying most recently, and each of them critical.

There was heredity. Before the generation of Martin's worldlywise grandfather, the Governor, the Pryors had mostly inclined towards the Methodist ministry. The Governor's own father, sternest of the lot, had rejoiced in the nickname of "Perdition" Pryor. For some time Martin had believed that these religious leanings must have skipped a generation, and his father was a frustrated minister.

Then elementary psychology had offered a theory. Of the Governor's three sons, Benjamin, Martin's father, was by several years the eldest and by several inches the shortest. Actually he was somewhat shy of the five feet six inches he had claimed. Martin, who had surpassed his father's height before he was twelve, had decided that his father had compensated for being shorter than everyone else by being more industrious, more successful, and more righteous.

And then, slightly more advanced psychology. Martin's mother had been on the sickly side; he'd suspected that she was frigid, and that his father, disappointed in his own sex life, had determined that all pleasure was essentially wicked.

But whatever the cause, Benjamin Pryor had unquestionably been a small, solemn, and righteous man. Perhaps he had not really objected to people enjoying themselves, as Martin had sometimes believed, but he certainly had regarded life as a serious matter. To him, the greatest virtue of them all was work. He had judged his fellow-men by their eagerness to do "an honest day's work," and he had never tired of the fable of the frivolous grasshopper and the industrious ant. Although he had tried conscientiously to be humble in the sight of the Lord, he could not help preening himself

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with some frequency over the fact that in his entire career he had missed only four days at the office.

That office was in Wall Street; Benjamin had been a partner in a small and very dignified firm of stockbrokers. Neither that smallness nor that dignity had been of any help when the bottom had fallen out of the market in Twenty-nine.

Martin's sophomore year at college had been rudely interrupted when he had been summoned home to attend his father's funeral. The overdose of sleeping-pills which had occasioned this sad event was called an accident only because the coroner, who was also the family doctor, somehow contrived to overlook the rather incoherent note which Benjamin had left behind for his family. In this note he had tried vaguely to make his suicide into an act of noble self-sacrifice, as though his insurance made him more valuable dead than alive. But since their position wasn't so desperate on the one hand, nor the insurance so great on the other, Martin hadn't believed a word of it. It had seemed much more likely that his father, in one of his fits of depression, had not been able to face living in a world where the puritan virtues by which he had lived had proved worthless.

Since Martin was amply provided for (his grandmother's fortune having been divided among the grandchildren), the lawyer advised Mrs. Pryor to purchase an annuity with the insurance and the remainder of the estate, and Martin had returned to college. For the benefit of his classmates he had manifested a modest grief, but his only sincere reaction was relief at the realization that now he wouldn't have to take another tedious job during the coming summer vacation.

But the real effect of his father's death hadn't become apparent until somewhat more than a year later when he came of age, and into possession of an income of over six thousand dollars a year. Despite Martin's rebelliousness, Benjamin

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Pryor had always maintained a strong moral ascendency over his son. Martin's cerebral dexterity might produce the cleverer arguments, but his father had had access to truths that were superior to logic. Sometimes Martin had gotten his own way against his father's wishes, but he had always been made to feel guilty about it, just as he would have been made to feel guilty if he had not left his inheritance in his father's hands, for the income to be reinvested. As it was, he was his own master, free to do as he chose—he had bought a car. And then an elegant wardrobe. And then had had to scrimp for the rest of the year to make up for the extravagance.

The scrimping had affected his thoughts in his senior year, much of which he had spent in the approved fashion of deciding what he would do with his life, though the conclusions he came to would have been approved by nobody. These conclusions had been arrived at easily enough; the difficulty had been in justifying them. It had been necessary to convince himself that the philosophy he was evolving for himself was no longer a reaction from his father, but the inevitable consequence of his intellect, temperament . . . and independent income.

This personal philosophy was founded on his complete noninterest in work of any sort. The conventional view—which his father had carried to a diseased extreme—would call that a defect in Martin's character, but Martin had never been willing to accept any conventional view without a struggle. Why *should* a man work if he didn't have to? Obviously because idleness harmed him, and broadly speaking this was undoubtedly true. The average man lacked the capacity to support idleness, the stability to withstand its temptations, and the resources to offset its stagnation. Looked at that way, the puritan hatred of idleness was based on sheer envy of a state which most people couldn't enjoy.

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It was most satisfactory to have this worked out for once and all, and Martin never thought of the matter again. Obviously the incapacities of the average man didn't apply to him.

So when he graduated from college Martin went to live in New York City as the best spot for an existence of cultivated leisure. Quite as he had expected, the time passed easily and pleasantly, and he had rarely been bored. Apart from a conviction that a good address was a necessity instead of a luxury, Martin's tastes were epicurean rather than sybaritic, and his income, in those days of lower taxes, would have sufficed if it had not been for his main hobby, which was women.

Calling women a "hobby" was not really a flippancy on Martin's part: he had collected love affairs as a pastime as other men collect bookbindings or antique watches—knowledgeably, artistically, and tenderly. He rarely troubled to get emotionally involved, but unless he did he was scrupulously careful to make sure that the lady remained as fancy-free as he. It spoke well for his finesse that (with one harrowing exception) he had never parted from a love on any but the very best of terms.

But if this was the most exquisite of hobbies, as Martin believed, it was also horribly expensive. New York was undoubtedly full of girls of simple tastes, but in the circles Martin frequented at that time he had encountered few of them. Although he specialized in restaurants that had not yet been discovered, and nightclubs that offered more value than fashion, the incidental expenses of seduction were enormous.

Fortunately, his mother was both indulgent and generous. As is so often the case, widowhood had greatly improved Mrs. Pryor's health, and she seemed to enjoy the last decade of her life much more than she had enjoyed the previous five. Martin was always a welcome guest, and he was not ashamed to

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impose upon her hospitality whenever his squiring about of some prospective mistress had reduced him to the alternatives of delaying his rent or going hungry for a couple of weeks. Moreover, he played bridge for quite high stakes. He could usually count on this for pin-money of twenty-five a week or thereabouts, but occasionally there had been catastrophes at just the wrong time, and his mother had bailed him out to the tune of a couple of hundred each time.

Even then there had been embarrassments. Several times he had had to borrow from his mistresses, and one of the conveniences of running with a wealthy set—one that he hardly could afford, really—was that the girls could help him out in a pinch. It need hardly be said that Martin had always scrupulously paid back every cent, but it might be noted that a girl who had helped him out never remained his mistress much longer. Martin was proud in those days, or at least rather prouder than he later became.

He was proud enough that when he met people whom he wanted to like him, and who would have disapproved of his idleness if they'd known of it, he had saved their feelings (and his) by inventing purposeful projects which supposedly occupied him. Occasionally he even lived up to them for a while. His biography of his grandfather dated from this era, though all he had to show for his work at that time was one small notebook full of illegible notes. He'd served on various charitable and philanthropic committees. And for a while he composed tunes for the suggestive and theoretically sophisticated songs of a friend of his who knew and supplied a night-club singer of such ditties.

Then, just about the time the war started the taxes shooting up, Martin's mother had died, and of course that source of income died with her. A punctured ear-drum had kept Martin out of the army, for which he was grateful at first,

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though less so later on. The ladies were interested only in uniforms, and besides, soldiers were able to spend so much more heavily than he. Finances were becoming an increasing consideration.

In fact, in time his income shrank to such a point that he had to choose among four distasteful alternatives. He could give up sex altogether, but that seemed drastic; he could move to a cheaper apartment, but they weren't to be found any more; he could get married, but he couldn't possibly afford that unless his wife had an income at least as large as his; or he could give up running with a crowd that was actually much too expensive for him. He had known for some time that this retrenchment was coming, and had tried to delay it with small economies—till a disastrous run of luck at the bridge table hastened the inevitable.

There was no gulf between the social set Martin left and the upper-class bohemia he entered; actually they overlapped quite a bit. By then fully a third of his friends had fallen under the latter classification, so the mechanics of the alteration was simply a matter of concentrating on this minority. But the shift in viewpoint, which was the only real difference between the two groups apart from the economic pace, had not been to Martin's taste. He had moved from conventional elegance to equally conventional informality, from gaiety to earnestness. Catholic in his tastes, he had taken in stride the change from musical comedy to reproving drama, ballet to modern dance, French *chanteuse* to guitar-strumming balladeer. But he lamented the intense intellectualism which discounted his polished wit, and deeply resented the standard of manners which permitted any young upstart to make fun of his opinions or even contradict him to his face. Still, on the whole, life continued pleasant, though as prices and taxes continued to rise he had had to economize

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more and more stringently for each extravagance.

Once in this period it had occurred to him to wonder why he had not married back in the days when an advantageous match would have been easy to achieve. Of course it would have meant an end to his womanizing, but one could always sacrifice a hobby for the comfortable life. But when he'd looked back, he had found that in none of the few occasions when he had become emotionally involved had the girl had any money to speak of. And he could never have married solely, or even primarily, for money: playing the gigolo, as he had inadvertently proved, was just another form of work, an exceptionally repugnant one at that. No, money was simply one of a girl's attractions, and though in his position at that time no girl could have been marriageable without it, love in some degree or other would have had to be present. Though he had undeniably been on the look-out for well-to-do girls when he had met Grace, that marriage had still been a love match, pure and simple. Martin's love for her money had been only one of the emotions involved.

Still, it was now pleasant to realize that if he should ever want to marry again—not that he was contemplating the idea, even remotely—he would be able to consult his emotions alone, without worrying about expediency.

"You have *such* lovely hair," Martin observed.

"Why, thank you," Sally said, and he felt a fleeting annoyance at the fact that, like most American women, she knew of no better way to cope with a compliment than by formal gratitude.

But the atmosphere was an auspicious one, and Martin couldn't be bothered with irrelevant irritations. He had dropped in at the studio late in the afternoon, and had found Sally just cleaning up after a day's work. She had brought him

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into the house and given him a drink and a magazine to keep him amused while she had a shower. And now, in a long, blue terry-cloth robe, she was sitting opposite him, working on a drink of her own. It was all very cosy.

"I said you have lovely hair," Martin repeated, "but I didn't exactly mean it as a compliment." He paused, tantalizingly, expecting some murmur of curiosity or encouragement. But Sally simply watched him with that expression which he had once thought blank, and in which he now saw so much earnestness and so much quiet merriment, canceling each other out to all but the discerning eye. "What I meant was that your hair can't help being lovely, despite the fact that you don't pay it any attention."

"That still sounds like a compliment."

"It isn't, though. I'm implying that you could be so much lovelier than you already are if you made the slightest effort. But you don't."

She smiled at him. "Men always want a girl to look her prettiest, and the prettier she looks the less seriously they take her."

"And you insist on being taken very seriously," Martin asked gravely.

"I have a living to make," she reminded him. "Which means that much of the time I'm too busy to care what I look like. Besides, it's hard enough for a woman to make herself respected as an artist; if she's attractive, sex just gets in the way to make it harder."

"I suppose that's true," Martin admitted, thinking that it would be a poor man indeed who could see Sally as she was now and keep his mind on ceramics. The robe was becoming, and, as far as Martin could tell, she didn't have on a thing underneath it. This costume, or rather its deficiency, gave the whole situation a familiar, almost hackneyed, quality, and

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made Martin feel full of confidence and very much at his ease. "But it's after working hours," he continued, "and I'm not one of your customers. You know how much I admire your work, but I'm afraid that I can't help thinking of you as a woman first, and an artist distinctly second."

"And thinking of me as a woman, you wish I'd go and put on some lipstick," Sally grinned at him.

"Not just now," he replied firmly.

For an instant she seemed uncertain; then she stood up. "Let me get you another drink," she said, reaching for his glass.

He put the glass aside instead, pulled her easily into his lap, and kissed her. Her lips firmed to an immediate response, and he hugged her to him tightly, wondering that he had ever been such a fool as to be unsure of her. He closed his eyes, the better to enjoy the delicate sensuality of unfamiliar kisses, and the fresh scent of her just-washed body filled his nostrils. His hands lightly fondled her shoulders, slid over the fine, silky hair, touched at the nape of her neck. He kissed her ever more deeply, and he could feel her ardor matching his, each step of the way.

And then, in his exuberance, he made the mistake of attempting to proceed too rapidly.

It was a moment before she reacted, but Martin sensed his error and tried to rectify it with the tenderest, most innocent of caresses. Yet she went quite passive in his arms and said quietly, tritely, "No, Martin. Let me go."

He was still confident, from the quickness of her response to his kisses, but perfectly willing to cater to her sense of decorum. So he let her sit up away from him, but held her in his lap, lightly gripping her shoulders. "I've wanted you so much," he said gravely. It was offered as a graceful and flattering apology, and he fully expected it to work. But when he

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tried to pull her close to him again she shook her head, and with a quick motion stood up.

"I was getting you a drink," she said with a brisk casualness that didn't ring true at all, and took his glass over to the table that served as a bar.

Martin was still convinced that this was just a momentary pique at his crudeness. He followed her, not wanting to let the mood escape too far. Perhaps a more direct apology was in order, so he manfully said, "I'm sorry, darling," and kissed her neck.

"So am I," Sally replied, and refused to let him twist her around and into his arms.

Confusion and outrage swept over him with the sudden realization that he really *was* being rebuffed after all. A frustrated fury built up in him till it took every bit of the sophistication and self-control he possessed to keep him from bursting out with some irretrievably damaging snarl. She was acting like a virginal school-girl, and he wanted to tell her so; wanted to tell her what he thought of a woman who evoked passion, responded to it, and then ran away from it. But he forced himself to keep silent, to walk shakily back to his chair and sit there patiently until she brought him his drink.

And his self-command was rewarded. Either Sally had sensed his turmoil, or she hadn't needed to, but now she was obviously feeling guilty. If he'd assailed her with furious words he would have driven her to the defensive; as it was, she avoided his gaze. "You have every reason to be angry with me," she said faintly, "but I hope you aren't."

Martin swigged at his drink until his throat felt relaxed enough to produce a normal voice. "More confused than anything," he lied.

"I don't blame you." She seemed uncertain how to go on, and Martin made no effort to help. "Has Bill ever told you any-

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thing of my background?" she asked suddenly.

"Bill Benson?" Martin said in surprise, and then remembered the time Bill had nearly exposed some confidence of Sally's. "No, he hasn't."

"He promised he wouldn't tell anyone, but I wasn't sure." For a moment she lapsed back into silence, and then began again, now looking at him very sweetly and contritely. "Martin, I really am dreadfully sorry. I know I owe you all sorts of explanations, but I simply don't feel up to going into all of it now."

"Perhaps I ought to run along," Martin offered politely.

"Of course not," she said. "Finish your drink and try not to be too annoyed with me. I did want you to kiss me, you know."

"You didn't seem to mind," he said drily.

"Oh, I enjoyed it," she assured him. "And dressed the way I am, and all, there was no way on earth for you to know that I wasn't perfectly prepared to leap into bed with you."

Despite himself, Martin couldn't help smiling at the complete innocence of this remark. And Sally, glad to see him less stern, smiled back. "Do forgive me," she begged. "I know I handled things very badly, but I'm not really such a bitch as you must think me now. And I promise you you'll understand very soon."

As long as he remained, her presence somehow made her hypothetical forthcoming explanations seem satisfactory. But as soon as he left he began to feel angry again, and by the time he reached home he was absolutely furious.

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CHAPTER 8

His anger had not dissipated itself by the next day. Every time he remembered the events of the previous afternoon a fresh wave of resentment swept over him. Against his better judgment he had been lured into dalliance, and then rebuffed! There simply *was* no excuse for such a thing. Whatever Sally's mysterious explanation might be, it couldn't possibly be satisfactory. He thought that she was frigid, that she was deformed, that she must be the blackmailer—in fact, he didn't know what to think, except that he was in a sour rage of frustration and in no state to think at all. And it was in this frame of mind that he decided to go into the city, as a way of releasing his pent-up emotions.

He hadn't been there since Grace's death; hadn't even thought of going since that morning when the first blackmail letter arrived. The problem which that had posed had kept him pinned to Alden Park with an almost superstitious conviction that if he went away, even overnight, something dreadful might happen. But now the idea of going into New York seemed justifiable, even essential, as a therapeutic measure.

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Then he remembered that this was the day of the Frobisher cocktail party.

His first impulse was to skip the party, but he instantly rebelled against giving in to such weakness. He was proud of his self-discipline, was he not? Well, this was certainly a time to exercise it. Anyone could keep himself in hand when things were going well, but it took an exceptional man to rise above them when they were going badly. He had planned on going to the party for a specific purpose, and go he would, even if it was the last thing on earth he wanted to do.

Back in the days when he had considered Dennis and his moustache a pair of unnecessary excrescences, they had seemed all too unavoidable. But recently, despite Sally's attempt to make Dennis and him more friendly, Dennis was rarely to be encountered. He would surely be at the party, however, and Martin had a little trap to spring on him. Accordingly, to the party he would go, and somehow he would put aside this welter of emotions and calmly and craftily spring his trap. He could leave the party by six with any luck at all, and that was time enough to be going into the city.

But it was quite maddening to recollect that it was fear of just this sort of situation, where extraneous emotion would interfere with the job of ferreting out the blackmailer, that had made him hesitate about getting involved with Sally. Damn and blast the girl!

A morning of bill-paying and other routine household tasks served to calm his mind, and he was able to devote the early afternoon to a relatively tranquil mental rehearsal of the more intricate part of the forthcoming scene with Dennis. For this trap was of necessity a bold one. If Dennis were the blackmailer he would instantly comprehend what Martin was about, and it must appear that Martin was insinuating that he had found Dennis out; on the other hand, if Dennis were in-

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nocent the conversation must seem an innocuous one so that Dennis would have ample opportunity to demonstrate that he was unaware of any overtones. This took a bit of planning, since Martin wanted to be able to deliver his own speeches with an ease which would leave him free to devote all his attention to Dennis's reactions, if any. But he felt prepared in time to give a leisurely hour to a bath and shave, and the careful choosing of a suit that would be equally appropriate for the party and the trip to town. When he finally set off he was feeling fully nine-tenths in command of himself.

If Martin went off to the Frobishers' in a spirit of duty, he was probably the only guest so animated. This was one of the smaller, or forty-guest parties. The Frobishers gave one enormous party each year, and half a dozen of the smaller sort. There was some mysterious rotation in the guest list for the latter, so they had come to be an index of one's standing in Alden Park. To be seen at most of them was a sign of distinction; to be missing from several in succession was evidence of some social crime, such as failure to contribute when Betty Frobisher approached you on behalf of one of her favorite charities.

But apart from the arbitrary laws that hedged the invitations, the Frobishers' parties suffered from no excess of formality, and were usually quite pleasant. Alec and Betty met Martin at the door with their customary little cries of social delight, and waved him in. As always, in one corner of the large hall a bar had been set up, presided over by a white-coated bartender imported from the city—to the great annoyance of emulatively-inclined hostesses whose husbands boggled at such expense on the grounds that his cocktails weren't a damn' bit better than those of the local caterer. The bartender asked Martin's fancy, and he chose a scotch sour. He didn't like scotch sours, thinking them an unfriendly way

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to treat good scotch, so he could be confident of not drinking it too quickly.

Glass in hand, he paused at the top of the three steps that led down into the vast, airy living-room. There was no sign of Sally's sleek blonde head, and for the sake of his coolness of mind he was glad. But he was more than a little chagrined to realize that he'd looked for her first of all, and almost eagerly, at that.

At the foot of the steps was Mrs. Hudderfield, talking animatedly to Gerald Marshall. Evidently her thoughtfulness in explaining ceramics to Sally had not been an aberration but a normal effusion of her personality, for she was telling Gerald all about golf. The links in Texas were apparently a superior variety, and one couldn't really appreciate what a challenging game golf was until one had played there.

Martin strolled through the room, exchanging smiles of greeting with those who had one eye cocked for newcomers. Mrs. Mitchell broke off a monologue on herbaceous borders to pat him on the arm and tell him how much she missed Grace at the Garden Club meetings. Martin summoned up a wistful smile, and moved on. Wally Herndon had backed Dr. Finletter into the far corner, and was telling him with unusual heat: "Just listen to this and tell me if you've ever heard anything more idiotic. My partner opened with one spade, and I held six clubs to the king, four hearts to the ace. . ."

In the library beyond, Martin found Dennis Morley and Agnes talking all by themselves; the party was not yet large enough for any more of an overflow. He braced himself, and joined them.

"She was telling Alex all about how to make money on the stock market," Dennis was saying.

"Lizzie Hudderfield," Agnes explained unnecessarily to Martin.

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"I can imagine," he said. "Just now she was telling Gerald all about golf."

"She's so wonderfully predictable," Agnes said happily. "Of course, I made a point of telling her that Gerald is our local champion."

Agnes's presence posed a problem. A complete outsider wouldn't have mattered, but a second suspect would multiply his difficulties. If she didn't leave of her own accord, it would soon be necessary to drive her away, but for the moment Martin could see a way to put her to use. So he waited until the subject of Mrs. Hudderfield was exhausted and then told Agnes that he had another detective novel that she would enjoy.

She was delighted. She counted on small economies, like cheap liquor in the punch-bowl or borrowing books instead of buying or renting them, to balance her extravagances in other directions. Martin allowed her no chance to enlarge on her gratitude, lest Dennis realize that the conversation was taking a turn that might bore him.

"I don't suppose you've acquired the taste yet," Martin said provocatively to Dennis.

Dennis had not, most emphatically. Martin had heard him on the subject before, so it was no trick to get him to repeat his opinion that detective fiction was unrealistic, inartistic and unimaginative. Martin encouraged him to expand these views. Just as he had hoped, Agnes soon lost interest in hearing her favorite form of reading-matter ridiculed. Her attention strayed; through the open door she spotted someone who promised to be more entertaining, and she darted away, leaving the two men alone.

"I admit there's a great deal in what you say," Martin broke in promptly in a tone that implied that what Dennis had said

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was both obvious and beside the point, "but I think you go too far when you say they're unimaginative."

"Oh, I know many people think they're most ingenious," Dennis said.

"And they can be," Martin replied. "Of course, lots of them are just stupid, and I suspect that the only ones you've read were like that. But some of them can be devilishly clever. For example, I was reading one the other evening that centered around a little puzzle that stumped me completely, and I'll wager it would have stumped you, too."

"Some tricky horror involving a corpse in a locked room?" Dennis asked contemptuously.

"No, nothing of the kind. It was quite a homely sort of problem—the type of thing you wouldn't expect to be much of a problem at all, but almost unsolvable once you really started to think about it."

Dennis succumbed. "What was it?" he asked, obviously determined to solve the riddle or prove that the author's solution had been ridiculous.

Martin took a deep breath and launched into his carefully prepared speech. "Well, the background doesn't matter—it was a sort of spy story with a gang of crooks mixed up in it, and not very plausible, I'll admit. But the problem was straightforward enough. The hero had to have one of the villains deliver a package to him in such a fashion that the villain couldn't possible discover to whom he was delivering it. This happened in a small town, and I thought of it in terms of Alden Park. Do you see the idea? How could I, for example, in a small place like this, have you get a package to me without there being a chance of your finding out who I am? Quite a neat little puzzle, isn't it?" And he looked at Dennis with an expression, patiently rehearsed in front of a mirror, that might be taken for either defiance or insinuation.

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Twice the blackmailer had indicated he was finding it difficult to think of a safe way to collect the price of his silence, and Martin, having given the matter some thought, could appreciate the problem. If Dennis could solve it, that in itself would be significant, but even more revealing would be the way he reacted to the problem. And Dennis's expression showed only a calmly competitive concentration.

"Oh, I don't know," he said after a moment. "It doesn't seem as difficult as you make out." And he proceeded to tackle the problem, thinking out loud as he went.

Despite his dislike of the man, Martin couldn't help being impressed by the speed with which Dennis organized his thinking. In a moment he had sketched out the various hazards that would have to be coped with, and then went on to examine different possibilities. The first three he dismissed as unsatisfactory on one count or another. He toyed with a fourth; started to throw it out, and then came up with a twist that made it seem foolproof. A fifth was nearly as good, and the sixth—almost an afterthought—was devastatingly simple. All this with the air of a lofty intellectual solving a child's riddle. But he spoiled that effect, and added the final touch to his display of innocence, by inquiring with ingenuous eagerness which had been the author's solution.

Martin chose the cleverest of Dennis's solutions and said that was the one the author had used. And then he patiently paid the penalty for having started the argument by listening while Dennis, obviously very pleased with himself, went on to explain condescendingly that writers of such stories started out with some elementary gimmick and then spent the rest of their time trying to make the puzzle seem more complicated than it really was so the reader would be all the more impressed when the author solved it. Martin took no offense at the condescension. The argument had been an artificial one,

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and had served its purpose admirably. Without a trace of doubt, Dennis was eliminated as a suspect.

Surreptitiously Martin glanced at his watch. It was only five o'clock, but, now that he had accomplished what he had come for, the party seemed a dreadful waste of time and he was eager to be on his way. So when he felt that Dennis had sufficiently savored his triumph, Martin capitulated gracefully, acknowledged defeat on all counts, and admitted that he only read such books to put himself to sleep. And because at the moment he felt only the friendliest feelings toward Dennis, and didn't wish to be thought sarcastic, he brought forth his very nicest smile and actually patted him affectionately on the knee—a gesture that he had never in his life employed before, at least to another man. Then he went away, leaving a thoroughly baffled Dennis behind him.

As soon as he reentered the living-room he saw that Sally had arrived. There was something different about her, but for a moment he couldn't think what it was. Then he realized that her hair was carefully and attractively done, and her make-up was thoughtful instead of slapdash. And she was wearing a new and becoming cocktail-dress. All in all, he thought he had never seen her look so lovely—and then it occurred to him that he'd gotten in the habit of thinking the same thing each time he saw her.

When she spotted him she grinned at him ruefully, and detached herself from Wally Herndon to join him. "Still mad at me?" she asked.

"Not in the slightest," he lied, and smiled down at her.

"These are new shoes, " she confided, "and they're doing horrid things to my feet. Can't we sit down somewhere? And later on I'd like a lift home, even if home *is* only a few hundred yards away."

For a moment he was shamefully tempted, but he strength-

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ened himself with the thought of what awaited him in the city. "I'm afraid I was just leaving," he apologized. "I have to run into town. I'm . . . ah . . . going to a party. Some friends are giving it," he added hastily, as if that detail would make it all more plausible.

"I see." She seemed disappointed. "Look, I know we're going to the Bensons' Friday evening, but I want to see you some time before then. Could you drop around to the studio tomorrow, perhaps? Or during the day on Friday?"

"Probably Friday," he said. "I'm staying in town tonight, and I may not be back till late tomorrow. Well, have fun." But the instant he left her he began to wish that at least he'd stayed for more of a chat.

Mrs. Hudderfield was still by the steps, but her victim now was Dr. Finletter, looking as though he had been trapped within inches of freedom. She was telling him firmly all about God, Who apparently was proud of having created Texas, whatever He might think about the rest of the world.

He stopped at a bar along the highway, and had a short straight drink to revive his spirits and clean away the taste of the scotch sour. Then he closed himself into the booth and put in a call to Mrs. Trotter, a lady whom he knew only by her rich, fruity contralto on the telephone.

"Mrs. Trotter? This is Martin Parker." The pseudonym had seemed a reasonable precaution at first, and now he was stuck with it.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Parker. I haven't heard from you in quite some time."

"No, I've been out to the coast on business." Martin was very proficient at lying to Mrs. Trotter. "I'm going to be in the city tonight, and I wondered if by any chance Diana were available."

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"I'm sorry, Mr. Parker, but Diana isn't with me any more. Her husband was transferred to Chicago. And I'm afraid that Denise is already engaged for this evening. This is very short notice, you know."

Even in his disappointment, he was impressed. Mrs. Trotter had either a fabulous memory or a businesslike cardfile close to the telephone. "Well, I'll have to leave it up to you, then."

"Very well," she said in an amused tone. "We strive to please, you know." She was silent for a moment, leaving Martin to contemplate the thought that Mrs. Trotter probably had a much more attractive personality than most of the young ladies she handled. "Mr. Parker? The name is Carol Crawford. Do you have that?"

"Yes," said Martin, who had jotted it down on a pad thoughtfully provided by the telephone company for just such purposes. "Could you have her meet me at the *Licorne* on East Fifty-fifth at eight o'clock?"

"Certainly, Mr. Parker," said Mrs. Trotter, and hung up.

Martin went back to the bar and had another drink in memory of Diana, and then drove into New York feeling less pleased with the expedition than before. He checked in at the small East Side hotel that knew him as Martin Parker, and gave in to a well-established compulsion by having still another bath. Promptly at ten minutes after eight he arrived at the *Licorne*, one of the many little French restaurants in New York which can hover for decades on the brink of a popularity which never quite arrives, though the prices would seem to indicate that it already had.

The captain, Léon, greeted him with an enthusiasm born of a long line of ten-dollar bills, lamented the interval since M. Parker had last been in, and indicated that M. Parker's "little friend" had already arrived. Martin's gaze had been scudding along the bar; now he followed Léon's line of sight

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and saw that his guess had been correct: it was the sulky blonde with the long-haired furpiece.

Léon rushed away to justify the most recent ten-dollar bill by producing a table for two, and Martin introduced himself to Carol Crawford. The sulkiness vanished instantly, to be replaced by a quick, talkative gaiety. To the extent that she was pleased to find him not bald, fat, or ten years older, the gaiety was probably sincere rather than mechanical. For his part, Martin would have preferred to find Carol ten years older than she looked, which was shockingly young: no more than eighteen or nineteen, he judged. She was very pretty in the fashion established by the motion pictures: a circular face, with symmetry of feature substituting for character. Unlike Sally, she evidently thought highly of make-up, and used a great deal of it. Her perfectly arched eyebrows were more pencil than hair, her eyes were delicately shadowed, and her lipstick had traced a line rather fuller than nature had provided for. However, if he didn't look too closely, the effect was certainly attractive. Her figure, if he could believe what he saw, was on the spectacular side. There was a noticeable craning of masculine necks as Léon led them to their table.

Martin put aside his dismayed reaction to her youth, repressed his dislike of southern accents, and immediately set about trying to establish a personal relationship. He urged her to call him by his given name instead of the "Darlin' " she seemed disposed to, and talked to her as to a person he wished to make a friend. He had once had an opportunity to read the *Memoirs of Fanny Hill* and one sentence in that charming book had left an impression which influenced all his subsequent dealings with ladies of Fanny's profession. "Men know not in general," the sensible Fanny had observed, "how much they destroy of their own pleasure, when they break the respect and tenderness due to our sex, and even to those of it

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who live only by pleasing them." Martin had thought this eminently logical, and out of the impulses of his own temperament had glossed the need for tenderness as the need for a cordial intimacy, even in a financially motivated relationship. The social aspect of sex was essential to him; he had to make love to a human being, and not just a willing female body.

So he firmly steered her away from her line of chatter, which consisted primarily of a recital of all the nightclubs she had visited in the last fortnight and the celebrities she had spotted in each one, and urged her to talk about herself. As delicately as possible he indicated that he had none of the amateur sociologist's morbid curiosity as to how she had arrived at her present occupation, but was sincerely interested in her tastes, her amusements, her ambitions. What did she hope to be, for example?

She was going to be a model, it seemed—but further examination elicited only that in a few weeks some man was going to take pictures of her, and if they turned out well she would, in some remote future, take them around to the agencies.

Martin abandoned that line as unproductive and turned to the theatre: what plays had she seen? Carol produced a list of the three most popular musical comedies and then stopped short. Evidently she had seen each of them at least four times, and whatever pleasure they might have given her originally had long since escaped her mind. Martin decided against inquiring into her reading habits, and, after having ascertained that she came from North Carolina and had been in New York less than two years, he asked if she liked the city—and, if so, what she thought its chief attraction. This was a mistake. In no time at all she was back on the nightclubs and the celebrities to be found in them.

After dinner she was visibly disappointed when he vetoed

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the more glittering night-spots for one of the more intimate supper clubs which offered good enough entertainment on its diminutive stage that nobody much cared who might be sitting at the next table but one. Martin was sorry to create a hiatus in her lion-hunting, but he had found the conversation tiresome, and felt in the need of outside distraction.

Because the evening was going badly, he set out to get tight as quickly as possible. This was not an easy task, since like most of its kind the supper club served as little liquor to each drink as the law allowed, but Martin did his best. Instead of cheering him up, however, the liquor depressed him still further, and he became terribly morose when a girl, who looked enough like Sally to be her sister, came out on the stage and sang bawdy songs in a loud, baritone voice.

Without any urging on his part, Carol matched him drink for drink, but the liquor seemed to affect her not at all. Somewhere along the line, though, she sensed his mood, and did her best to cheer him up with a kind of heavy-footed, adolescent teasing. There was more kindliness than wit in her efforts, though once she came very near to humor, when she remarked that he hadn't once mentioned his wife. "Most of the men do," she explained.

"My wife is dead," he told her.

"Gee, that's too bad," she said sympathetically, and a moment later was trying all the harder to amuse him, doubtless assuming that he was a recently bereaved widower.

But though Carol's efforts accomplished little in themselves, they did serve to remind him that he had no right to spoil her evening. He forced himself to brighten up, and set out to entertain her, as he should have done in the first place, by doing most of the talking himself. He told her all the funny stories he had heard recently, carefully weeding out the lewder ones because he had long since learned that girls like Carol often had a nice sense of propriety in language. He

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eschewed gossip about theatrical personalities on the probability that she was better informed there than he, but when he found that she knew several of his society friends from the old days, he invented scandalous stories about them. She was an appreciative audience, and things began to go much better. For the first time that evening Martin began to enjoy himself.

They stayed through most of the second show, but when the girl who looked like Sally was due to reappear Martin suggested they leave. Carol's exit created the usual stir of masculine attention, and trailing after her Martin was warmed by the envy he excited. She *was* a delectable creature, and what the devil was the matter with him? In the cab he pulled her to him, and fondled her with an almost vicarious hunger. She was as docile as a child, offering nothing, refusing nothing. There was no reason for him to be disappointed. Even Diana, easily the sexiest trollop he had known, had not responded to his very first caresses until the second time he took her out, and by then she had known of his proficiency in bed. But he *was* disappointed, and he couldn't help comparing Carol's docility with Sally's electric and exciting response, brief though it had been.

As always, Martin had taken a small suite at the hotel, considering it an indelicacy to usher a woman directly into a bedroom. Carol seemed impressed, and looked around as inquisitively as a puppy while he phoned down for glasses and a pitcher of ice-water; the bottle of scotch had come with him in his suitcase. But these were just mechanical arrangements, and Martin already knew that it would take more than another few drinks to keep the evening from collapsing into futility.

From across the room Carol was a mature, exciting woman. He called her to him, and as she came obediently there emerged the ignorant, overly good-natured girl, and he despaired of ever making her understand that, especially in the

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mood he was in, he needed more from her than just an acquiescent body. This time when he kissed her she seemed more interested, but that her mind wasn't really on it was shown by the speed with which she reacted when the bellhop knocked at the door. With practiced silence she vanished into the next room, taking her purse and furpiece with her.

When the bellhop left she returned, and now she was obviously more relaxed. She kicked off her pumps and sat down on the couch with her feet tucked under her. The pose was so reminiscent of Sally that Martin, who was mixing the drinks, wanted to fling the bottle of scotch at her head. But he kept his temper, gave Carol her drink, and then picked up her purse. She watched him uncertainly while he took a fifty-dollar bill out of his wallet, tucked it in the purse, and then dropped the purse down beside her. Then he got his own drink and sat in the armchair opposite her.

"Look, Carol," he said. "The purely financial aspect of this evening is over and done with. Do you understand?"

Quite obviously she didn't. "Don't you want me to stay?" she asked.

"I'd like you to stay," he replied, "but that's entirely up to you now. Your evening had to be paid for, and I've paid for it. You can pick up your purse and walk out of here any time you like. But if you stay, which I hope you do, it will be solely because you want to." Yet deep in his heart Martin realized that he wasn't even sure that he wanted her to stay.

"I just don't get it," Carol complained. Then sudden suspicion flared in her face. "Listen, I won't stand for being whipped or any fancy stuff like that. I know there're men who like that sort of thing, but I don't have to stand for it, and I won't. . . ." Her voice fell before his contemptuous stare.

Abruptly her painted face, her dirty, empty mind, her bulbous body, all seemed unbearably coarse and hateful to Mar-

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tin, and he wanted nothing so much as to be rid of her. Even a Sally who left him shaken with frustration was preferable to the passion of such trash as this, if she had any passion in her. "You're a very stupid little girl," he told her coldly. "No, I had no desire to whip you or perform any of the other filthy things you refer to as 'fancy stuff.' And now I think you'd better run along."

"I'm sorry I said what I did," she said placatingly. "I guess I didn't understand what you were driving at."

"I guess not," he agreed. "As I said, you are a very stupid little girl."

"You've no call to talk to me like that," she snapped, fumbling into her shoes. "Anybody can make a mistake."

"I suppose that's true," Martin admitted. He was sick of the whole episode, suddenly bone-weary, and interested in nothing but a soft bed and oblivion. "Just run along, please."

"I can keep the fifty dollars?"

"You may."

"And you won't tell Mrs. Trotter that I called you a pervert? Please don't do that!"

"I shan't," Martin promised, and she was gone.

Resolutely he sat in his chair and finished off his drink and Carol's before he went to the bedroom. In his foggy state it seemed desperately important that he make sure that he would fall asleep the instant his head touched the pillow. He didn't want to lie awake even for a minute with the understanding that, unlike any other woman he had ever known, Sally had somehow destroyed the pleasure in casual sex. He wanted to postpone till tomorrow the realization that he was deeply, desperately, head-over-heels in love with a girl who showed no sign of being anywhere near that much in love with him.

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CHAPTER 9

Early the following morning Martin drove home in a fashion that showed no consideration for the other drivers on the highway. As the least disturbing line of thought he tried to concentrate on his three remaining suspects, Agnes, Benson and Sally, but he kept ending up thinking just of Sally, and not as a suspect at all. He got into a row with Mrs. Hodges for not having anything in the house for his lunch, and was proved thoroughly in the wrong. Then he puttered aimlessly about the house in a state of sullen impatience until late afternoon, when Benson could be presumed to have returned home from college. And when he went to see Benson, even that was not a visit to a suspect but to someone who knew something of Sally's mysterious past.

He found Benson in a towering rage. In such states Bill fancied himself Olympian, but "incoherent" would probably have been a better description. It was several minutes before Martin could even discover what all the fuss was about. Apparently another of Bill's scholarly books had just come out, something about The Heritage of Medieval Thought, and a well-meaning friend had sent him a copy of the review that was about to appear in the New York *Times*. "Of all the mean,

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underhanded, swinish tricks, this is the worst!" Benson declared. He popped his spectacles into place and glowered furiously at Martin. "Do you know who they went out of their way to get to review my book? 'The eminent historian'—that's what *they* call him—'the eminent historian, Cyril Talbot.' Do you know who he is?"

Martin admitted that he'd heard the name.

"Of course you have," Benson roared. "The man has a press agent. He was thrown out of England because he was boring the population to death, but we've made a hero of him here. Eminent historian, indeed! They'd have been nearer the mark if they'd called him an eminent metaphysician. What little history there is in his books has been twisted out of shape to fit Talbot's adolescent notions about the historical importance of the religious impulse."

"But don't you think . . . ?" Martin began.

"I think the man's an ass," Benson said. "Listen to this. 'Professor Benson dwells at unnecessary length—' Unnecessary length, eh? That from a man who once devoted sixteen jejune and long-winded chapters to demonstrating that a nation's geography could have an effect on its history!"

"It seems excessive," Martin said soothingly.

"Don't you humor me," Benson snarled. "Listen to this. 'It is often difficult to tell from his tone whether or not Professor Benson expects us to take his theories seriously.' Do you know what that means? It means that a sense of humor is so foreign to Talbot's nature that he doesn't know what to make of one when he encounters it. Of course, this is just self-preservation in action. A sense of humor would ruin him in a minute. Have you ever read any of his books?"

"Well, I've read *about* them," Martin said.

"That's the best approach," Benson said, "as long as you don't believe anything they tell you. Talbot benefits from our

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national sense of cultural inferiority. Americans are too unsure of themselves to respect anything they can laugh at, and all too quick to be impressed by anything that's sufficiently ponderous and solemn. Anything this dull, they think, *must* be profound. So they conscientiously admire it without ever stopping to think that if the author had a spark of originality or wit or perception or anything at all but a fifth-rate pedestrian mind he couldn't possibly be that dull."

"But some profound thinkers expressed themselves pretty tediously," Martin objected.

"Don't be too sure about them," Benson warned him darkly. "In any case, Talbot is tedious without being in the least profound. He merely absorbed a little Calvin-and-syrup at his mother's knee and has been rewriting history ever since in an effort to justify his own religious convictions."

"You know, all along you've been sounding as if you were quoting from something," Martin observed.

"Well, perhaps I have been," Benson grunted. "I reviewed Talbot's last book for the *Historical Review*, and I made it quite clear what I thought of the man. That's why it's so howlingly unfair of the *Times* to get him to review my book. He's obviously been itching for revenge for the last two years. This whole piece screams with the petty malice of an injured, over-inflated ego."

Martin had been waiting impatiently for a chance to change the subject, and now Benson's subdued tone gave him hope. "By the way," he began, and ended.

"Of course, it will be fine for sales," Benson mused aloud. "If it hadn't been for Talbot the *Times* probably wouldn't have reviewed the book at all."

"I suppose not," Martin said. "I was wondering—"

"And he attacks it so vehemently that all the historians who hate his guts will come rushing to my defense," Benson theo-

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rized, brightening visibly. "Really, I suppose I ought to be grateful to the man. What were you wondering, Martin?"

"Well," said Martin, deciding that under the circumstances there was more to be gained from a direct approach than a circuitous one, "well, you knew Sally before she came to live in Alden Park, didn't you?"

"Sally?" asked Benson. "Sally Teal? Of course I did. You knew all about that. What does she have to do with Talbot?"

"Nothing," Martin admitted. "What did you mean when you said I knew all about that?"

"I told you all about Sally and her husband—oh, five or six years ago."

"I don't remember," Martin said. He hadn't even been aware that Sally had ever been married.

"You must," said Benson, whose own memory was phenomenal, and who never could understand that everyone was not just like him. "Surely you recall my telling you about a young new colleague in my department, a very brilliant fellow I was quite interested in. He taught Ancient History, but he knew more about the Middle Ages than a lot of specialists ever do. Larry Burton was his name. Doesn't that ring any sort of bell?"

"Very vaguely," Martin said.

"He asked my help on a book, and I got very friendly with both him and his wife, Sally. I distinctly remember telling you that she was the only vivacious girl I'd ever known who also had a brain in her head."

"And that's Sally Teal?" Martin asked, unable to associate the adjective "vivacious" with the Sally he knew.

"Of course," Benson said disgustedly. "I naturally assumed you'd made the connection years ago, though at Sally's request I made a point of saying nothing about her background. Honestly, Martin, at times you carry your self-centeredness

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much too far. If all this comes as a surprise to you it can only be because you simply don't listen when friends tell you about people you don't happen to know."

"But what happened to them?" Martin asked. "Sally and her husband, I mean."

"They were divorced four years ago," Benson replied. "That much is a matter of public record, so there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you. Beyond that, you'll have to go to Sally. It's her story, and I promised never to breathe a word of it to anyone. As far as I know, it's the only secret I've ever managed to keep successfully, and I don't propose to spoil the record now."

And from that position Benson refused to be budged. Indeed, the more Martin pressed him to talk about Sally, the more determined he seemed to get back to his arch-enemy, Cyril Talbot, who was evidently nearly as ludicrous as Spengler, if not quite.

Martin stayed home that evening out of sheer pride. He wanted to go over to see Sally, but he had said he would see her on Friday and he refused to go crawling (for that was how he thought of it) a minute sooner. But he was desperately bored and depressed and restless. He tried playing the piano for a while, but this was definitely one of those times when the left hand hadn't the remotest idea what the right hand was doing, and after three assaults on a Chopin *Prelude* had failed to produce anything but discords he gave up, and looked for something else to do.

He remembered that he wanted to look up some word that Benson had used that afternoon—"jejune," that was it. A perfectly commonplace word which he came across all the time, but for some reason the meaning had never stuck in his mind, and he looked it up periodically at least once a year. He went

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into the study for the dictionary, and the overhead light blew out as he switched it on. He was grateful for the task of having to replace the bulb, but for the moment he was content to fumble in the dark for the dictionary. He carried it—both volumes, to be on the safe side—into the living-room. It was the *Shorter Oxford*, which Grace had given him one Christmas as a sop to his anglophilia. She had thought his fondness for it an affectation, and had never hesitated to say so in that archly nagging manner which had been her substitute for teasing.

He looked up "jejune" and found that it meant "unsatisfying and insipid" which was approximately what he had guessed.

The dictionary was indelibly associated with Grace not merely because she had given it to him, but also because it had, strangely enough, played a part in that critical moment when he had passed from wishing Grace were dead to thinking of doing something about it. A small hurdle, but a momentous one.

In retrospect, Martin found it hard to understand why it had taken him so long to arrive at a decision so logical. The marriage had not been six months old before his disillusionment had been complete, and he had taken the position that he would play the sort of husband Grace wanted in return for the comparative luxury of life in Alden Park. If his love had vanished without a trace, Martin had sincerely tried to replace it with affection—but this Grace had destroyed within the year by the petty attrition of indifference. After that, there was nothing left but play-acting, for he had come to feel nothing for Grace but hatred.

It was a quiet hatred, which rarely came to the surface because Grace had despised scenes of any sort. It was a mild hatred, which expended itself in reveries of the contented,

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tranquil life he would lead (there was irony for you!) if "something" happened to Grace. It was a static hatred, which seemed neither to grow nor to diminish with the years.

And years had gone by in just this fashion, six of them. Years in which he had never seen Grace drive off to the city without some faint thought of a fatal traffic accident; years in which she had never had a summer cold without giving him the materials for a day-dream in which the cold flourished into a pneumonia that defied every known wonder-drug. Yet never once in all that time had it occurred to him that he might take matters into his own hands.

Consciously, at least.

But as he had realized later, the long slow descent to callousness must have been traveled unconsciously, for when the thought of violence had at last appeared he had not recoiled from it, though by nature he was not a brutal person. Perhaps the onset of his forties had accented the feeling of failure in life; a failure all the more humiliating because his ambition had been so modest. With his superiority he might have demanded so much more, but he hadn't: merely a serene and comfortable existence. A small desire, surely, yet he had failed to achieve even that. There could be no serenity with Grace; there could be no comfort without her income.

And somewhere deep under the dumb despair of his day-to-day thinking must have grown the recognition that Grace was the sole cause of his failure; that if she were not there—if *in any fashion* she were . . . erased from the picture—then his humiliation would end, his superiority would have justified itself, and he would suddenly be a success.

It was a relatively minor thing that had finally jarred that recognition out into the open one evening last December. Not even a year ago.

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The evening had started off badly. There had been a quarrel at dinner about something he couldn't now remember; one of those small, hot quarrels that lapsed into furious silence every time Mrs. Hodges entered the dining-room. After dinner they had taken their cold hostility to the living-room. Grace had set up the card-table and laid out one of the two-pack solitaires that held an inexhaustible fascination for her; flanked by his dictionary Martin had settled down on the couch with the Sunday crossword puzzle. Actually, the puzzle was less of an end in itself than a pretext. Every time he looked up a word he read on for page after page, enchanted by the wealth of quotations, proverbs, and fragments of erudition that the editors appended to each word they defined.

As usual, Grace wondered aloud that anyone could just sit there reading a dictionary, and as usual he replied courteously that solitaire was not generally regarded as an intellectual pursuit.

Then she began to fidget, and think of things for him to do. From experience he knew that this was a punishment for having let her set up the card-table herself, but since he couldn't prove this point there was no advantage to be gained from raising it. So he obediently went upstairs to turn on her electric blanket; went downstairs to make sure that Mrs. Hodges had locked the basement door behind her; went out to the kitchen to fetch a glass of ice-water. He was returning from this last errand when he tripped over a scatter-rug and lost his balance. His instinctive effort to keep the water from spilling cost him any chance of recovering himself gracefully, and he had to reach wildly for some support to keep himself from falling. His flailing left hand crashed through one of the glass panels of Grace's great-grandmother's breakfront, but he went down to the floor nevertheless. Grace came running

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in alarm—but after one quick glance at Martin's bleeding hand, her concern was obviously all for her precious breakfront.

Later, after washing disclosed that all the blood had come from two shallow gashes in the fleshy part of the palm, and a little gauze and adhesive tape had sealed off the damage, Grace insisted that she'd seen at once that he hadn't been really hurt. "After all," she pointed out sensibly, "your hand can heal up, but the breakfront might have been harmed beyond a point where a cabinet-maker could ever make it look the same." Martin, who had suffered the pain and the blood and the frightened thought of a cut tendon, leaving him with a left hand that could never again stretch an octave, was not appeased. Neither was he especially angry. The whole episode was so utterly typical of Grace that he shrugged it off much as he had shrugged off countless other instances of her egoism.

That is, he went back to his couch, consoling himself with a day-dream wherein Grace expired of some rapid but painful ailment, and his first action as a widower was to sell the breakfront to any antique dealer who would offer him a decent price for it. By furious haggling he got the price up to four hundred dollars and then spent every penny in laying down vintage wines for the long, lovely future . . .

"How is your hand?" Grace asked with an abstract solicitude that was as close as she could come to an apology.

"It hurts like the blazes," Martin replied coldly, outraged at being reminded that she was still very much alive. He and his aching hand and his shattered day-dream had retreated to the dictionary, where comfort might be found among complex derivations and subtle usages. And he had found not merely comfort, but inspiration as well, and, of all places, under the word "Barefoot." The editors of the *Shorter Oxford*

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had embellished this innocuous-seeming word with a proverb of manifest antiquity. Coming upon it at such a moment had given Martin the eerie sensation that the cynical wisdom of the ancients had come to his assistance: "Who waitth for dead men shoen, shall go long barefoote."

"But why wait?" Martin had inquired of the living-room.

"What was that?" Grace had asked.

"Nothing," he had said, already lost in a new line of thought.

"Are you working?" he asked from the doorway.

"Not really," Sally said. "Come on in." She mashed down the clay she had been toying with and tossed it back into the trough. "I haven't accomplished much of anything the last couple of days. I've been brooding, mostly."

"You take things too seriously," Martin told her. Perhaps in anticipation of his coming, the kitchen chair was for once uncluttered, and he settled into it.

"Oh, not about the other afternoon, exactly," Sally said. "I've been wondering whether I made a mistake in keeping my background a secret. People like me shouldn't keep such secrets, but Alden Park is so damned stuffy and old-fashioned, and there were business reasons as well. But if I hadn't kept it dark, I wouldn't owe you this explanation now. You see, I'm not exactly what I seem to be."

Martin had come prepared for almost anything except this atmosphere, which, to his over-strained nerves, seemed highly melodramatic. "Don't be so intense," he urged uneasily.

Sally laughed. "I'm not, really. It's just difficult to talk about, and I've been rather dreading it."

"My curiosity will keep till another time," Martin said, somewhat to his own surprise.

"It wouldn't be any easier another time," she said. "Besides, I know I shouldn't be secretive, and it will probably be good

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for me to talk about it again. And there isn't really much point in telling you what happened without telling the why of it as well."

She brushed the dried clay from her hands and accepted the cigarette he held out for her. "I know you were married," he said helpfully, "and that's just about all I do know."

"That was when I was eighteen," she said. "I could go back before that and tell you about a couple of parents who shouldn't have been permitted to have children, but that seems pretty much beside the point. It's easier to begin when I was eighteen and going to a small college in the Middle West. I was very gay at being away from home, and thought I was very grown up because I'd read a lot of books, and I fell in love with one of the instructors, Larry Burton. That spring Larry got just the break he'd been hoping for, an assistant professorship at one of the Ivy League colleges, so we got married and came East."

"I know your husband was a colleague of Bill's," Martin said, to spare her any unnecessary evasions.

"That's right," Sally agreed absently. "He was just ten years older than I. That's young for an assistant professor, but Larry deserved it if ever anyone did. He was the most brilliant boy I've ever known. And one of the best looking, too. I wish I had a picture to show you, but I threw them all out a few years ago. I adored him madly, and I loved the life of being an assistant professor's wife. I was . . . less serious than I am now, I suppose, and all the academic feuds went right over my head, and I just had a wonderful time. Larry used to bring the bright young men from his classes home for cocktails; they were just my age, but already they seemed like such kids to me. But they were fun, too. Oh, everything was just heavenly. And then one day I came home and found Larry in bed with one of his bright young men."

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Martin, who had gradually been coming to suspect something of the sort, wasn't too surprised. "You probably didn't even know such things existed," he said sympathetically.

She grinned at him briefly. "The Middle West isn't as backward as all that," she pointed out. "Besides, I've already said that I had done a lot of reading. No, the idea of homosexuality never bothered me; it was just finding it in Larry. And it's probably difficult for a man to understand just what that did to me." In her anxiety to express herself clearly, Sally was wearing that look of schoolgirlish concentration Martin had been charmed by before. "You see, a girl in love—physically in love as well as all the rest of it—is proud of her femininity, proud of whatever attractions she may have . . . and all that was suddenly taken away from me. It was the most helpless, hopeless feeling in the world."

"You'd been rejected in favor of something you couldn't compete with," Martin offered.

"That's it exactly," Sally said gratefully. "If it had been another girl, I could have fought, and even if I'd lost nothing much would have been damaged but my ego. As it was," she shrugged, "all my values went topsy-turvy. That was part of it, anyway. Then, too, it seemed that my happiness had been based on a complete delusion; that Larry had never loved me at all, that he had just used me as a blind to protect his nice new job. Much later on, when it didn't matter any more, I found out that wasn't true. He *had* loved me—as much as he could, anyway. He was so unhappy with himself as he was and wanted to change, wanted desperately to be normal. And he fell in love with me and hoped that with me he could be normal. But it didn't work out that way."

"It rarely does," Martin said.

"I suppose not. But I've often thought that if I'd known, at least, I might have been able to help him more."

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"That's ridiculous," Martin said. "You'd have been suspicious every time he shook hands with another man, and that just would have made things worse."

"I guess you're right," Sally said. "In any case, as I say, I didn't know any of this until much later. All I knew then was that the bottom had fallen out of my universe. None of the things I had believed in were real: Larry, our marriage, my happiness . . . even my own womanhood couldn't amount to much if I'd lost my husband to another man. And I simply couldn't face up to it. I didn't have the guts, or the stability, or whatever you want to call it. I just couldn't take it."

"You had a nervous breakdown?" Martin asked.

"I went insane," Sally corrected him.

This was obviously the crisis of the story as far as Sally was concerned, and now that it was past she relaxed visibly and asked for another cigarette. "Oh, they called it a nervous breakdown," she said, much more lightly now, almost humorously. "But it was the real thing. Straightjacket, cold baths, shock treatments—the works." She waved at one corner of the room. "I hate it when winter comes and I have to plug in that damned electric heater every day. I still can't stand anything to do with electricity. Did you know they turn the current just so high, just high enough that you wish you were dead, and never any higher? They judge it very expertly, because if it goes too high it knocks you unconscious, and then they have to do it all over again."

"Stop it," said Martin.

"Because it's upsetting you or because you think it's upsetting me?" she asked.

"Because it's upsetting me," he said truthfully.

She smiled at him. "I was only in the hospital about four months, and only the first month of it was really bad. After

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that I'd come out of the dream world I'd fled into, and it was just a matter of learning to face up to reality. They stopped the baths and the shock treatments, and set me to occupational therapy. God only knows how they decide these things, but in my case they gave me clay to play with. And that's how I happened to discover that I have a talent for the stuff."

"Good Lord," Martin exclaimed.

Sally nodded. "Yes, it's funny how these things work out. Well, I came out of the hospital to find that I had to build a new life right from scratch. Enough of the facts had come out to send Larry's career down the drain; he'd gone West, gotten the divorce, and the last I heard he had a job grading papers for a correspondence school. It seems a terrible waste."

Martin could find no pity to spare for Larry. "What about you?"

"I *wouldn't* go home to be brooded over, so I went to New York. I studied ceramics like mad and went to my analyst three times a week. My family sent me money, and Larry sent me some whenever he could, but it wasn't enough, so I got jobs for a couple of months at a time. By then I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to do, so I worked mostly as an interior decorator's assistant, to have the contacts for later on. After about a year I found I couldn't afford both the analyst and the pottery classes, so I gave up the analyst. I was pretty sure of myself by then."

None of Martin's considerable experience with women had taught him to esteem the sex. For the most part he thought women shallow creatures: even those who were not blind-dominated by their instinct to perpetuate the race were unable to pursue any end remoter than next week's comfort. He subscribed heartily to Bill Benson's dictum that their only natural creative outlet was sex: even the most foolish of them brought to a romance a flair and a subtlety that she showed in

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no other direction. Therefore, to make love to them was to show an appreciation of their finer qualities; to take them seriously would have been a betrayal of his own.

Prior to Grace, his deeper emotions had rarely been aroused. On the occasions when he had thought himself in love, it had resulted from being captivated by some intensity of charm which had awakened in him a protective passion akin to that which some people can bring to an enchanting, helpless kitten. In Grace he had thought he had found something vastly more important: a sense of companionship and empathy, but that had been self-deception, pure and simple.

From the very first moment that he had been aware of his interest in Sally, however, Martin had been conscious that his attitude toward her was somehow different from that toward all the other women he had known. Previously, he had been uncertain what this difference consisted of, but now he acknowledged to himself that he had all along respected her as a person. Unlike most women, and all too many men, Sally was an adult—and instinctively he had accepted her as one. His only reaction to her story, apart from the automatic sympathy that any such harrowing relation might evoke, was a gratification in finding that his instinctive respect had been so well justified. For Sally to have collapsed in the face of an intolerable situation was nothing; for her to have picked herself up and made herself into the mature person she was now seemed impressive and admirable in every way.

"And then Alec Frobisher helped you get started on your own?" he prompted, just to tidy up the story when Sally appeared inclined to fall silent.

"That was Bill Benson's doing more than anything," she said. "He and Eve had kept in touch with me all along, visiting me whenever they came to New York. Of course he'd known that Alec was a cousin, and I guess Bill had just been

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waiting for a time when Cousin Alec could be really helpful. Whatever Bill may say about my having blackmailed Cousin Alec into helping me, it was really Bill who went to him first. Under all his bluster and cynicism, he's really an awfully sweet person—Bill, I mean. And extremely fond of you, as I'm sure you know."

Not being sufficiently sure that he knew anything of the kind, Martin merely nodded. He wanted to make some comment on what he'd heard, but there just didn't seem anything to say.

Sally's gaze had rested levelly on Martin throughout her story, but now she seemed unwilling to meet his eyes. "Anyway, that's it. You can understand why I haven't exactly made a parade of it, and why I've even tried my best not to think about it. And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll lie down for a while before dinner. Pick me up about seven." And still avoiding looking in his direction, she fled the studio.

Martin made no effort to detain her, suspecting from the sound of her voice that she was indulging in one of those inscrutable bursts of tears to which even the most adult women were sometimes susceptible. Rather thoughtfully he went out to his car and drove home, wondering what Sally had been like before her tragedy. He had nothing but contempt for the notion that suffering had ever ennobled anybody, and so assumed that the seeds of her present maturity had always been present, and would somehow have flourished whatever course her life had taken. But he could not help wishing somewhat wistfully that he had known the gay, vivacious young Sally he had glimpsed twice in the past few days.

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CHAPTER 10

"Martin looks as if he's ready for another cocktail," Eve Benson observed in her most hostessy voice.

"That is just his normal expression, my dear," Bill said. "You shouldn't call attention to its significance." Nevertheless he got up obediently and began to do things with the cocktail shaker.

In all fairness, Martin had not been thinking of his empty glass. He had been sitting passively, letting the other three carry the conversation while he brooded over the suspicion that his passion for the subtle, roundabout approach was a major weakness. The occasion for this line of thought was the fact that, although he had a highly important question to put to Sally, he had completely thrown away the opportunity of the drive from her place to the Bensons' in looking for a sufficiently delicate opening. From worrying about this he had gone on to reflect that if he had just pushed Grace firmly down the basement stairs, instead of getting involved in his elaborate car smash-up, he might now be a perfectly carefree widower. It was a depressing line of thought, to be sure, but no more so than many that occupied him these days.

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"You must tell us about this dreadful friend of Agnes's," Benson said greedily. "What the devil is her name?"

"Mrs. Hudderfield?"

"That's the one. Sally's mentioned her several times, without going into any detail. I can never get Sally to describe these impossible creatures: she's so soft-hearted she hates saying unpleasant things about people even when they're quite true."

"That makes me sound so wishy-washy," Sally complained.

"You *are* wishy-washy, my dear," Bill assured her.

Just in time Martin realized that he was being baited, and refrained from leaping to Sally's defense. It disturbed him to know that Bill sensed his infatuation, till it occurred to him that Sally had perhaps been talking of him to the Bensons, and that idea, though it had its disquieting side, raised his spirits considerably.

He dutifully tried to appease Benson's appetite for odd characters by describing Mrs. Hudderfield, and did his very best to make the lady sound amusing, but his heart wasn't really in it. When a superior person like himself was filled with self-doubts, Mrs. Hudderfield's unjustified complacency seemed almost a personal affront.

Eve agreed with him to the extent that she said Mrs. Hudderfield sounded feahful, simply feahful, and went off in disgust to the kitchen. Bill, on the other hand, purred delightedly throughout and when Martin finished lamented that he hadn't met the lady himself.

"She would have explained the Middle Ages to you," Martin said.

"My students do that all the time," Benson replied. "No, the charm of people like Mrs. Hudderfield is their complete lack of self-consciousness. The trouble with most of us is that our self-consciousness acts as a kind of extra-temperamental

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timidity, so that we accept fools at their own inflated evaluation simply to avoid being thought discourteous. Whereas the Mrs. Hudderfields of the world go charging in where we angels are too dainty or too cowardly to tread."

"But she's a bigger fool than any of them," Martin said.

"That has absolutely nothing to do with it," Benson insisted, suddenly serious. "That's your worst failing, Martin: once you've decided that someone is a fool, you are incapable of seeing anything about him except his foolishness. Your own contempt blinds you to the fact that there are all sorts of fools—clever ones, useful ones, dangerous ones, entertaining ones—all sorts of them. But you just lump them all together as your inferiors and dismiss them."

"Oh, I know; there's some good to be found in everyone," Martin scoffed, thinking that Bill was sounding like Grace at her most maudlin.

"Not necessarily," Benson replied. "All I said was that people aren't negligible for being what you call fools."

"Tell me what qualities I've overlooked in Mrs. Hudderfield," Martin challenged.

"I haven't the remotest idea," Benson replied. "Possibly the same ones you've overlooked in her hostess."

"Agnes?" Martin said. "I hadn't realized that you were one of Agnes's champions."

"Are there others?" Bill inquired.

"I'd be one of them," Sally said quickly.

"And quite properly," Bill agreed. "But Martin, here, considers her a fool, if I'm not mistaken."

Since Sally had already taken a position, Martin was more circumspect than he otherwise might have been. "I think she's a spoiled brat who's never grown up," he said.

"Perfectly true," Benson said, "but what does that prove?

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The same might be said of Richard *Coeur de Lion*, Teddy Roosevelt, and possibly even me."

Before Martin could think of a reply, there was an interruption from the kitchen. "Billeee," Eve called.

"Excuse me," Benson said. "Whenever Eve undertakes hollandaise an extra pair of hands seems to be essential. No, sit still, Sally. You're going to have to help later with the dishes."

Martin had wished for nothing so much as that Sally and he might be left alone for a few minutes. He had promised himself that if this happened he would waste no time in devious, roundabout approaches, but would grasp the nettle boldly. "Sally," he said with determination.

"Yes, Martin?"

"Ah . . . isn't Eve's new dress attractive?" At the last moment he had decided that the nettle was a fragile thing, and might easily be crushed.

"Yes, isn't it!" Sally agreed warmly. "Why don't you tell her so?"

Martin gave due thought to this odd suggestion.

"You know," she continued, "Bill may have been talking about Agnes and Mrs. Hudderfield but I wouldn't be surprised if he had Eve in mind too. I don't blame you for thinking she's rather a fool, but I wish you wouldn't make it so *obvious* that you think so."

"Do I?" Martin asked in amazement.

"I'm afraid you do. There's a lot more to her than I think you realize, and anyway she's been awfully kind to me. For my sake, at least, I wish you'd try to be nicer to her."

"I'll try," Martin promised. The sheer pointlessness of wasting time on Eve Benson evoked the boldness which he had previously lacked. "Sally, listen. There's something I want to

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ask you, except that I'm afraid you'll think me obtuse. Normally I'm not. But when I've blundered once in a relationship with a girl, I'm sensitive enough to be nervous about the possibility of blundering again."

"You didn't blunder; I did," she said, smiling at him gently. "But go on."

"What you told me of your background this afternoon was meant as an explanation of . . . what happened on Tuesday. Superficially, there was no direct connection, but actually of course there was. I'm pretty sure I know why you offered your background as an explanation for what happened between us, but I'd prefer you to tell me."

She nodded. "It's quite simple. For a moment there, that afternoon, I got scared. For nearly five years I've had my nose to the grindstone, working my head off. I haven't had to worry about my emotional stability because I haven't had any emotions to speak of. Then I found I was getting involved with someone who attracted me quite a lot. It was lovely, it was inevitable, and when it became a reality all of a sudden it was frightening. I found that I just wasn't entirely sure of myself, wasn't sure that I could go plunging into an affair and take the consequences, whatever they might be, without getting hurt too much. It was silly of me, perhaps, but I suppose it takes a long time before you feel completely sure that you mightn't wake up one morning and find yourself back in that straightjacket."

"Poor darling," Martin said. He took her hand and pressed it lightly.

"I just had to have more time to think it over, Martin," she said. "Time to find out whether I was a big grown-up girl again."

"That's more or less what I thought," he said. A whole jumble of unfamiliar emotions had been confusing him re-

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cently, and now still another was added to the list: it was with something very like humility that he asked, "And what did you decide?"

This time her smile was mischievous, and something more as well. "You're taking me home later, aren't you?" she asked. "We can straighten that out then."

"A tradition-loving colleague of mine has just sired a seven-pound daughter," Benson explained as he slipped the cellophane off the cigar and sniffed at it doubtfully. "If this is any indication, I suspect he wanted a son."

Sally and Eve were out in the kitchen doing the dinner dishes while Martin and Bill callously enjoyed their coffee in the living-room. The meal had gone well. In a rare state of elation, Martin had beamed upon everyone, and made a particular effort to be nice to Eve. Sally had appreciatively squeezed his hand under cover of the table, and Martin, quite fatuously happy, had redoubled his efforts. Now he beamed at Benson with uncertain affection. Sally had made quite a point that afternoon of Bill's fondness for him, and it would be nice to be quite sure she was right. If he could be confident of Bill's friendship, he could strike Bill from his dwindling list of suspects, for the blackmailer was certainly no friend. But how could you test a person's friendship?

"It was lucky for you Eve called me into the kitchen when she did," Benson remarked. "I was just about to illustrate Agnes's essential good-heartedness by reminding you that she went out of her way to be kind to Sally back in the days when you were asking me why I bothered to have that odd, silent girl over so often."

"I never did," Martin protested automatically. It had occurred to him that there was one way, crude but effective, to test a friendship. But was it too absurd?

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"You did," Benson said, "you most certainly did. You called her a frightened rabbit, and I distinctly remember your asking what I could see in someone with just enough intelligence to keep her mouth shut."

"You're making all this up," Martin said. Normally he would have taken his idea home, fussed with it, worked it all out, rehearsed it. But this evening was different. The thought that in a few hours he would be taking home a complaisant Sally filled him with exuberance and self-confidence. He could cope with anything. Caution was for lesser folk. "Bill," he said impulsively, "I have a tremendous favor to ask of you."

"Ask away," said Benson, with an airy wave of his cigar.

"Can you lend me ten thousand dollars?"

The cigar stopped in mid-flourish. "Are you serious?" Benson asked bewilderedly.

"Quite serious."

"But with Grace's money and your own . . . you ought to be in fine shape."

"I know it," Martin said ruefully, or as ruefully as he could manage. "I don't want to go into details, but it's beginning to look as though I may have made a damned fool of myself in the stock market. I don't know yet. But I may need a devil of a lot of money to pull me through, and even that might not do it. I could be wiped out. In which case, frankly, it would be quite a while before I could pay you back."

Someone like Alex Frobisher would have pulled this story to pieces in no time, but Benson swallowed it without question. From past experience Martin was aware that whereas Bill knew everything there was to know about medieval economy, he was as innocent as a child about the financial structure of the world he lived in. Wall Street, to him, was just a malevolent agency which had whisked away his father's capital by means which Bill preferred not to understand.

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Familiarity with the intricacies of the stock market he regarded as a sure sign of an improper upbringing.

"But why come to *me*?" Bill asked plaintively. "You know perfectly well that the average first-class plumber earns more than I do. Why, some of my own students have cars that cost more than I make in a whole year, and in my own field I'm supposed to be one of the most eminent men in the country. But you could scarcely imagine the screams of outrage that go up any time I ask for a couple of hundred more a year. I'm a scholar, I am, and scholars are supposed to work for the sheer joy of working. But do you have any idea what the football coach gets compared—" He broke off in mid-sentence, evidently realizing that this was not the best possible time for a lecture on the inequities of the American educational system. "Martin, you have any number of rich friends in Alden Park. I should think you'd go to one of them."

"They aren't really *friends*, Bill," Martin said. "Oh, they're amusing enough, and pleasant enough, as long as things are going well. But the instant they get it into their heads that someone's in real trouble, they're just like a pack of wolves. I just *can't* go to them." This was utterly unfair, of course, but it fitted in perfectly with Benson's own opinion of his neighbors. Martin would have been delighted with his spontaneous ingenuity if it hadn't been for Benson's quite obvious concern.

"Yes, I can see that," Benson said. "Personally, I've never been able to understand what enjoyment you could find in such people, but that's neither here nor there." He sighed heavily, and popped his glasses into place with a weary caricature of his usual intimidating gesture. "You're a damn' fool, of course. You'll undoubtedly get taken for every cent, just the way my father did. And you've never done an honest day's work in your life, so God only knows how you'll pay it back. But I suppose I'll have to do what I can to help you."

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Martin mumbled shame-faced thanks.

"Not to the tune of ten thousand dollars," Benson told him, glaring fiercely. "I simply couldn't raise that much. But if you absolutely have to have it, I expect I can scrape together six or seven thousand. You'll have to find the remainder somewhere else."

Martin was both astonished and embarrassed by the success of his improvised plot. On the one hand, he had had no idea that Benson regarded him that fondly; on the other, he could not have conceived of anyone making such a grave decision in such an offhand manner. Evidently Benson either discounted practical considerations where friendship was involved, or he so despised the mercenary instincts of his neighbors that he preferred to pretend that he had none of his own. But in any case such unhesitating generosity made Martin feel ashamed of himself for having put Benson to the test, and he immediately set out to undo as much damage as possible. He said that he was probably being unduly pessimistic, that everything would doubtless straighten out in due course and he wouldn't have to call on Benson for a penny.

Bill grunted skeptically, indicating that he thought it most unlikely that any entanglement with Wall Street could end otherwise than catastrophically, and that he was already resigning himself to the loss of what must have been the major part of his life's savings. But if by any chance Martin did emerge with his shirt, Bill had some trenchant advice as to what should be done with the money, the essence of which was that whereas there were some advantages to government bonds, there were even more to a nice tin box buried in a safe spot.

Listening meekly to Benson's witty nonsense was Martin's way of apologizing for ever having included Benson on his list of suspects. What blackmailer could hear his victim's re-

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quest for a staggering loan and respond, first with a harangue on the subject of underpaid college professors, and then by volunteering most of his laboriously acquired capital? No, this was a friend, and a real friend. And it struck Martin as rather ironic that he should never have realized what a friend Benson was till he had come to think of him as a possible enemy. Doubtless this was his own fault. Martin had never thought of himself as a lonely man, but now it seemed to him that his own capacity for friendship must have been relatively shallow, if he could have regarded Benson's so lightly or been so unsure of it.

In keeping with Martin's thoughts, when Benson had consigned to perdition the last known form of investment he reverted to the subject of Agnes, and Martin's inability to appreciate her good quilities. "She's one of the civilizing influences in Alden Park," Bill said. "Do you remember the cocktail party she gave for that Negro contralto, Elizabeth What's-her-name?"

"And you'll recall that she invited mostly the stuffiest people," Martin pointed out. "She wasn't trying to civilize them; she was just hoping to shock them."

"She was," Benson agreed, "and forty stuffed shirts discovered that the colored wench was more charming company than half their friends." Then he looked at Martin in surprise. "I think I see where you make your mistake. You think motives are important. You haven't discovered yet that the only good motives are the wrong ones."

It was at this moment that the girls returned to the living-room. From the inquisitive glance Eve threw at him, Martin guessed that he had been a topic of conversation, and for once the idea did not offend him. He smiled at Sally in hungry possessiveness, and for the merest fraction of a second she

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drooped an eyelid at him companionably. "It takes a good dinner to inspire Bill's best paradoxes," she said.

"I don't see that it's so much of a paradox," said Benson, who would have been disappointed if no one had called attention to the fact that it was.

"I don't see that it makes much sense," said Martin.

"The people who set out to do good are always meddlers," Benson explained, "and generally undo all their own work. Unless there's money to be made in it, all the good that gets done is done by accident. Agnes is one of those accidents."

"And what good does Agnes do?" Martin asked.

"She makes people think," Benson replied. "That's why they dislike her so much."

Martin merely sneered, but sneering effectively was another of his accomplishments. Most people seemed to believe that sneering belonged in old-fashioned melodrama, and left the expression out of their repertoires, but Martin had perfected an eloquent sneer, well calculated to drive argumentative friends out onto insecure conversational limbs.

"Oh, it's quite true," Benson insisted as he began to set up the card-table. "It's unpleasant to have to admit that Agnes succeeds where you and I merely put people on the defensive, but it's so. People who usually think in clichés are chary of uttering them when she's around, because she's perfectly capable of making fun of them. They can't resent her because they know she's not one bit cleverer than they, but they're frightened because she's so unpredictable. So to avoid being ridiculed, they actually have to go to the trouble of thinking before they speak. And to some extent that becomes a habit that persists even when Agnes isn't around."

"I doubt that," Martin said.

As soon as everything was in place, Eve slid into her seat and began shuffling the cards with a sharp, impatient riffle.

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"Always the negative approach," Benson sighed. "Can't you see that Agnes evokes a kind of critical spirit?"

"Cut for deal," Eve commanded, fanning out the deck. She herself drew high, and set in motion a small whirlwind of cards that settled neatly into four piles.

"Every time she undermines a cliché with her ridicule," Benson persisted, "some of its bloom is rubbed off, and the good matrons of Alden Park can't help regarding it with suspicion thereafter."

"One club," Eve said firmly.

"You overestimate the good matrons," Martin said. "One spade."

Benson played the hand at a sulky two No Trumps, and went down. When Eve seemed disposed to tell him how he might have made it he looked abused and asked for some more coffee. "The trouble with you," he told Martin the moment Eve left the table, "is that you like to think that your good qualities are the only ones worth having."

Sally entered the discussion with such abruptness that Martin flattered himself with the notion that this was her way of coming to his defense. "Both of you take Agnes's stupidity for granted," she observed, "and from your point of view I suppose you're right. But you don't seem to realize that she really is a lot brighter than most of her friends!"

"Oh, come!" Benson said.

"Just as ignorant, perhaps, but smarter," Sally insisted.

"If you're still talking about Agnes, Sally's right," Eve said, returning with the coffee. "If she treated her husband better, I'd have a lot of respect for her."

"Sometimes I think she's just too good-natured to enjoy seeing her friends make fools of themselves," Sally continued, "and in her own abrupt fashion she tries to tease them out of it."

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Martin was sincerely astonished to discover that there could be two interpretations of Agnes's character so different from his own and from each other. In a vague way the discovery troubled him, but he was not allowed to find out why or to brood about the matter: Eve took matters firmly in hand and made the three of them concentrate on bridge. As usual the game settled down to a battle between Martin and her, with Bill and Sally as innocent bystanders who took the blame meekly whenever a hand went sour.

Although the cards ran his way, and at first sheer exhilaration enabled Martin to play over his own form, he could find very little pleasure in the game this evening. He did his conscientious best to think of Sally solely as a bridge-partner, and tried to obliterate from his mind the fact that in a few hours he would be taking her home and almost certainly to bed; but he didn't succeed at either one for very long at a time. As the hours crept slowly by, the sight of Sally frowning studiously over a hand tended increasingly to arouse irrelevant and distracting thoughts. And the more impatient he became for the hour when they might decently depart, the more his concentration suffered. Eve had a field-day, calling attention to his mistakes with malicious glee, but for once Martin was feeling too benign to retaliate.

Five rubbers, and it was scarcely ten-thirty. A sixth (delayed by a dispute between the Bensons over how one hand should have been bid), and it was a few minutes past eleven. Martin, who seldom had been more wide awake, doubted if he could muster a convincing yawn, and peered ostentatiously at his watch. The Bensons looked horrified, and said they must play just one more rubber. Sally looked innocent, and said that would be lovely. Martin did his best to look agreeable. The Bensons looked puzzled when Sally burst out laughing and refused to explain why.

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Inevitably the last rubber produced a series of plausible but impossible contracts, and dragged on interminably. Martin made matters worse by relaxing his concentration and letting his imagination race ahead to Sally's bedroom, with the result that he misplayed a couple of hands which would have ended the rubber then and there. By the time he pulled himself together, the cards had gone back to being contrary, and it was well after midnight before the scores were finally totaled. The Bensons had lost the vast sum of eighty cents—and of course Bill lacked the proper change. Martin suggested hopefully that the score could be carried over till the next time —but no, that would never do, and Eve vanished up the stairs in search of her purse, which was eventually located out in the kitchen.

This last delay might have done unfortunate things to Martin's good humor if Sally had not kissed him promptly as he was helping her into the car. "I thought we'd *never* get out of there," he grumbled as he settled behind the wheel and started the motor.

"So did I," she assured him.

"You tease!" he laughed. "You were the one who got us into that ghastly last rubber."

"I was just thinking of you," she said. "I know how fond of bridge you are. Besides, it would have looked odd if we'd left that early, particularly after Eve spent half an hour warning me against getting involved with you. She thinks you're cynical, untrustworthy, and too old for me—all of which means that you've been sarcastic with her much too often. But I told her you were nice."

Martin's vanity was wounded. "How old does she think I am?" he demanded of the night.

"I have no idea," Sally said. "Anyway, I told her I preferred the elderly, dignified type, so it was perfectly all right."

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"The elderly, dignified type, eh?" Martin said. In the reflection from the headlights he could see that she was looking remarkably demure. He braked the car to a stop beside the road, disengaged the gears, and pulled her to him. For a moment he kissed her hungrily and expertly; then he ran his hand down from her shoulder over the curve of one breast, firmly but without pausing, and down to the tender spot among the lower ribs. Then he tickled her mercilessly. When she was gasping for breath he let her go, reengaged the gears, and drove sedately on.

"Untrustworthy, just as Eve said," Sally muttered, and he let her have the last word for the moment. When they reached her house she asked in her politest tone if he would like to come in for a night-cap.

"I'd be delighted," he assured her, and followed her to her door.

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CHAPTER 11

"Draw the curtains," Sally said briskly. "It would never do to shock dear Dr. Finletter." Then she vanished into the bedroom.

Martin did as he was told, and then mixed a couple of light highballs and sat down on the couch. He lit a cigarette and waited quite patiently, though with some curiosity, for Sally to reappear. Marriage had not dulled the imagination of his approach to the mating-dance, nor had prostitutes diminished his appreciation of the artistry that could be brought to it. In his bachelor days he had settled on a rule-of-thumb for such moments: seduction called for a certain amount of initiative, but if the lady obviously expected to be made love to, it was better to let her establish the mood. This was not just laziness on his part. He had discovered that, except for virgins (who were never worth the bother anyway), each woman had her own private notions as to what was romantically or erotically suitable, and it was generally simpler and more satisfactory to humor her at the first encounter. Later on he could teach her better, if necessary.

Apart from its other advantages, this approach had kept his own technique from slipping into a rut.

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He found it hard to imagine what to expect from Sally. Whatever logic had led to her decision to accept him as a lover had evidently left her with no stray doubts; she seemed quite carefree in a matter-of-fact fashion, and she was obviously having a fine time with her own impish style of seductivity. It could be assumed that she had had no lover since her husband. That much was implicit in her story. She had been young at her marriage—far from the sexual maturity which she was just now entering—and it was most unlikely that her husband, with his homosexual inclination, would have been very adept as a lover. So, as far as experience went, Sally was probably still relatively innocent, and Martin instructed himself to keep to the essentials and eschew the more esoteric refinements. It was a critical step that Sally was taking, resuming a more normal life, and it was his job to make that step as simple and uncomplicated as possible. He must do nothing to startle her—

"Is that my drink?" asked Sally, materializing so suddenly that Martin jumped. It dismayed him slightly to realize how tense with anticipation he had become. "Whatever were you in such deep thought about?" she asked.

"Silly question," he said. Her shoes and stockings were gone, but she was still wearing the pale blue cashmere sweater and the darker tweed skirt. He was glad she hadn't changed, partly because he had feared the inhibiting associations of the terrycloth robe, and partly because all evening long he had been anticipating the sensual possibilities of the cashmere sweater.

He had expected her to sit down beside him, but instead she picked up her drink and wandered off to a far corner. "I'm an elderly and dignified gentleman," he reminded her, "and chasing you around the house would undoubtedly wear me out."

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"There's something I want to show you," she said, and he saw that she was fumbling in a cupboard.

She brought it to him diffidently and put it on the coffee-table before him: a reclining nude, modeled in some greenish material he was too ignorant to identify. The body was that of an ecstatic bacchante, big breasted and heavy thighed; the face was hidden by long trailing hair. The workmanship was crude, but the fleshiness and the abandoned disposition of the limbs gave a powerful impression of almost orgiastic sexuality. Martin realized, from the way Sally had presented it, that the work had some special significance for her, and that he was expected to divine it. "When did you make this?" he asked.

"When would you imagine?"

"Not too long after you got out of the hospital," he hazarded.

Sally nodded. She was sitting beside him now, her feet tucked beneath her, looking bemusedly at her own creation. Martin had no interest at all in guessing games, but knew that he was being put to a test of some sort, so he forcibly withdrew his attention from the lithe living body and focused it on the voluptuous inanimate one. There were so many personal meanings it might contain, and he wasn't feeling clever at all. "A self portrait of sorts," he offered, hoping that vagueness might be taken for profundity. "A Sally you would have preferred to the real one?" If he meant anything, it was that she might have wanted to be more passionate than she then was.

"That's it," Sally said delightedly. "You have no idea how I hated my own body then. Larry had always been so enthusiastic about its . . . boyishness. That was the adjective he had used. When I understood why—oh, how I wished I were more womanly! I'd have sold my soul for a body like that one there. Now it doesn't seem to matter so much, but I wondered if

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you'd understand. I should have known that you would."

Martin accepted the credit without shame.

"Forgive me for bringing up Larry, which wasn't very tactful," she said. "I suppose that whole business isn't as well buried as I had hoped." She leaned back, her body arching provocatively against the cushions. "Does my boyish figure attract you, Martin?"

This was heavy-handed coquettry, but Martin realized that she was trying to make up for the rebuff of the other afternoon, and in any case was not disposed to quibble. "Not because it's boyish," he said, and reached for her.

The somewhat boisterous passion of her response enchanted him, and made him want to weep for the waste of her celibate years. His own celibate months merely added zest to his ardor.

Her kisses were eager and long, and with an exciting relaxedness which had been lacking the time he had tried to make love to her and failed. Then there had been reservations based on uncertainty, even fear; now there were none. Then he had been offering caresses which she had welcomed only diffidently, until finally she had refused them; now she raked her fingers across his back in invitation for his hands to greet her breasts, and he was not backward about accepting the invitation. The cashmere sweater fully lived up to expectations, but did not last for very long. He followed her into the bedroom.

Always Martin had been extremely conscious of the technical dexterity of his love-making, the skill with which he hunted out a woman's own particular eroticisms and excited her with them, and this time was at first no exception. He had made himself into a polished practitioner of the refinements, and he delighted in the aesthetic finesse with which he performed very nearly as much as he enjoyed the pleasure

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itself. But this time, somewhere along the way, any conscious aestheticism was driven out by a joyous passion of a strength that was utterly new to him. His dexterity was none the hastier for it, but the intensity of feeling that gripped his entire being was such as he had never experienced before.

After a climax that was more gently violent and then more deeply satisfying than any he had known, he was shattered.

For a time he lay breathless and empty, drifting in the new knowledge of why some poet had applied the word "dying" to this consummate act. Then he became aware again of the one beside him in the dim light, and he was swept, to an extent that was almost physical, by waves of grateful love for the girl who had called up such passion in him, and in fragments of sentences he tried to tell her what she meant to him.

She stirred herself and rumpled his hair, kissed him. He was instantly frightened to find more tenderness in the gesture than he wished to see. Was it possible that she had not experienced an intensity of feeling comparable to his own? This touch of doubt suspended some of his joy in the moment. Hoping for reassurance, he asked.

She kissed him again and pulled his head down between her breasts, urging him to silence. But he was really alarmed now, remembering that she had never said a word about loving him. He pushed himself away. Surely she realized how much he loved her? he demanded of her. Surely she could love him no less?

"Don't be so upset, Martin," she said gently. "You have every reason to know how fond of you I am." Mutely he begged her to go on, and finally she did. "Don't you understand that I'm still afraid of any emotion stronger than that?" she asked almost sulkily. "That was what gave me the courage to come into this affair: the belief that I wouldn't have to worry about getting in over my emotional depth. I don't have

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any confidence in my ability to stand getting hurt too much. I'm very fond of you and greatly attracted by you; if I keep it at that we can enjoy our affair and when it's over I'll undoubtedly be sorry but I won't be hurt. If I let myself fall in love with you, it would be different. I'm a coward, my darling, and I'm sorry."

There was no thought of practical considerations in his mind; just the instinctive knowledge that this new-found emotion had to be shared to be experienced fully. "There's no reason why we can't get married," he said.

She nuzzled him and kissed one shoulder. "I'd probably have thought less of you if you hadn't said that," she said, "but you don't really mean it."

"I do!"

"You don't; you can't," she said. "You know that you enjoy hanging around the studio and that we go well in bed together, but you don't know me nearly well enough to be sure that you'd want me around for the rest of your life. And even if right now you think you *are* sure, I'm afraid I'm not."

"You're not what?" Martin asked.

"Not convinced that I'd want to marry you." She pushed a strand of hair back from her face. "Lord, what a time to be discussing all this! Martin, you have a streak of cruelty in you that bothers me, and so does your contempt for people you consider your inferiors. I'd have to know you a lot better than this before I could understand those qualities, or dismiss them."

Martin fell back into the shadow and stared bleakly at the ceiling. His mind was a jumble of trite emotions, uppermost of which was horror at finding that he was very close to tears.

Sally stroked his hair. "Poor dear, you look so sad and so tired. You always look tired these days." And he accepted her pity passively. "I haven't said that I can't love you or that I

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won't love you," she continued, after a moment in which Martin had brooded over the way all but the most fleeting glimpses of happiness had always seemed to elude him. "All I've said really is that right at the moment I'm not capable of anything much more than an affair. And I think that when you're less tired and upset you'll be able to forgive me for that."

In the welter of his self-pity, Martin was remembering a fragment of a line he had once heard: "I have had my hand upon the stars. . . ."

"Why don't you try to take a nap," Sally suggested. "I'll wake you in an hour."

Martin knew for a fact that he could not possibly sleep with this new calamity upon him—but he did, for sixty minutes by the clock.

"You don't look well this morning, and that's a fact." Mrs. Hodges brought this cheery information in with the grapefruit. "Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"Not especially," Martin admitted. After he had returned home, about four in the morning, his mind had been bubbling with the problems that needed to be thought out, and his efforts to postpone such thinking until the morning had been rather frantic than successful. What sleep he had gotten had been troubled by dreams of a derisive Grace, who seemed to find his various predicaments hilariously funny.

"You've been looking run down recently," Mrs. Hodges continued. "Maybe you ought to see Dr. Osborn."

"Maybe I shall," Martin said for the sake of peace. He ate his breakfast listlessly and retreated to his study for the first cigarette of the day. On the desk, in a tidy pile, lay the notes and documents for the biography of his grandfather—symbol of the contented widower's life—untouched these several

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months. Martin stared at them gloomily for a bit, contrasting the innocent days when he had last worked on them with his present tortured, feverish existence, and briefly wondered if, after all, murder had really been such a logical solution to his previous dilemmas. But there could be no profit in that speculation, and he pulled himself back to consideration of his immediate situation.

Last evening, with more than half his mind devoted to Sally, he had given no more thought to the elimination of Benson as a possible blackmailer than to regret that he had never before realized how fond of him Bill really was. Now he had to face the knowledge that without Benson, his list of suspects was reduced to two names: Sally and Agnes.

From his hiding-place in the desk he took out the two letters from the blackmailer and reread them slowly, weighing every phrase. With his present knowledge, it now seemed obvious that there was something feminine about the style: an effeminate use of words, a feline quality to the animadversions—and he wondered that he hadn't noticed it before. Moreover, come to think of it, there was some significance in the blackmailer's timid secrecy: a man would not have been so fearful about coming directly to him.

Sally or Agnes? If his life depended on it (and it easily might!) how could he be expected to be objective about such a choice? Every instinct demanded that he dismiss Sally at once and settle upon Agnes, but the much-battered remains of his intelligence protested against such an abject surrender to his emotions.

Yet it was intolerably difficult to think of Sally without dwelling on the astonishing strength of his love for her. He was still shaken from last night's experience, though he was by no means sure that he liked what had happened. There

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was something humiliating about having to understand that at his age he was really deeply in love for the first time. If he had been a decade older he would have had to wonder seriously if he were a victim of the pathetic groping for rejuvenation that could overtake even sensible men in their fifties; as it was he had to accept the fact that he had previously lacked the capacity for such intensity of feeling, and that now he had matured into a more nearly complete individual. But humiliating or not, there it was. He couldn't go backwards from it, any more than one of Sally's figurines, once it had tasted the fire, could be returned to the original clay. Discovering of what he was capable had made him, in a very real sense, incapable of being satisfied with less.

It came to him that all his life he had been reading of "grand passions" that turned a man's life upside down and shook it by the heels, and he had never really believed in their existence. Oh—among the fools, perhaps: the very young and the fast aging, the mother-seekers and the fugitives from humdrum. But not among superior people, the worldlywise-men, persons like himself: secure in their self-satisfaction. When in the lives of men he could not dismiss as fools Martin had encountered evidence of a "grand passion," he had always been a little skeptical and inclined to believe that there must have been more to the story than appeared on the surface. No one woman could have caused as much trouble as all *that*.

He was not ashamed of his skepticism, but in the light of his new understanding he was forced to abandon it.

Now it seemed reasonable to him that otherwise rational men, who had once glimpsed the happiness implicit in this rarest extreme of love, should have swum Hellesponts, fought duels, or renounced kingdoms. Such excesses now appeared

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perfectly fitting tributes to the women who had taught their lovers that they were capable of something larger than a groundling passion.

Martin still doubted the existence of "star-crossed lovers," and tended to believe that this capacity became implicit once it had been achieved: a man capable of one grand passion might be capable of several, were he fortunate enough to find several women with just the right combination of qualities to evoke such love. But the unlikelihood of this was immediately obvious. When he thought back over the women he had known, both in the social and biblical sense of the word, he realized that there had been none before Sally . . . and it was all too probably that he would live out the remainder of his life without ever encountering another.

It occurred to him that if Grace had still been alive at this moment, he would now have an infinitely more powerful—and more decent—motive for murdering her than the one which had actually animated him. This edifying line of thought was interrupted by the harsh jangle of the telephone.

"Hi," said Sally.

"Good morning," Martin replied warmly, temporarily throwing his objectivity to the winds.

"Yes, isn't it a lovely day!" Sally agreed with enthusiasm.

Martin glanced out the window and discovered, for the first time, that it *was* a lovely day: the sun was shining brightly, the air was clear and undoubtedly crisp. A blizzard might have been more in keeping with his mood.

"How are you feeling?" Sally inquired. "You seemed so tired last night."

"Everybody's been telling me how run down I look," Martin said pettishly. "I feel fine."

"I'm sorry," Sally said. "I didn't mean to sound possessive.

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It's just that I'm feeling so wonderful that I couldn't help hoping that you did too. I've been up for hours and I've got half a day's work done already."

Martin thought that was nice.

"You don't sound as enthusiastic as you might," Sally observed.

He apologized promptly; he truly did think it was superb that she'd got so much accomplished.

Her voice dropped to a more intimate key. "I realize that I was much less tactful last night than I might have been. I've been worrying that you might wake up offended at me."

He firmly denied any such smallness of nature.

"You took me rather by surprise, you know," Sally said.

Could this mean that Sally had changed her mind overnight? Martin was inclined to doubt it, but happy to give her an opportunity to say so if she had. "I took myself by surprise, too," he said, "but I meant every word of what I said." There was delicate emphasis on the last pronoun.

She overlooked the implied invitation. "When will I see you?" she asked. "That's a forward question, I know, but it's too late for me to start being coquettish all of a sudden."

In a perverse way Martin admired her all the more for facing up to his various importunities and refusing to give him words if she could not give him emotions to back them up. "Oh, I expect I'll be over some time later on," he said. "What time will you be quitting work?"

"Any time after four, I should judge."

"I'll be along. I love you, Sally." He had meant to leave it at that, but in his own ears the bald statement had a demanding sound to it, and he knew that he could do nothing but harm by pushing at her. "That was just a reaffirmation," he added hurriedly and lightly, "not a complaint of any sort. I want nothing more from you than you are eager to give."

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"You're a dear," she said softly, and hung up.

Well, if her attitude was not exactly ideal, still there was nothing in it to discourage him. Quite the contrary. He already had her affection and her interest; give her time to understand that he really meant all he had said, and time for a few more sessions in bed, and she would not find it easy to retain her serene insouciance. He felt confident of that much. He had ample grounds for being hopeful.

But did he want to be hopeful?

Supposing, just supposing, that she were the blackmailer. The thought revolted him, but it had to be faced. It was not enough to say that her conduct had been wholly inconsistent with such a possibility—in fact, that wasn't even true. He abruptly saw that there was no need to believe that Sally must be a genius at duplicity in order to be the blackmailer, not at all. It was at least conceivable that she was sincerely fond of him, perhaps halfway in love with him, and kept from going any further simply from fear that his own protestations of love were nothing but a clever ruse to lure her into revealing herself.

Martin glumly considered this ingenious theory and concluded that there was such a thing as carrying objectivity too far.

Ingenuity was all very well, but it didn't amount to a damn unless it operated on all the facts in question, and his theory had completely failed to take Sally's character into account. And however cautiously he examined what he knew of that character, every facet of it argued irresistibly against the notion that Sally might be his enemy.

There was her fierce, humorless pride in her independence. She had taken help when it was necessary to start her career, but had scrimped and pinched until every penny had been repaid. Would such a person descend to the sneakiest of im-

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moral means in order to get a little additional income?

There was her natural gentleness. Benson had commented on her inability to say unkind things, however true, about even the most dreadful people. Could such a person, even for the sake of deception, have authored the sneering viciousness of the two letters he had received?

Yet even stronger than that gentleness was the integrity which last night had kept her, even at the cost of hurting him, from so much as hinting at promises which she might not be able to keep. Could a person of such integrity have embarked on a project that was not merely criminal but cruel, underhanded, and devious?

Martin was pleased to answer all three questions with a thumping No.

And there was still another argument, more weighty than such a delicate matter as interpretation of character. Sally's story of her background had to be accepted as true: it would be too easy to check for there to have been any sense in falsifying it. Now, even if she had exaggerated her uncertainty in her emotional stability, surely anyone who had been through such an experience would be wary of emotional whirlpools forever after. It seemed unlikely that such a person would undertake the strains of a course of blackmail, and downright incredible that she would multiply those strains by getting herself involved in an affair with her victim.

Could there be a flaw anywhere in this reasoning? With heroic will-power he sustained his objectivity for five minutes longer to satisfy himself that there could not. Then he surrendered. Sally was eliminated.

As for Agnes, he could think of no argument against her being the blackmailer. She had opportunity, she might be presumed to have means, she unquestionably had motive. There was nothing in her temperament that made such a role

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unlikely, and he had long suspected her of disliking him to the extent that she disliked all the people she couldn't impose upon.

Agnes was It.

His search was over, his intelligence had triumphed as he had known all along that it would. He felt exhausted, and, oddly, less relieved than he would have expected to feel at such a moment. Perhaps he really was as run down as everybody had been telling him he looked. But if he couldn't be exultant, at least he could be confident. He could plan ahead now that there wasn't a trace of uncertainty left in his mind. Not a trace.

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CHAPTER 12

Martin glowered at the telephone. "Well, how about Thursday, then?" he asked.

"What a shame!" Agnes exclaimed, sounding perfectly cheerful. "We're tied up then, too."

Martin was exasperated. There had been no difficulty in arriving at the tentative conclusion that the most practical way to cope with Agnes was to kill her. But to do a thoroughly tidy job of it, one that would leave *no* loose ends to plague him afterwards, required that he have a much more intimate knowledge of her habits and her personal life than he now had. The simplest way out of this dilemma was to see as much of her as possible, but Agnes was refusing to cooperate.

"What about some evening next week?" he persisted.

"Next week is so muddled, you have no idea," Agnes said. "Why don't I give you a ring?"

As a target she reminded him of one of those pingpong balls which, in shooting galleries, bob maddeningly up and down on uncertain spouts of water.

"All right," he said, not knowing what else to say. But sheer nervous exhaustion made him impatient, and it seemed in-

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tolerable that she should escape him completely. "But I must see you before that," he added. "For a few minutes, anyway."

"Why?" Agnes asked.

"I have a favor to ask of you," he invented, and prayed that it wouldn't occur to her that a favor could be asked over the telephone quite as easily as face to face.

"What is it?" Agnes asked. Of course.

He hadn't even the germ of an idea. "Agnes, it's a personal matter," he said desperately.

"This is a private line," Agnes pointed out. Then she relented. "Martin, you're being a pest. But I'll be home most of this afternoon, I guess." She hung up without saying Goodbye, but that was perfectly normal.

Martin was annoyed at his own impetuosity. Now he would have to dream up some favor that he might plausibly ask of Agnes, and of a personal nature at that! It seemed a dreadful bother. On the other hand, he had gained the impression that Agnes was annoyed at him; she was doubtless nursing some fancied slight—it wouldn't be the first time—and he would take the opportunity to smooth the ground for future meetings. He must be at his most engaging. Of course, Agnes's personality was precisely calculated to undermine any man's charm, and that meant that he would have to use patience as well. In the present state of his nerves he wasn't sure that he had enough.

But he spent the following few hours soothing himself with biographies of mass-murderers who had been successful, at least to a point far beyond any that Martin expected to reach, and he arrived on the Herndon doorstep in a mood of such determined affability that not even Agnes's greeting jarred him.

"You look positively haggard," she said.

He offered up his most boyish smile and admitted that he

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wasn't at his best. "I guess I miss having Grace to look after me," he said.

Agnes grunted and remarked that she found it difficult to imagine Grace exactly looking after anyone but herself. This was one of those perceptive remarks which had originally led Martin to overrate Agnes's acuteness, until he had realized that for a woman to have a low opinion of another woman did not necessarily imply intelligence.

As soon as he was comfortably settled in the heirloom-blighted living-room, Agnes inquired the nature of the favor he had mentioned. But he was afraid that if he answered at once he would be shunted right out the door again. "Agnes," he said, smearing his voice liberally with manly charm, "I have a feeling that you're avoiding me. Have I offended you in any way?"

Every other woman in Alden Park would have thrown out a preliminary denial or two, but not Agnes. "Of course you've offended me," she said. "You've been going around making fun of Lizzie Hudderfield."

Martin's mind reeled. Leaving aside the mystery of how Agnes's own attitude had taken such a somersault, how was he going to wriggle out of this one with all of his charm intact? He tried looking abashed.

"I realize that she's ridiculous in some respects," Agnes continued severely, "but she's a loyal and generous friend, and it's a rudeness to me to make fun of her behind my back."

With a little effort the abashment became contrition.

"She's taken a great liking to Tommy," Agnes added. Tommy was the Herndon offspring, in the most repellent stage of adolescence. Martin mentally gave Mrs. Hudderfield credit for having achieved the impossible. "She's invited him out to their ranch in Texas for all of next summer."

Now everything was clear, and Martin conceded to himself

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that Agnes's volte-face was a small price to pay for the prospect of being rid of Tommy for an entire summer. He apologized long and effusively for his indiscretion, and eventually Agnes seemed mollified. Certainly her manner was friendlier when she inquired again about the favor he had to ask of her.

"I've come across a trunk in the attic full of Grace's things," he said. "Winter clothes, and I don't know what all. I wish you'd go through it for me and decide what should be done with them." It was the best he had been able to improvise, and quite untrue. Fortunately, there were still some of Grace's clothes in the back of one of the storage closets, and if necessary he could stuff them into one of the attic trunks, though how he would explain such conduct to Mrs. Hodges he could not imagine.

"But why were you in such a rush?" Agnes asked. "That could be done any time."

"It's been weighing on my mind," he said, coating the absurdity of the statement with earnestness of voice.

Agnes said that she would attend to the matter the first chance she got, in a fashion that offered no hope for the next six months; and that she supposed he'd like a cocktail, in a fashion that indicated that there was no scotch in the house.

Since this was as close to hospitality as Agnes came between her semi-annual parties, Martin accepted with pleasure. Now that he had accomplished his first objective, reestablishing more cordial relations, he was studying Agnes closely, snatching up every unconsidered trifle. Her nicotine-stained fingers reminded him that she was a chain smoker, her hair that she must have it touched up with some frequency. A pair of glasses in the book she had been reading when he arrived suggested that she was far-sighted, which he hadn't known before.

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Exactly what he was going to do with such details as these he did not know or care; his only aim was to collect every possible scrap of information about her that he could. He was quite proud of the unobtrusiveness of his scrutiny until, just as he was filing away the news that she put too much vermouth in a martini, she asked nervously why he was staring at her like that.

Thinking quickly, he said that he had been admiring the little buddha on the table just behind her. Agnes looked at him oddly, and he had to keep a straight face and pretend he'd forgotten that he and Grace had given her the ugly thing just a few Christmases back. Shortly after that he decided that it was time to leave.

Before he went he made another attempt to set up an engagement, but either the week to come really was in a muddle or Agnes was still not feeling that friendly. Or, most likely of all, she simply preferred to see as little of him as possible. Undoubtedly that was it. It was natural, when he came to think of it, that a blackmailer's social relations with his victims should differ from a murderer's.

This was a depressing thought, since it meant that his visit had not accomplished much of anything. Feeling that he needed to be cheered up, he went straight to Sally's, only to find Dennis already ensconced there and sipping a highball at a rate that would keep him for hours. Though with no real optimism, Martin stayed till his vile mood began creeping up toward the surface. Then, fearing that if he behaved badly Sally might believe that he was sulking on her account, he pleaded a headache and went home.

A full week would have to go by before he properly could renew his assault on Agnes's social life. Impatience was nag-

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ging at him; he could not possibly wait that long to continue his research into her habits.

Martin's compulsion towards making an intimate collection of the minutiae of Agnes's life was motivated only secondarily by hope of turning up some weak point by which she might be attacked. This was important, of course—it would be ridiculously short-sighted to prepare a poisoned cocktail for a teetotaler—but even more important was the need to reduce Agnes, as quickly as possible, from a human being to a specimen of study. Only when this was accomplished could he really begin to think of her as a prospective victim. Psychologically speaking, the cold-blooded killing of a fellow creature was an ugly business, and the only way to keep from being brutalized in the process was to convince oneself that the victim was something less than human. Soldiers might whip themselves into the belief that the enemy was a species of vermin, fit only for extermination; the civilian murderer, in peaceful social contact with his enemy, had to find a more complex form of self-deception. To the extent that he was sensitive, Martin was a humane and well-meaning individual; he could not think (except tentatively in the suburbs of his conscious mind) of killing his acquaintance, Agnes Herndon. But from experience he knew that intimate inspection would transform her into a walking collection of neuroses, habits, frailties, small cruelties and petty sins. Then she would be something less than human which could fittingly be subtracted from the world; in short, a victim.

The sooner this could be achieved, the better. If Agnes inconsiderately was going to be reluctant to cooperate, then he would have to learn as much as he could without her help. For a moment he toyed with the idea of trailing her about for a day or two. The thought of the discomforts involved,

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now that winter was upon them, hastened his conclusion that Alden Park was so thinly populated that she would become suspicious within half an hour. That idea would have to be saved as a last resort.

So he would have to work through people who knew Agnes in one fashion or another. He started off by calling on the Bensons, partly because it seemed easiest, and partly because today was Sunday and tomorrow Bill would be going down to college.

It was simple enough to raise the subject of Agnes: he merely told of her annoyance at him, and its cause. This brought down on him another lecture from Bill to the effect that Agnes was probably just getting back at him for the way he had undoubtedly treated *her*. "With people you hold in contempt," Bill said, "you are never more than half as polite as you think you are." Apart from this, Bill contributed nothing except his opinion that Agnes looked more attractive in slacks than most women her age, an item which Martin did not consider helpful to his cause.

For a moment, wonder of wonders, it seemed as if Eve might be more useful: at least she made another cryptic remark about Agnes's mistreatment of Wally, but then stopped short.

"I wish you'd either explain that or leave it alone," Martin said invitingly.

Typically, Eve did neither. Instead, she rattled for a while about what the ideal marriage should be like, implying delicately along the way that Martin could have been a more affectionate husband. Since it seemed late in the day for such advice, he flattened Eve with a sarcasm (Bill being out of the room) and left. But at least she had served to remind him that he must lose no time in cultivating a stronger friendship with

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Agnes's husband. It was easy to discount anyone as sweet as Wally, but certainly he could be a mine of information if properly handled.

So the rest of the afternoon he spent at the Club, playing adventurous and costly bridge, and being expansively cordial to Wally, somewhat to that gentleman's innocently pleased surprise.

He spent the evening with Sally. She glanced at him worriedly a few times when he first arrived, but she made no comment on his appearance, for which he was grateful. Now that she was no longer suspect, he could relax with her as much as he could relax at all these days, and he didn't want to be reminded of the strain he was under. Apart from her solicitude for what she probably thought a temporary insomnia, Sally fortunately seemed oblivious to that strain. Conscious as he was of the feverish anxieties and tortuous plottings of the last few months, it seemed almost incredible that he should still give her the impression of a carefree and somewhat frivolous widower. Yet that was how she treated him: as the ideal partner for a casual love affair.

The following morning he forced himself to face the knowledge that there might be all sorts of information about Agnes to be gleaned from the village tradespeople. It was a distasteful thought. His background had made him adept in his dealings with people whose vocation was service and whose avocation was accepting bribes: headwaiters and the like. But he had always done as little of his own shopping as possible, and had never settled on a satisfactory approach for independent shopkeepers whose stock in trade was tangible merchandise. He wavered between haughtiness and an artificial camaraderie, and was invariably the last to be waited on.

Yet now he had to go out and somehow conjure up an atmosphere of good-fellowship that would induce self-respect-

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ing tradespeople to gossip about another customer. All that kept him from conceding defeat in advance was his innate conviction that a superior person could do *anything* he set his mind to. Nevertheless he frittered away the morning in procrastinations and nostalgic reflections on the relative convenience of confining murder to one's own household.

But after lunch he went down to the village, with determination if no enthusiasm. He started with the bookstore, where at least he was well known. The rental-library section was happily untended, and he got a peek at Agnes's card. Aside from murder mysteries she seemed to read only historical romances of the sort where the plot was a mere mechanism to provide the hero, every fifty pages or so, with a new wench, each with a more awe-inspiring bosom than the last. Martin filed this taste away as evidence of Agnes's general expendability.

Then he sat in the car for some time, staring at the drugstore. He would have liked to know if the Herndons were in the habit of using sleeping-pills in any quantity, but was there any plausible way to lure a pharmacist into disclosing such information? Martin could think of none, unless the pharmacist were uncommonly talkative. But it was worth a try, so he went into the store. The pharmacist seemed talkative enough: he and an equally articulate friend were explaining to one another how one of last summer's baseball games ought to have been played. Martin stalled for time with a rootbeer he didn't want, but when he gave up in disgust and left the game had still only reached the fifth inning.

Ten harrowing minutes in the confectioner's elicited the fascinating datum that Agnes bought a pound of assorted gumdrops every other week. Martin had been prepared to study up on poisons if necessary, but was easily discouraged by the thought that there was no practical method of tamper-

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ing with a gumdrop. He purchased a small box of chocolates he didn't want, and left.

In the liquor store he was known, by name at least, as a good customer, and the proprietor seemed disposed to be chatty. Martin ordered several bottles of a more expensive scotch than usual, and then, with vague mention of an impending party, wondered what Mrs. Herndon's taste in whisky might be.

"That one!" said the proprietor disgustedly. "She buys her stuff by the case from one of the big department stores in town. She never orders from me unless she runs out of something unexpectedly. Then it's 'Dear Mr. Burrows, could you send me a bottle of vermouth and have it here in half an hour?' How does she expect me to stay in business that way?"

Martin didn't know the answer so he looked sympathetic.

"Sure, she gets it a few dollars cheaper than I can sell it," Mr. Burrows continued. "But how would she like it if she ran out of vermouth some time and called up and I wasn't here because I'd been forced to close down my store and move away because all of my customers used me just in emergencies like she does?"

Martin made a small horrified noise.

"That attitude is a real problem for we merchants in the village," said Mr. Burrows. "Is anything wrong, Mr. Pryor?"

"Nothing," said Martin hastily, and warned himself sternly that he would never become popular with tradespeople if he permitted himself to wince at every lapse in grammar. But in the case of Mr. Burrows, the problem was not to get him to talk, but to keep to the point. Or even to stop talking. Twice Martin dragged Agnes back into the conversation, and twice Mr. Burrows used her as a springboard for denouncing the inconsiderateness that the residents of Alden Park displayed toward the local merchants. The subject seemed to have an

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endless fascination for the man. Forty-five minutes went by before Martin was rescued by the arrival of another customer, and when he left he knew no more about Agnes's drinking habits than when he went in.

He returned home exhausted. He had been intending to spend the evening with Sally, but after dinner he called her up and said he wouldn't be coming over after all. This time the headache wasn't fictitious.

Abandoning the shopkeepers for the time being, Martin spent the next few days concentrating on Wally Herndon. Like most good-natured people with no aggressiveness to speak of, Wally was taken for granted rather than courted: everybody loved him, but rarely did anyone pay him much attention. Martin's sudden, hot-house cordiality might have surprised him, but he accepted it happily and unsuspectingly. No thought of an ulterior motive would ever occur to him, for any favor in his power to grant needed merely a simple request. He might also have been surprised by Martin's interest in hearing so much about Agnes, but Wally was quietly very fond of his odd, crotchety wife, and perfectly content to talk about her as long as anyone would listen . . . and there was no bridge game he could cut into. Martin's collection of useless information about Agnes grew apace. Moreover, he was surprised to find that, in a slow-thinking fashion, Wally was much more intelligent than he had ever given him credit for.

But all that he learned from Wally came piecemeal, for Wally could not be kept from his beloved cards for very long at a time. These days Martin found it impossible to concentrate on the game for more than a rubber or two, and often wandered around the Club, chatting with any of the members who seemed at loose ends, and turning the conversation to

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Agnes whenever it could be done without straining. Sometimes he learned something, as when Alec Frobisher contributed a hint that the Herndon finances were in even worse shape than usual. Sometimes he was rebuffed, as when he wondered to Gerald Marshall why Agnes had lost her enthusiasm for golf, and it was pointed out to him that it was none of their business. Sometimes he was just confused, as when he tackled Dr. Finletter on the subject of some church matter that Agnes was supposed to be involved with. Dr. Finletter admitted vaguely that she did take an interest in some of his little projects, and then—with a wealth of aimless gesture—proceeded to regale Martin with an evidently hilarious but wholly incomprehensible anecdote about how Agnes hadn't known who wrote the Apocrypha.

Martin was just about to set out for the Club on Thursday when he remembered that Mrs. Hodges's sister sometimes dropped in on Mrs. Hodges on Thursday afternoons for a visit. Mrs. Hodges's sister was a laundress, and one of the people she worked for was Agnes. Without giving the matter any further thought, Martin headed for the kitchen. That was a mistake.

In the first place, the kitchen was distinctly Mrs. Hodges's province, and he had always been encouraged to feel like an alien whenever he invaded it.

In the second place, he had completely forgotten Mrs. Hodges's sister's name. But by the time he realized this he was already in the kitchen and the sister was regarding him with bright, inquisitive eyes.

"Was there something you wanted, sir?" Mrs. Hodges asked coldly.

He ignored her. "Ah, there; how are you?" he said to the sister. He had meant his voice to be hearty and cordial, but by some miscalculation it came out sounding so patronizing

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that the only possible reply would have been a deep curtsy. Thoroughly flustered, he turned on Mrs. Hodges, thanking fortune that he had an honest grievance. "I can't find my cigarette lighter anywhere," he told her. "Could you have tucked it away?"

Mrs. Hodges said she hadn't seen it, and marched away with the confident air of a woman who knows she can find something in the very spot a man has searched most carefully.

Turning back to the sister, Martin tried to undo his lord-of-the-manor approach with his most genial smile. "Well," he said, "I expect there's a lot less work at the Herndons' now that Tommy's gone back to school."

"Guests," said the sister darkly. "That woman from Texas. Cold cream all over the face towels."

"What a nuisance," he said sympathetically. "How is Mrs. Herndon to work for?"

"Same as all the rest," was the reply.

"Just as fussy as all of them, eh?" Martin said understandingly, showing that he could imagine the problems of a laundress.

"None of them have any call to be fussy about *my* work," retorted the sister, showing that he couldn't.

"I'm sure they haven't," Martin agreed. He didn't feel that he was making any real progress, but he wasn't ready to give up trying. "I imagine that Mrs. Herndon can be pretty sarcastic when she wants to be, though," he suggested.

"So can I," said Mrs. Hodges's sister, and Martin was completely routed. He smiled at her in polite silence, and was hard put to it to keep the smile fixed in place till Mrs. Hodges returned. She was empty-handed, but looking not in the least abashed.

"I can't find it anywhere," she said so accusingly that Martin instantly realized that he must have left the lighter at

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Sally's. He admitted that he might have mislaid it himself, and fled for a more congenial climate.

As expected, the lighter was at Sally's; she tossed it to him as he arrived that evening, and told him to take back his gold. "I'll bet Grace gave you that," she added. Martin admitted this was so. "I didn't think your own taste in lettering would be quite *that* flossy."

If there was a touch of cattiness in that remark, it was all the comfort he got that evening. Sally was gay, was entertaining, was relaxing, and eventually was passionate, but never did she manifest a sign of anything deeper than her normal, casual affection. Martin was discovering that unrequited love could be quite painful; the last time he had encountered it, it had been only boring and uncomfortable, but then he had been at the other end.

She hadn't been an especially attractive girl; Martin had added her to his collection solely because some undiscriminating idiot had said that she was frightfully good in bed. That hadn't been true, but she had been so eager to learn that he'd continued as her lover for several weeks—and she'd repaid him by falling wildly in love with him. He'd tried to be sympathetic and gentle, but patience with foolishness had never been one of his virtues; she had made the most dreadful scenes, and finally had even tried to pretend that she was pregnant. It had all been so tedious and distasteful, at the time.

But now it seemed to him that his gentleness had been merely the tolerance of indifference, and his sympathy simple courtesy; and he wished that he had been more understanding. Loving so much could be very like a sickness; if the cure was not available, sincere affection was at least a palliative, though a less and less satisfactory one as time went by, as he was finding out.

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The following afternoon he scored a major triumph, and one that proved wonderfully fruitful: when the dinner hour approached, and the bridge session broke up, he persuaded Wally to stop by for a drink on his way home. Twice before Martin had made the same suggestion, hoping for a stretch of uninterrupted conversation, and both times Wally had declined on the grounds that Agnes expected him home for a before-dinner cocktail. Today, however, he welcomed the invitation.

But with the impatient lack of foresight that was marring most of his efforts these days, Martin had failed to prepare specific avenues of exploration, and the conversation drifted aimlessly. The precious opportunity was slipping away and nothing was being accomplished. It was only because he was growing desperate that Martin chanced to think of anything so elementary as the fact of Wally's presence.

"Did you and Agnes have a fight?" Martin asked.

"Heavens, no," Wally said. "Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"Your not rushing straight home to have cocktails with her."

"Oh, she's probably not back yet," Wally explained. "She's taken to vanishing on her own a couple of days a week. She tells me she's taking lessons in something, but won't say in what until she finds out whether she's any good."

Listening to this ingenuous statement. Martin had great difficulty concealing both his contempt and his excitement. Unless he had misjudged Agnes's character completely, the last thing in the world she'd be interested in was improving herself or acquiring new talents. She had a secret of some sort, and he would have been willing to bet it was a love affair. At last he was on to something really important!

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CHAPTER 13

Now that he had something specific to hunt for, his mind seemed to be working with its old clarity, and he was buoyed up by an elated hopefulness. "Twice a week," Wally had said. Friday was one of the days, and Martin cast his mind back for another evening Wally had been in no hurry to get home. Tuesday. Tuesday they had sat chatting in the Club bar for fully half an hour after the afternoon bridge session had broken up; that was what had given Martin the idea of inviting Wally home for a drink.

So next Tuesday afternoon he would follow Agnes wherever she went, and learn her secret. The risk of discovery would have to be taken, and that was all there was to it. Martin was confident that he was on the trail of something significant.

But first Saturday, Sunday and Monday had to be lived through somehow or other. Martin was in a fever of impatience. He gave up all his prying, and devoted himself entirely to Sally. By Monday she had grown irritable at having him underfoot all the time, and they quarreled. It was a pointless flare-up and should have ended in quick, sweet apologies, but Sally chose to take offense at the manner of his apology. "You

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aren't sorry at all," she told him, "you're just tired of the argument and want to be friends again."

This would have been an accurate description of almost every other apology he had made in his life, but didn't happen to be true in this case. Martin felt the victim of a lifetime of insincerities, and went home sulking. In the evening they made up by telephone.

Tuesday produced a light, steady snowfall. At first Martin feared this would make his task harder, but as soon as he was out in the car, and saw how quickly the rear window was obscured, he realized that the snow minimized any chance that Agnes would notice that she was being followed.

Wally habitually arrived at the Club at a little after two o'clock; by a quarter before the hour Martin was parked in a spot where he could watch the Herndon driveway. At two precisely Wally drove off in the antiquated sedan; exactly half an hour later Agnes appeared in the relatively newer, powder-blue roadster. Martin had assumed that she would turn left, toward the village, but instead she turned right and shot past him. He was forced to make an agitated U-turn and then race so as not to lose sight of her. As successive turns took them further and further from the village, Martin became increasingly puzzled as to where she might be heading, till suddenly he realized that there was only one possibility left, and fell back. At the very back of the Chernet estate there was a small summerhouse; its seclusion was ideal for a lovers' meeting-place, but Martin shivered involuntarily at the thought of how cold it must be in the present weather.

Only one road led to the cottage. There was some danger that he might be sandwiched between Agnes's car and that of the arriving lover, but Martin relied on the conviction that even the least chivalrous gentleman would make a point of being first at any assignation.

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He stopped a quarter of a mile short of the cottage and went the rest of the way on foot. He had forgotten rubbers, of course, and his shoes were not meant for such abuse and quickly soaked through; the icy wind nipped at him and whisked away his hat. He stumbled through the snow in pursuit of it, captured it finally, and stuffed it into his pocket. His head froze.

But there were two cars parked in front of the cottage; there was that much to be thankful for, and no more. Martin didn't recognize the second car, and that meant that he would have to get a glimpse into the cottage.

It was a revolting prospect. The thought of himself darting across the clearing like some awkward, over-grown boy engaged in playing Indian, and then spying on a couple of middle-aged lovers, seemed to him the acme of humiliation. But it had to be done, and quickly. The sky seemed to be getting lighter, and he was counting on the snow to cover his traces.

He knew, roughly, the lay-out of the cottage, and could deduce where the pair would be; he approached from the opposite side. Fighting down his self-consciousness, he glided hurriedly across the few yards of clearing and hugged himself against the damp wall. Then, slowly, he began to circle the house. There were windows, and to be quite safe he had to crawl under them on hands and knees. His overcoat kept getting in the way, and suffered so that Martin despaired of being able to account to Mrs. Hodges for the damage.

Finally, though, he reached the window he had selected as his vantage point, and with great caution he peered in, prepared to turn and run if he were noticed. But he needn't have feared—they were oblivious to everything but one another. Amid the shrouded summer furniture they stood, still huddled in their heavy coats, hugging like a couple of young innocents

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reunited after a long separation. The man was Gerald Marshall. Martin's only surprise was at himself, for not having guessed it. He crept away, unwilling to add to his sins by witnessing any greater intimacies.

By the time he reached the car he was sneezing fitfully, and he raced for home and a hot bath. Luck was with him, and he got upstairs without being seen by Mrs. Hodges. While the tub was running he hid his wet, bedraggled clothes and ruined shoes in the back of the guest-room closet, where there was some chance of their remaining hidden until he decided what to do about them.

The hot water gradually restored him to a point where he could think coherently about something besides his own discomfort. Agnes and Gerald: there was something rather pathetic about that coupling. Each was a misfit in Alden Park, though for different reasons: Agnes because of her temperament, and Gerald because of his background. He had never completely adapted; men never did when marriage alone lifted them too far from their early environment. Women did. You could take a girl from the slums, drop her into the most exclusive society, and within a year, given any kindness at all, she would have made herself indistinguishable from the other women in her set. But not a man. Whether men were naturally prouder, or just less flexible, Martin had never been able to decide.

Two misfits, then, joining forces in a secret little scramble for happiness, each gaining some sort of strength or security from the other. Yet try as he might, Martin could not be contemptuous, for even the brief glimpse he'd had of them had shown that, for the moment at least, they were sublimely, blissfully contented in their love.

Oh, he could tell himself that theirs was a small, sordid love; that half its pleasure derived from the adventure of furtive-

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ness; that their love-making was doubtless inferior to his, and their joy a trifle compared to that which he was capable of. But none of these arguments prevailed against the simple fact that they were happy, and he was not.

He envied them, that was the truth of it. These days his own love was as much a pain as a pleasure.

"I *thought* you were coming down with something," Sally declared as soon as she saw him that evening.

"I do *not* have a cold," Martin said firmly, and sneezed four times in rapid succession.

"Of course you do," Sally said impatiently. "You were an idiot to come out on a night like this. Haven't you any sense at all?"

Martin meekly supposed not, and tried to gain some credit by suggesting that he had been irresistibly drawn to her, but she was not to be appeased so easily.

"I'd like to put you to bed and keep you there for a day or two," she said, "but I can just imagine Dr. Finletter's expression when he woke up and saw your car still out in front. Yet it's just wicked to let you go out again." She glared at him crossly. "What a muddle you can make of things. Honestly, you need someone to look after you." Then she looked appalled at what she'd said, and went off in confusion to fix him a drink.

He was delighted by her possessiveness. In spite of having caught cold—and it was a very slight cold, at that—this was unquestionably one of his luckiest days. He hadn't felt so confident of himself in months. At long last things were going his way, and Sally, too, was beginning to come around. He felt sure that with a little time, and the peace of mind to woo her properly, he could break down her reserve and persuade her to let herself love him as he knew she could. Anything was

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possible now, even marriage. After all, why not?

If he had not again mentioned the subject of marriage to Sally, if was only secondarily out of a strategic fear of seeming to push at her. As soon as he had been capable of rational thought on the subject, he had come to see that for the sake of Sally's mental health alone marriage was out of the question until the matter of Agnes was disposed of for good. The blackmail situation was potentially too dangerous. He hated to think of what might happen if Sally did marry him, and then discovered that her second husband was a murderer. As long as even the remotest possibility of this existed, it would be unthinkably cruel of him to urge her to get too deeply involved with him.

He had been astonished to find that he was capable of such unselfish thinking. That had certainly never been true before. But it was true now: he could put Sally's interests ahead of his own desires and be sincerely convinced that that was the way things ought to be. It was a refreshing change.

Still, as he had always suspected, unselfish thinking had its drawbacks. To his instinctive dislike of murder had been added the knowledge that killing Agnes would greatly prolong his period of danger, for then he would have to feel entirely secure from suspicion in her death as well as Grace's before he could make a move. And he recalled all too distinctly that he had felt secure for two whole months last time, and been proved mistaken.

All this had been most discouraging, and doubtless had contributed to his depression of the last week.

But now, *now* he could fight fire with fire: to Agnes's blackmail he could answer with blackmail of his own. He could make her surrender her evidence against him with the threat of exposing her affair with Gerald. Could she refuse? Could she throw away such happiness as he had seen on her face that

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afternoon for the sake of a revenge that would gain her nothing? She could not, he was positive. In fact, once she realized that she had been found out, she would probably be only too glad to call it quits. And he would be free, at last.

Martin had all he could do to keep from bubbling over with joy. In between sneezes he told Sally all about his old days in New York, and never, so it seemed, had he been wittier or more amusing. The one drink she permitted him went straight to his head; he was gay, relaxed, flirtatious—and very much put out when Sally firmly declined to let him make love to her. He accused her of being afraid of a few friendly little germs and was told that even if he wanted to make himself sicker he could expect no cooperation from her. And long before midnight he was bundled up and sent home to bed.

In the morning his cold seemed better, and with a relatively clear head Martin faced the very last of his problems: how to bring about a private meeting with Agnes. He took it for granted that she would frustrate any attempt to arrange such a meeting in advance, and that made it difficult. Then it occurred to him that if yesterday could be regarded as typical, when she was meeting Gerald Agnes left the house half an hour after Wally did. Presumably the interval was to allow for the possibility that Wally might turn back for a forgotten cigarette-case. Agnes would surely be alone in this interval, and her eagerness to be off to her lover would make this an ideal time in which to confront her. In her impatience to be rid of him she would be less apt to toy, even momentarily, with the undeniable fact that her weapons were stronger than his.

At first he thought that meant waiting until Friday, and then he remembered that the next day, Thursday, was the date of the Club's monthly duplicate tournament. Wally had never been known to miss one, and none had ever been known

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to finish before seven in the evening, much to the exasperation of non-participating wives and husbands. Martin thought it scarcely conceivable that Agnes and Gerald would fail to take advantage of such a perfect opportunity to snatch an extra meeting. So he would only have to wait until tomorrow, and even that much delay would have seemed unbearable if he had not been almost manic with elation and self-confidence.

Although the weather forecast talked of more snow on the way, the evening was mild, and he took his improved self over to Sally's without fear of reproach. He announced that he had spent the entire day in bed being looked after by Mrs. Hodges, which wasn't entirely true but which served to satisfy Sally's feminine notions about how a cold should be treated. He himself believed that if one ignored a cold it would go away, and eventually it always did.

They chatted companionably about Sally's work, about Alden Park, about how dull most of the local parties were compared to the Bensons'. (Martin made a mental note to call Bill the very next evening and reassure him that the Benson savings would not have to vanish into Wall Street's greedy maw after all.) He found himself talking about the biography of his grandfather, and was surprised to find that either neglect had fertilized the project or some of Sally's industry had rubbed off on him. He was now thinking of making the biography into an intimate study of local state politics of the time; as far as he knew, nothing of the sort had been done before. Of course, probably nobody would want to publish such a book, but if it turned out well he might have a few hundred copies printed up and give them to libraries and friends. Some historian might even get a footnote out of it some time.

Sally appeared intrigued by the idea, and Martin, who had been making most of it up as he went along, became more and more enthusiastic as the possibilities multiplied even as he

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talked. It really might be a lot of fun to have something like that to work on.

This evening Sally's concern for the state of his health was more formal than determined. In the love-making that ensued Martin felt younger and more vital than he had in years, and he sensed that a whole new life was opening up before him, filled with fascinating new horizons.

He spent the following morning in bed, as the best place to ignore a cold that was appreciably worse. It was a filthy day outside, with a nasty, gusty wind to agitate the naked trees. About noon the snow began again, and Martin brooded about triumphing over Agnes only to contract pneumonia in the process. He consoled himself with the popular conviction, doubtless no more accurate than most, that nowadays it was easier to cure pneumonia than to cure a common cold, and tottered downstairs to peck at his lunch.

He played hopefully with the idea that he had a fever, and discovered that he did: nearly one whole degree. Even after that, what finally drove him into getting dressed was only the suspicion that whereas pneumonia might not kill him, suspense surely would.

Today the snow was heavier than last time: from his parking spot he could barely make out the driveway. The car heater was working energetically, and he had to wipe the windshield every few seconds to keep it from fogging over. It seemed as if Wally would never come out, but finally, after an interminable fifteen minutes, the old sedan slewed out of the driveway and set off briskly toward the village.

His crisis was at hand, and Martin didn't feel in the least prepared for it. His hands were sweaty, he felt lightheaded, and nowhere in him could he find a trace of the ruthless confidence he wanted to impress upon Agnes. He told himself

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that this was nothing but stage-fright, and that he would be perfectly cool when he came face to face with her. With hands that were not entirely steady he put the car in gear, entered the driveway and stalled the motor in front of the house.

Between the driver's seat and the front door he rehearsed his plans one frantic last time. He knew the door would be unlatched; he would walk right in without pausing to ring, and on into the living-room. Agnes would look up startled, and say something cutting about his rudeness. He would gaze at her with cold hostility, and say, "Never mind that, Agnes; we have business to discuss. I believe you have some pictures of me that I'd prefer not to have lying around." Would she deny it? He'd brush away her denials with withering contempt. Would she be frightened? He'd assure her calmly that she had nothing to fear, that he only wanted to make a little bargain with her. But beyond that point he could not plan; everything would depend on the way Agnes reacted. Besides, the front door was at hand.

He walked in without pausing to ring, and on into the living-room.

"How nice of you to drop by," Wally said hoarsely. "How did you know I was sick?"

With a frustration and a fury which he strove to keep from reaching his face Martin stared at Wally—in pyjamas and bathrobe, with a blanket around his feet, stretched out on the sofa with a mountain of pillows propping him up. His nose was red and his eyes were runny. On the table beside him were a box of tissues, an atomizer, pills of three different colors, and a glass of orange juice. Stunned though he was, Martin was able to make the deduction that Wally had an even worse cold than his own.

"Sit down, Martin," Wally urged. "You don't look so well yourself."

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Martin sat down; it was easier than continuing to stand.

"Oh, take off your coat," Wally fussed. "Otherwise you'll get a terrible chill when you go out again."

Martin did as he was told. The reaction from the horrible strain and the still more horrible let-down had set in, and he was capable of nothing more than passive obedience.

"Right up till this morning I hoped that I wouldn't have to miss the tournament," Wally rattled on hoarsely. "Alec was to have been my partner, and I think we stood a good chance of winning. I just sent Agnes along so he wouldn't be without a partner."

Now Martin understood the angry swerve the sedan had made coming out of the driveway. She'd have been furious at missing her tryst with Gerald.

"How did you find out I was sick?" Wally persisted.

Forced to respond, Martin mumbled that he guessed someone at the Club had told him.

Wally thought that was odd. He'd talked to Alec just yesterday, and Alec had said that he hadn't seen Martin in nearly a week. "I supposed you were spending most of your time with Sally," Wally said, with a jovial wink.

The knowledge that by now half of Alden Park must be aware of his infatuation found Martin surprisingly indifferent. He was trying to resign himself to the bitter understanding that it might be days and days before he had a chance to be alone with Agnes, and was finding it difficult.

Wally gave up worrying about how Martin had learned of his illness and expatiated for a while on Martin's sweetness in coming to see him, especially as he seemed to have a slight cold of his own. Martin made a half-hearted effort to look as if visiting the ailing were just a normal part of his routine.

If Wally found it strange that he should be entertaining his visitor, rather than the other way about, he gave no sign of it

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and continued to prattle away contentedly. He patted the book lying face down on his belly and told Martin that Agnes had found him a wonderful new bridge book to keep him amused. "The most fascinating hands I've ever come across," he said in a moist whisper, and proceeded to describe them.

The trouble was, Martin decided, that all his confidence had been based upon suppositions that *this* was true and that *that* would work. However valid the suppositions might appear, there was no real security until they were proven true and the damning evidence was safely up in smoke. There was no more real reason for his present black depression than there had been for his excessive elation of the past couple of days. Nothing had been changed—just postponed for a while. He simply could not afford any more of these wild emotional ups and downs; somehow he would have to pull himself together and keep on an even keel until this ghastly business was over and done with.

As Wally's voice became huskier and fainter, Martin realized that he would have to begin his campaign of self-discipline by playing out his role of the cheering visitor. With nothing to go on but the fact that Wally had been babbling on about bridge, Martin said the first thing that came into his head: "Maybe those lessons Agnes is taking are to make her into an expert at bridge."

"Not at bridge," Wally said with a wheezy chuckle.

"I thought you had no idea what they were all about."

"Are you teasing me?" Wally asked. "Don't tease me, Martin. You know perfectly well that Agnes isn't taking any lessons."

Martin felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "*What?*" he squeaked.

Perturbed pale eyes studied him. "Didn't you know?" Wally asked. "I shouldn't have said that, then. I thought everybody

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knew by now. People have been hinting at me for weeks about Agnes's affair with Gerald."

So it was common gossip, and he hadn't heard a word of it! But of course he wouldn't: people never gossiped with him. . . .

Painfully Wally hoisted his bulk up on to one elbow and stared at Martin with pleading eyes. "Promise me you won't say a word about this," he said with desperate earnestness. "You must promise me that, Martin. When people hint at me I pretend not to understand. Because the important thing is that Agnes mustn't find out that I know. You can understand that. It would be a terrible, terrible blow to her if she ever found out that I know, and she has a frightfully weak heart."

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CHAPTER 14

Martin was concentrating so intently on trying to figure out whether there was anything to be salvaged from his plan to threaten Agnes with exposure that a moment went by before the sense of Wally's last statement reached through to his understanding. "Agnes has *what?*" he demanded.

"Heart trouble."

This last shock seemed almost more than he could bear; he prodded at it fearfully. "Badly?" he asked.

Wally nodded. "Very badly. With no stairs, no strain of any sort, she might last another few years. Or she might go tomorrow, just like that. You can see why I want her to have all the happiness she can possibly find."

Martin was afraid he could see a great deal more than that. "How long has Agnes known of this?" he asked, still searching for a straw to clutch at.

"A little over a year," Wally said bewilderedly. "Why?"

No stairs, no strain of any sort . . . meant no climbing of steep little hills just to take a few photographs. It was as simple as that.

From a great distance away Wally croaked, "Martin, what's the matter? You're as white as a sheet!"

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Painfully, refusing to let himself think of anything at all but the necessity of getting away from there at once, Martin fought down his dizziness. With numb, mechanical movements he stood up and tried to struggle into his overcoat, but the effort was too complicated and he draped the coat over his shoulders. With numb, mechanical voice he spoke his little speech: "I had no idea Agnes was so ill; I'm sorry, very sorry, to hear it. It—it's come as rather a shock and I guess I'm not feeling very well. You'll forgive me if I run along." And he made his way toward the door.

From behind him came Wally's wheezy, pleading voice: "Promise me you won't say a word to anyone. Promise me, Martin!"

He steadied himself against the doorjamb and turned to look back at the now hateful fat man, wallowing prayerfully on the sofa. "Never fear," Martin said as tonelessly as he could, and then went on.

The chill, gusty wind whipped at his hair, reminding him that he had left his hat inside. No matter. The awkward location of his overcoat made it difficult for him to get into the car, but he managed it finally in small, grave movements. With detached hands he felt at his pockets till he located the car keys. After several failures the motor caught, and he drove down the driveway and turned unsteadily onto the road.

But within a hundred yards he had to stop the car, roll down the window and gulp in the icy air to fight off the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. He had begun to think again, and the first thought that had come to him was that he so easily might have murdered Agnes in all innocence, and only another letter from the blackmailer would have shown him his ghastly mistake.

Dear God, was there no end to the horrors he had let himself in for?

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The nausea finally passed. He drove on, as stiffly as an automaton. His thoughts lurched on, stumbling over the other implications of this new catastrophe.

Agnes was out—that was a fact that had to be accepted. But if Agnes was out, there was no one left.

Except Sally.

But it *couldn't* be Sally. Not she, not his love, his joy, his promise of a brave new world. . . .

But who else was there?

Where was his triumph now, his superior discipline of intellect that could not fail? Where was his confidence, and his faith that he had found himself at last? He could hear Grace mocking him, as she had always mocked his enthusiasms as frail whims that were bound to peter out in one fashion or another. He could even hear the shrill, elusive mockery of his unknown enemy, and one small corner of his brain yammered that it must be pleasant to go insane.

But this would never do! He had to pull himself together. Logic; that was the thing. He must cling to logic, which had never failed him yet. But it *had*. Logic had shown that Sally could not possibly be his enemy, and now logic showed that she must be. Which logic could he accept?

Could it be that the blackmailer was someone he had never dreamed of suspecting? This was a possibility which he simply could not face; Martin knew that he did not have the stamina to start all over again from scratch, with all the world to choose from. Could one of the other suspects have seen through his ingenious traps and outwitted him? To believe that would be to admit that his enemy was cleverer than he, and that meant that safety could never be attained.

Was there no hope left at all?

Blind instinct had brought him straight toward Sally, and now he found that he was parked in front of her cottage. Why

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had he come? Did he rush for comfort to the arms of his enemy? Did he come to denounce her, or to beg her to reveal herself and then love him none the less, though he was a murderer and she a blackmailer? He had no idea.

As he stared moodily at the cottage, someone came around the corner from the direction of the studio; it was Dr. Finletter. He spotted Martin in the car, and approached. Martin got out of the car. There was no one he was less interested in talking to, but the last vestige of his father's training was an instinctive politeness to the clergy.

"Sally tells me you've been ill," Dr. Finletter said. Even in greatcoat and mittens he seemed to be battling invisible mosquitoes.

"I've had a cold," Martin said. It seemed such a tremendous understatement that he began to laugh a trifle wildly.

Dr. Finletter peered at him anxiously. "You still don't look at all well, you know," he said. "Do you think you should be out in such weather?"

"It won't make any difference," Martin assured him.

"Well, you certainly shouldn't stand around in the snow like this," the clergyman said. "Hurry along now." And with the kindliest of intentions he pushed Martin in Sally's direction.

The heat of the studio came as a physical shock, and Martin felt dizzy again. He slumped into the kitchen chair just vacated by Dr. Finletter. It was a relief to be able to get rid of his overcoat by merely pushing it back from his shoulders.

Sally was kicking rhythmically at the potter's wheel, spinning clay into a wide-spreading bowl. "Martin?" she inquired, without looking around.

"Mm-hmm," he grunted.

"How are you feeling today?"

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There didn't seem to be any adequate reply to that. "Not too well," he said.

"You sound worse."

He watched her for a moment: the lithe body bowed in concentration; the steady, dexterous hands; the face that was lovely even now, with her tongue protruding slightly in the ecstasy of absorption. Would he feel the same way towards her, could he love her as much, if she admitted that she was the one he had been searching for, his enemy? He didn't know. He was inclined to think not, but he really didn't know. It seemed the only hope left.

"Sally, I have to talk to you."

"Talk away," she invited.

But he couldn't talk to her this way, with only part of a profile to watch and no real chance of telling what she was thinking except the words she spoke. "I mean seriously," he said. "Not with half your attention on something else."

"Then it will have to wait," she said placidly.

Already the sweat was streaming off him; he mopped impatiently at his face and the backs of his hands. It seemed as if for weeks he had done nothing but wait—wait for a day to arrive, for an opportunity to present itself. "It can't wait," he said, trembling.

"Of course it can," she said sensibly. "But clay as thin as this can't. If I left it even for a few minutes it would begin to harden."

After fifteen seconds more the sight of her calm, unhurried hands was too much for him. Almost before he had time to realize what a temper he was in he had reached past Sally and smashed the delicate structure flat on the revolving wheel. "That *can* wait!" he snapped.

Sally leaned back with a sigh and watched the damage spin

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to a halt. "I suppose it can," she agreed. She dabbled her fingers in a bowl of clayey water and wiped them on her dungarees. "May I have a cigarette, please."

Normally her seeming lack of anger or outrage would have chastened him, perhaps even frightened him a little. But now he was concentrating every bit of attention on the problem of how to ask what he had to ask without giving away too much. He gave her a cigarette, lighted it for her with a hand she had to steady with her own.

"You ought to be home in bed," she observed.

"Never mind that," he said. "Sally, have you . . . have you been entirely honest with me?"

She frowned over the question. "Is anyone ever *entirely* honest with another person?" she inquired. "I doubt that it would be either possible or advisable."

"Well, have you kept any secrets from me, then?"

"Probably lots of them."

"Important ones, I mean," he said with the dregs of his self-control.

"Important to whom?" Sally asked sweetly.

"To me, of course," he snarled, almost hating her for her evasiveness. His head felt hideously stuffed up and was beginning to ache, and it seemed intolerable that she wasn't more sympathetic and understanding.

"Important to you?" Sally said. "It's difficult to tell what *is* important to you, Martin. From all you've said, I would have thought that my affection was important to you, but if that were the case I doubt if you would have come storming in here as you did, demanding to talk to me, and then smash up my work when I failed to give you my instant and undivided attention."

"I'm sorry about that," Martin said tensely. "I really am, Sally. I'm upset and my nerves are shot to hell, and—"

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"And you belong home in bed, as I said," Sally put in.

"Perhaps I do," Martin admitted, "but this is too important."

"What is?" Sally asked.

"I can't explain exactly," he muttered. He was reminding himself that, innocent or guilty, Sally could know nothing of what he had been going through the past months. As far as she was concerned, he had simply been run-down and mildly irritable the last few weeks—and now he had suddenly marched in to rage at her. Even if she were his enemy, there was no reason for her to know how he had reached this state, or to understand that any fears she might nurse about revealing herself were completely groundless. *He* knew that he could never harm her, whatever the circumstances, but how could she possibly know that unless he told her? "Sally, you realize that I would never do anything to hurt you, don't you?" he asked beseechingly.

"I don't know anything of the kind," she replied. "You hurt me quite a lot when you showed such lack of respect for my work. Right now, I'm inclined to think I was wise to make sure you couldn't hurt me any worse than that."

"I mean, hurt you physically," he almost shouted at her.

"If you could only see the way you're glaring at me now, you'd understand why I'm not even so sure of that."

Martin wiped at his brow, exasperated almost beyond endurance at the way she persisted in refusing to see how desperately earnest he was. "Sally, you're being terribly difficult," he told her wearily.

"*I'm* being difficult!" she exclaimed, on fire at last. "Martin Pryor, you're the most disgusting egoist I've ever known."

"You don't mean that."

"Oh, I certainly do," she assured him. "You barge in, you lose your temper, you smash my work—"

"I've apologized for that!"

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"I know you have. I'm sure you're apologetic every time you're destructive, but you go on being destructive just the same. Because you can't help it. Because you never think of anyone but yourself. Because you're selfish all the way through."

"Not any more," Martin said so imploringly that Sally was thrown off her stride for a moment.

"Of course you are," she said finally. "I've never had any illusions about how selfish you were. That was what made me feel safe in having an affair with you—knowing that you couldn't care too deeply for anyone but yourself."

"But I do. You know how much I love you."

She looked away from his pleading gaze. "Oh, damn, I suppose I do. Martin—go away, go home, go to bed. I've used up today's patience and in a few minutes I'm going to lose my temper or burst into tears or both, and I don't want to do either."

"Then you won't help me," Martin mourned, blind to everything but his own self-pity.

"Then you won't help *me?*" she mimicked. "Me, me, me. Don't you see what I mean?"

"You're the one who doesn't see," he said dully, with little hope that he could accomplish anything now except to antagonize her still further. "That's just what I've been trying to make you understand all along: that I'm not thinking of myself, but of both of us."

"Then you can stop right now," Sally said, and started crying. "*Now* are you satisfied?"

Martin left.

On the slow drive home, past half-familiar landmarks crouched behind the snow, his mind was working with a

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benumbed lucidity, and he methodically examined his downfall to see if there was a loophole left anywhere. He scarcely seemed to care whether or not there was. His sick, exhausted depression had reached a state so deep that for the moment he was capable of neither hope nor despair. Emotion had been burned out in him. He was just remotely curious.

He could not run away and hide without giving up the comfort and security which were all he had to show for the first forty-three years of his life.

He could not stay and endure the torment of his persecutor —except perhaps with Sally to give him strength. Yet he could not have Sally while the blackmailer was a source of danger.

Anyway, apparently he had lost Sally. Yet even assuming that he could woo her to forgiveness, persuade her to reestablish the old, unsatisfactory relationship, what would be the point of it? If she were his hidden enemy, then today had shown at least that she could never trust him enough to reveal herself, and unless she did there was a barrier between them that cut off any real hope of joy in the relationship.

And if Sally were not his enemy? Then somewhere along the line the whole structure of his logic had been faulty, and no part of it was to be trusted. The blackmailer might be anyone in the whole world—the bootblack from this village, or a casual sightseer from the next—and no amount of cleverness or ingenuity would ever discover him. Besides, why search? In Agnes's case he had been lucky enough to stumble on a weapon he might have used against her, but that couldn't be expected to happen again, and he knew that under no circumstances could he go to Sally with a second murder on his hands.

So he could never have Sally anyway.

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But he couldn't run away . . .

The circle appeared quite complete, and he admired it without a trace of agitation.

He put the car away, locked the basement door, and trudged upstairs, surprised at this moment of calmness. Evidently, after the months of confusion and doubt, the emotional storms and the nervous indecisions, it was a relief to have reached any area of calm, even the calm of catastrophe.

It was mildly interesting to discover that one corner of his mind had never lost sight of the possibility of defeat, had nursed the gambler's awareness that even loaded dice must sometimes land the wrong way up. When it wasn't a passionate accident, murder was always a gamble, however careful the planning. Martin had accepted that fact when he had first contemplated killing Grace. He had always been coldblooded and professional about his gambling: scorning the adventure of pure chance, accepting no hazard except when his skill might be expected to affect the outcome, as at bridge.

He had brought the same attitude to the gamble of murder. There the stakes were higher and the odds less calculable, to the extent that there would be no chance to recoup a disastrous error; on the other hand, the cards could be stacked in his favor in advance. He had weighed the advantages to be gained against the possibility of failure, and the odds had appeared to be tremendously on his side. He had expected to succeed, he had taken it for granted that he would. But he had always known there was the one chance, however remote, that he might not.

Now he was very near to admitting that the remote chance had come up. All that stopped him was the feeling that perhaps he wasn't really thinking clearly. His cold still gave him an excuse to procrastinate.

On medicinal grounds he fixed himself a strong drink, and

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was starting up to bed with it when he spied the afternoon mail on the hall table. There were two letters, and one of them —how well he had come to recognize those chaste envelopes! —was from the blackmailer. Martin scowled at it nervously. Once he had greeted this sight with hope, seeing each new communication as a possible flaw in his enemy's anonymity; now he was only frightened. The timing seemed ominous. When he went to pick up the letter he found that he was shivering slightly, and even the cheerful snugness of his study failed to warn him. He lighted the fire, drank off half the scotch, and slit open the envelope.

The familiar salutation "My dear Martin:" brought on a spasm of fury that almost blinded him; he had to force himself to calm down again before he could read on.

"I have been concerned by your interest in Sally Teal, and had thought of ordering you to leave her alone, on pain of exposure. But I am not so sure any longer. I have to admit that she seems to be very fond of you, and unquestionably she needs someone older and more stable than herself. If kept in line, you just possibly might be the man for her. So, if she will marry you, I have decided to give you as a wedding-present the assurance that as long as you treat her well you have nothing to fear from me. But if I ever learn of your tormenting her, as you enjoy doing to other defenseless women, then I shall—"

Martin never reached the threat. The blackmailer's concern for Sally had set him thinking, and now the remark about tormenting defenseless women, reminiscent of something Grace had once said, suddenly made him realize with sickening clarity who his enemy really was.

What an idiot he had been.

How foolish of him to have let himself be tricked into assuming that the blackmailer's only motive was money, when

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it should have been obvious all along that much more important was the delight in having him, Martin, dancing at the end of a string! How absurd of him to have scanned the field like a haughty aristocrat looking for an enemy worthy of his steel, instead of searching among people who had suffered too much from his contempt. And, above all, how blindly stupid of him to have overlooked the fact that every argument that led to Bill Benson applied equally well to his wife, Eve.

No longer the unnatural calm; now he was racked by a whole complex of emotions. There was disgust, there was humiliation, and there was despair—all tangled together, yet each a distinct and separate pain.

The disgust was at his own inadequacy. He had rejoiced in his superiority, and that proud rejoicing had proved a greater weakness than any of those he had scorned in people whom he had dismissed as his inferiors. Pride had led him into gratuitous contempt, which was a fatal mistake for a man who refused to compromise with what he wanted out of life. And the worst part of it was that so many friends had tried to save him. Bill, with his warning that fools could be dangerous; Sally, by her telling him that there was more to Eve than he realized, and by her disapproval of what she thought a streak of cruelty. But he had been too proud even to listen. If he had been defeated by the gods, Martin might have pitied himself; discovering that he alone had been the cause of his own downfall merely left him disgusted with himself.

The humiliation, sharper than he would have thought humiliation could be, was almost too harrowing to contemplate. To have been defeated by someone like Eve Benson! To have danced to *her* tune, to have anguished and schemed and plotted over the outwitting of such as she . . . and to

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have failed! Yet this humiliation was actually bearable in comparison with the prospect of eking out a misery for years in helpless dependence on Eve's good will. Humbling himself to her. Watching his every word to Sally, for fear that she might complain, even jokingly, of the way he treated her. Living with the knowledge that his very existence was the gift of someone who detested him, that every fragment of happiness was in pawn to someone he despised.

And he despaired, knowing that if such humiliation could not be endured, neither could it be cured. He had changed in the last months, and if the change had been for the better, it had also been for the weaker. He had become less selfish, till he could no longer retrace his steps to attain the concentration of selfishness that an act of premeditated murder required. In fact, he had changed to such an extent that he found he recoiled quite instinctively from the very thought of killing the beloved wife (however incomprehensible that belovedness might be) of the man who had proved himself the staunchest friend Martin ever had won. Perhaps this was a sentimentalism which he might overcome, but, even so, the reasons that derived from his love for Sally rendered him powerless.

No, this was defeat, complete and final. He could accept that knowledge and relax, secure at least in the understanding that there was no way out of the trap. No need to struggle any longer. Nothing left now except to tidy up a bit.

Wearily he got the other letters and the photographs from their hiding-place in the desk, and fed them into the fire, making sure that each was reduced to ashes before he added the next. Then he sat down at his desk. He put aside the notes towards his grandfather's biography—which was to have been the industry in his shining future—and took out a couple of envelopes and two sheets of letterpaper. On the first he

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scrawled a quick note to Bill Benson, thanking Bill for his generosity, and saying that his financial difficulties were all a mirage but that other problems were too much for him. As an afterthought he added a postscript, sending his regards to Eve.

The note to Sally was more of a problem, a problem complicated by the fact that his efforts to jog his feverish mind to inspiration were interrupted by tears that came streaming down his face. He was not sobbing, not even crying at all, but still the tears came—the ultimate humiliation. He disregarded them, and wrote "Dearest Sally:" in a firm hand, and then paused to blow his nose with a loud and somewhat comic honk. The thought that he was spoiling this most tragic moment of his life, just as he had spoiled the rest of it, really did make him want to cry, but his tears contrarily had stopped, and he snatched at the moment of sanity to marshal his thoughts.

"Forgive me for my behavior of this afternoon," he wrote, "and try to understand that it was not entirely my fault." He wondered how he could possibly justify that ridiculous statement, and promptly thought of one way that should arouse Sally's special sympathy. "For more than a year now I have been afraid that I was losing my mind; today's was just the most recent of a long series of such aberrations."

And now that the lying was done, and he could be completely honest with her for the first time, he could find no eloquence in him.

"Thank you, my darling, for many of the happiest hours that I have ever known. All my love, Martin."

The triteness of the wording offended him, but otherwise he was prouder of the letter than of any other action in his whole life. It would shield Sally from any fear that she might have been responsible for his suicide—and writing it was the

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most unselfish act he had ever performed. He spent a moment regretting that none of the people who had accused him of egoism would ever know how sublimely unselfish he could really be. It seemed most unfair.

He sealed the notes, addressed them, and propped them on the center of the desk. From the bottom drawer he got out the revolver he had purchased against just such an eventuality, and made sure that the safety-catch was off. And then, with the same imaginative efficiency which all his life he had mistaken for superiority, Martin blew out his brains.

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