

A NOVEL ABOUT THE TENSE GENTLEMANLY EAGER WORLD
OF BEVERLY HILLS BY SPEED LAMKIN

the Easter
Egg Hunt

THE EASTER EGG HUNT

Speed Lamkin

Speed Lamkin's second novel is about Hollywood, the phoniest but the most human city in the world. Mr. Lamkin understands the false idols, the deep hopes that draw the crowds there. He understands too the need for normality behind the glamour, and this is a novel of the Hollywood people - not just the stars, but the others -- trying to make their dreams come true.

With a fast, sure style that has the glitter of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Lamkin plunges into the tragic life of an aging oil magnate and his unhappy young wife. Their hectic circle of friends stream through the enormous mansion drinking, loving, celebrating - in their desperate search for happiness.

It is a sensational novel and it is also a novel of great understanding and feeling. This is ambition and opulence. There is the loneliness of crowded rooms, the feverish struggle toward unknown goals, and behind it there is the clean quietness

continued on back flap

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THE EASTER
EGG HUNT



THE EASTER EGG

a novel
by

HUNT

Speed Lamkin

The Riverside Press Cambridge
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1954

Books by Speed Lamkin

TIGER IN THE GARDEN
THE EASTER EGG HUNT



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FOR CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

PART
ONE

FIRST OF ALL, I HAD KNOWN ANGELICA, HIS wife. I went to her second birthday party at the Miro country club, when she was supposed to have tossed pink cake in other children's faces.

When I was nine, "Tootie" James and I one summer afternoon climbed the great mimosa tree in Angelica's back yard. I had got out on a limb about eight feet from the ground, when suddenly I began to shake with fear. I longed to climb back to the trunk to safety. Angelica, who was one year older, sat in a clover bed below, looking up at me.

She was a pretty little girl, I remember, with long dark curls, honeysuckle skin, and tawny-gold eyes that glowed like two candles in the wind. At ten she had already begun to paint her lips behind her mother's back. She wore shoes with tiny heels, flaring pink skirts, and owned a diamond ring. She noticed what make automobiles other children's families rode in, how many servants they had, how large their houses were. And she knew all about men's private parts, and could tell you where babies came from. Oh, she was a lovely, snotty, artificial little girl, and boys flocked around her like flies.

As I said, I had climbed out on this high limb and had begun to tremble, when suddenly Angelica said: "If you really love me, Charley Thayer, *jump*." And I jumped. As a result, I

broke my right leg and I had to hobble around on crutches the rest of the summer months.

I knew Angelica, I believe, as well as it was possible to have known any person who had grown up with you and was not a close friend. Well, perhaps I knew her somewhat better than that.

Although the O'Briens were Catholics, Angelica went to Tucker High with the rest of us, because the young people whom her mother wanted her to like went there. In those days Angelica, June Kellogg, and Sarabelle White were a familiar triumvirate. They went everywhere together and they held the same opinions about practically everything under the sun. They dated big smooth South Side boys like "Slick" Chauvine and "Bubber" Jones. They looked down their noses at "nice" boys. We weren't "cute" — they really meant fast; and they were the most popular girls in town.

Those three girls were inseparable. You used to see them wearing identical pink wool skirts and pink sweaters, walking down Sycamore Lane, arm-in-arm. One Christmas at the country club junior dance they wore pink camellias in their hair. Easter Day they turned up at D.B.S. meeting wearing pink silk dresses and hats. Birthday-party pink was Angelica's color. She had adopted pink, as the Communists adopted red, and the triumvirate wore pink everywhere.

I saw her, of course, in Miro, Louisiana, the city where we were born and raised, and I used to see her when she was going to that swanky finishing school in New York. I was a freshman at Harvard. I remember the time when she came to a punch party after a Harvard-Yale game. Outside a light snow was falling; inside, forty men and their dates stood crowded in four rooms in Lowell House; logs were burning in the fireplaces;

phonographs playing; and we were singing; and the hullabaloo sounded like four merry-go-rounds turning at once. Suddenly there were cries and screams of laughter. Angelica, looking like a fine drenched cat, paraded through the rooms, dripping water on everybody, swinging a Yale pennant, followed by four Yale guests. She had got under a shower, wearing her mother's mink coat.

I saw her in the East; and later on, I saw her in Beverly Hills, where she and the young man whom she had married lived. In fact, I was with her at a large party in Beverly Hills the night that the terrible thing happened. I suppose that you could say I had watched her character develop and grow — if a country club girl like her does grow inside.

Yet she was no worse than the rest of them. The only thing was that June Kellogg had settled down with a nice, dependable life-insurance salesman back in Miro, and Sarabelle had married Dr. Gordie Murphy's son. At one time all three of them had dreamed of a life more fascinating than the Canasta, coffee-hour, country-club round-robin in Miro. The other two had given up dreams when they received their first suitable proposals.

Angelica married Laddie Wells, a young assistant producer in Hollywood. He wasn't an assistant producer when she met him. He was simply a good-looking young man, who spoke English with a mild German accent. He wasn't anything. He was a loafer, people in Miro said, a bohemian, who didn't have his feet on the ground. And when Angelica eloped with him after she had brought him home to be looked over by her parents — and they had turned thumbs down — everyone said they felt sorry that Angelica had done such a thing to the poor O'Briens! Several months later a friend of Laddie Wells

got him the job in the picture business; and overnight people's attitude changed. Visitors to Miro were told about our hometown girl marrying a big producer in Hollywood, and with each telling Laddie Wells's job sounded more and more grand.

At any rate, there was this girl from my home town, married to a young man in the picture business, living in Beverly Hills.

After I graduated from Harvard, I got a job working for *Life*. I started working for *Life* in August 1948; in March 1951 *Life* transferred me to their Hollywood office in Beverly Hills.

Through the efforts of Sam Goldwyn, whom I interviewed during my first week, I found a pleasant place to live. Dr. Leighton Grey, a well-thought-of Beverly Hills physician, had two rooms for rent adjoining his garage. Dr. Grey had not only attended Mr. Goldwyn at one time but had also married the ex-wife of a famous motion picture director. Mr. Goldwyn implied I should be happy with a landlord who had these points in his favor.

Before I moved to Dr. Grey's I got to know my way around Beverly Hills. The city itself had the new-leather look of a prosperous suburb. In Beverly Hills proper, between Santa Monica Boulevard and Wilshire, stood dozens of small shops extravagant as chocolate boxes, where producers' wives purchased such things as silver salvers, golden lighters, and gowns designed by platinum names. In ice-cream-colored buildings, none of them taller than eight stories, movie agents maintained offices with cow-hide walls. There was a tailor who could make you look as if you'd gone to Yale.

Beyond Santa Monica Spanish bungalows, beamed English

cottages, and clapboard colonial houses faced each other along pleasant palm-lined boulevards. In the daytime nurses clutching the hands of little children strolled up and down. After dark these boulevards were patrolled by police, who are known to question any person walking.

Crossing Sunset Boulevard, you saw white pillared mansions, pink Florentine villas, Spanish haciendas, and Georgian country seats, topping smooth grassy knolls like castles. These show places belonged to the never-never past of Hollywood when movie stars at their parties hung up artificial moons and ate off gold plates and had peacocks and leopards and forty-five fur coats. Marion Davies, Mary Pickford, and Goldwyn lived on in houses there, but most of the places had been sold.

Under the noses of the show places lived some of the quiet people of Beverly Hills. If they were once famous, they were famous no longer, and most of them were never famous at all. Their streets had names like Shadow Hill and Laurel, still streets with the mock modesty of country lanes. Such a street was Cove Way where lived the Doctor and Mrs. Grey.

My rooms, carrying out the style of the Greys' New England colonial cottage, had a ship's model over the mantel and lamps made of coffee grinders. From my sitting-room window I could watch Esther, the Greys' one colored servant, cooking dinner in the evenings: Esther, who had an old woman's stork shape at twenty-five, and philosophized. Twice a week she gave my rooms a cleaning, and we came to be friends.

From my bed at night I could look across Cove Way at a huge white elephant of a place. According to Esther, it was supposed to be Mount Vernon. It had been once owned by the late Jean Harris, the famous platinum-blond star who killed herself during the war. For five years the house had

stood sad and dirty at the top of a shaggy green hill, its sunken gardens swirling with vines, its columns yellow-streaked. And then one afternoon about five months ago a Mr. Clarence Culvers, Louisiana oil millionaire, had driven up in a canary-yellow Cadillac with his young wife to look at the house, and within a week had bought it because, so Esther thought, it had belonged to the late Jean-Harris. Every night lights burned in the Culverses' windows. At least twice a week the noise of the Culverses giving a party kept "nice" people like the Greys awake at night. The Doctor and Mrs. Grey, Esther said, were praying for the day when the house would grow still again.

When I went to rent the rooms one cool evening in late March I had made a good impression on the Greys. Dr. Grey, a soft-spoken, regular-featured man in his forties, repeated my name several times in a tone of recognition. "Harry *Thayer*? Harry *Thayer*? I once gave some thyroid shots to a Mrs. Thayer out here from Philadelphia. Isn't it a Philadelphia name?"

After I explained about our branch of the Thayers settling in Louisiana before the Civil War, Dr. Grey transmitted currents of approval to his wife. Mrs. Grey received his currents with a flick of dulled blue eyes, eyes which ten years ago when she was married to George Wheaton the director must have been her mark of beauty. She smiled pleasantly, smoothed her crêpe skirt, then said that she was so happy to have someone like me in the garage rooms.

Mrs. Grey didn't know me at all. But like most of the American upper middle class to which she belonged, she placed her faith in good manners, a gray flannel suit, and brown-haired American looks. Superficially that's a pretty good

description of me. When they had shown me the rooms, I had sherry with them, and we talked about the Russian situation, and the California climate. After I moved into the rooms, I saw the Greys as seldom as possible.

It was pleasant living there. On an ordinary day I would leave my rooms at nine o'clock. I would have breakfast at a Beverly Hills eatery named the Della Robbia, the investment of an old-time actress who had once played opposite Ramon Navarro; I would arrive at *Life* about a quarter of ten. The Life-Time-Fortune office in a small clean modern building in Beverly Hills had an atmosphere of Yankee New England. We wore the same quiet tweed sport coats and gray flannels that we had worn at Harvard and Yale, we had fairly adequate vocabularies (never once called anything *colossal*), and in California held on to Eastern ways and values as tenaciously as the British remain British in Singapore. We perceived something socially significant in Ava Gardner and we looked on ourselves as the most serious and truthful reporters of the American scene.

I would return to my rooms around six o'clock, shave, take a shower, and dress for the evening. Friends in New York had given me letters of introduction to several high-powered Beverly Hills matrons who in turn took me along to parties. During my first two weeks in Beverly Hills I went to sixteen affairs. At the beginning of my third week I had a hundred speaking acquaintances and no friends. The story of my summer in Beverly Hills began one clear April evening when I drove down a palm-lined boulevard to have dinner with the Laddie Wellses. He had telephoned me that morning at *Life* — (how he had learned I was in California he didn't say); and he vaguely invited me for dinner, whenever I was free to

come. When I sounded so pleased with his calling me, he had said — “Why don’t you come this evening?” So I had accepted.

Actually, I had seen Laddie Wells only twice before in my life; and neither of those encounters was entirely pleasant. Our first encounter had taken place at a cocktail party in Miro. He had arrived with Angelica by train the day before and everyone else at the party was as curious to meet him as I. He had behaved very badly at that party.

It wasn’t anything he did, anything that you could put your finger on. It was his way of only half listening when we spoke; it was the measuring look in his eye, taking in the lot of us as if we were a pen of geese; it was the attitude he seemed to bear toward us throughout the evening: “You nice dull middle-class people are of no use to me; nor I to you.”

I don’t know how Angelica ever persuaded him to come to Miro. Certainly Miro, Louisiana, was the last place on earth he would have chosen to visit. Miro was a Southern city of about fifty thousand, more New South than Old. The oil and gas people had the finest houses; the old families were depressingly broke, or going broke, trying to keep up appearances; and you could count on one hand the people who would admit that they were not perfectly satisfied living there. The only persons Laddie would have liked were a wealthy doctor’s wife, who was a recluse, and an articulate Catholic priest, mysteriously transferred to Miro from his fashionable New Orleans parish. I don’t mean to sound running down my hometown. It is only that I understood what Laddie’s looks meant. As he himself would have put it, Miro belonged to the “burghers,” lock, stock, and barrel. And Angelica’s father, J. Porter O’Brien, who had made a million out of the war, was the greatest burgher of them all.

I have wondered why Laddie ever fell in love with a girl like Angelica; yet, on the other hand, I am positive that he believed Angelica despised Miro as much as he did. He believed that Angelica had rebelled. And, indeed, she had, as far as it meant settling down in Miro, Louisiana, or some other Miro, for the rest of her life. Angelica wanted a life with kicks, wanted life to be an adventure, a joy ride; we all knew that. Nevertheless, I have wondered why.

What surprised everyone in Miro who met Laddie Wells that summer evening was that she had chosen *him*. He was by no means the best-looking one Angelica had gone with. "Why he's just a boy, a nice clean-cut boy!" I overheard one woman exclaim; and this was a pretty accurate description of him. Laddie was over twenty-six years old when they married, yet his cheeks looked as soft and flushed as a fifteen-year-old's. He had nice light brown hair, soft as the tassels on a dressing gown, and he wore it rather long and combed back. If he happened to be standing near a mirror, he would whisk out a pocket comb and run it through. Why, this was how I behaved when I first started going with girls! Every one of his features, even his slender body, reminded you of a boy's, all but the eyes.

They were as gray as the sides of a flint. When you looked at them carefully you saw that they were perfectly cold, perfectly wise, perfectly, perfectly innocent. But the youthful flush beneath his tender smooth skin gave them a curious, pathetic expression — like an old silver Lincoln penny stuck in a pink cherry birthday cake. Everything else about him looked so boyish, even the way he stood. He kept one hand in a pocket, as if he were jingling coins; one shoulder, hiked above the other; one knee bent. For some reason, as I looked at him

had copied this posture from some older boy in school or college whom he had admired — some boy who had been lazy, easygoing, and happy with the world.

And so there Laddie was, hostile, bored, silent, above-it-all, standing beside Angelica, who stood giggling, sipping champagne. I was staring at him from behind a vase of gladioli, thinking how he reminded me of one of those hard fashionable young hangers-on I'd met at cocktail parties in New York.

I have forgotten about his clothes. He wore an English-cut suit that day of fine gray worsted. His shirt was of tissue-weight English blue gingham and was monogrammed above the pocket. I noticed the monogram, because the large initials were L.G., not the initials of his name. And he was wearing a pure silk blue tie with a pattern of tiny black butterflies. He was so elegantly dressed for a scorching evening in Miro that he seemed almost to be wearing a costume.

As I said, I was looking at him, when suddenly he looked directly into my eyes and smiled. The expression was that of immediate understanding, as if he were saying, *We know*, but they don't *know*, do they? I did not have the slightest idea of how to return his look, so I pretended that I was gazing over his shoulder.

The next afternoon, when I ran into him with Angelica out by the country club pool, he acted as if we had never met.

Now, nearly five years later, when he telephoned me at the *Life* office, inviting me for dinner, I felt both curiously surprised and delighted; in fact, I was as anxious to see *him* as I was Angelica, his wife.

Their house, a rambling Spanish-style bungalow, painted pink, stood in an expensive section of Beverly Hills. The

neighboring houses had manicured lawns and barbered trees, and were copies of dwellings in more romantic lands. Their neighbor to the left lived in a Norman cottage with a real thatched roof. To the right there stood a pint-sized copy of Scarlett O'Hara's plantation house. Although their tile-roofed bungalow was no Beverly Hills show place, the mahogany door, the two camellias growing in black tubs on either side of it, pointed out their success in the world. It was quite a setup for a young man who five years before had had nothing. I stopped my Chevrolet coupé in front of the house and I got out.

Laddie Wells stood in the driveway in his relaxed pose, one hand in a pocket, one shoulder slouched. He was examining a dent in the fender of a new black Ford convertible. When he noticed me approaching him, he glanced up and greeted me. He had changed little. A few lines, perhaps, creased his forehead. But his hair had not thinned and he hadn't grown fat. As he spoke, he kept one hand in a pocket, and he cocked his head. Coming from such a boyish appearance, his voice sounded deep and male and thick, and, of course, there was his German accent. We talked for a few minutes beside the Ford.

"Angelica has dented her new car," Laddie said. "I gave her the car for Christmas. Like it?"

"It's beautiful," I said.

Laddie moved forward to look at the dent again.

"She doesn't know how she did it. It's too bad, isn't it?"

"A garage can fix it," I said. "You'll never know there was a dent."

We moved toward the house.

"How do you like the house?" he said.

I said that it was a fine house. He stopped in his tracks and looked at the house with pride. I expected him to say something such as, You see, now I've everything I ever wanted.

"I want to show you the swimming pool," he said.

So we changed our path. We walked down the concrete drive past a line of broad windows, until we came to a new pink brick wall that rose to our shoulders. Over the wall I saw a tiny kidney-shaped swimming pool that looked like an enlarged puddle among the glass-topped tables and green canvas lounge chairs. On one of the tables stood a yesterday's martini glass; and a crumpled paper napkin had blown to the pool's edge. Laddie Wells opened a wooden pink door in the wall.

"Soon it will be dark," he said. "You ought to see the pool lighted up."

I said I bet that it was pretty. Then Laddie noticed me looking at the mess and frowned.

"It — it's not Angelica's fault," he said, almost to himself. "I pay a Swedish woman sixty-five dollars a week to keep this place clean."

In the distance a warm rosy tint colored the March clouds, as though a blood vessel had burst across the sky. A nurse was calling a child named Elizabeth to come home. From nearby came the words and music of a song that had been popular the year when Angelica went East: "Kiss me once, And kiss me twice, and kiss me once again, It's been a long, long time. . . ."

And we soon entered what Laddie called the playroom. It was a wide white glass-walled room, rippling with shadows and dim with the pastel glow of the evening. A fat modern sofa and easy chairs dotted a white twill carpet like islands. Enormous lamps protruded like the tops of buoys. And cool March breezes blew through the opened plate-glass windows, changing the nylon curtains into lovely sails. Near a corner

of the room stood a small mahogany bar like a rock in this sea of white. On top of the bar a bottle of nail polish had spilled into a puddle of deep pink.

I saw Angelica before Angelica saw me. The picture she formed contrasted with the pictures of her I carried in my mind. Wearing her pink, her thin legs drooping over the arms of an easy chair, she sat daydreaming, drying her deep-pink chewed-off nails. Circles had formed under her twinkling eyes from loss of sleep, and her dark curls looked mussed. She reminded me that evening of a wilted iris, sitting there.

When she saw me, she came gloriously to life. She gave a silly little laugh, that matched the period of the song, and I said, "Well, well . . ." and then she rose merrily with a jingle of her gold charm bracelets and kissed my cheek. She smelled of Elizabeth Arden's Blue Grass and cigarettes.

"I've never been so happy to see anybody in my whole life!" she cried.

As she took my hands, twirling me around, some of the pink polish rubbed off on the sleeve of my brown tweed jacket. She pretended not to notice this.

"Fix Charley a drink," she told Laddie, "and play the record again. Oh, Charley, it's been such a long time, hasn't it?"

"Now don't start telling me you feel old," I said, "because I know how old you are."

"Oh, twenty-four can seem awfully old, Charley. Sometimes I feel like a cake with the icing all gone. Did you know I have a baby, Charley, who's three years old?"

I exclaimed over her baby.

"I named her Florence after Mummy. I know Florence is a horrible name for a baby, but it did please Mummy, and after all her objections and disappointment over me marrying Laddie . . ."

"She likes me fine, now," Laddie called from the bar.

"Well, maybe *now*," Angelica said, blowing on her nails. She fell into the chair again, kicking off brown leather pumps. She took out a cigarette from a pocket in her pink knit suit and began looking for a match.

"There're never any matches in this house," she laughed.

"I bought her a silver lighter and she lost it," Laddie said. Laddie came from behind the bar, lit her cigarette, then went back again.

"Doesn't excuse there being no matches," she said, childishly. "Now tell me everything, absolutely everything that's happened back home, Charley. Is Bitsy McKenzie married yet?"

"Was married last January to Eddie Devereaux," I said.

"Big-Ed Devereaux, who played for Tulane? And Maggie Gardiner, Charley, what's happened to her?"

"Well," I said, "I guess you heard about her little boy drowning down on the coast. After that, she and Soule decided to get a divorce."

"My Lord, no! Why?"

"She thinks she's crazy about Robinson Kane."

"Who's that?"

"Somebody she met at the races. Lives at Kane's Landing near Lafayette."

Angelica's face got a pleased incredulous expression, then she coughed and flicked her ashes on the floor.

"Mummy never writes me anything except about who she saw at the country club, and who asked about me, and who's sick, and what she's bought for the house. I never hear a thing in California." Then, "Why don't we move to New York, Laddie? Don't theatre producers need assistants too?" She jerked her head back with a little nervous motion which must

have originated in California and she added irrelevantly: "Laddie got me the most divine little poodle, Charley. People at a party fed it lots of sweets and it died last month. Laddie, let's never invite those people back."

Laddie placed a hammered copper tray with two drinks and paper cocktail napkins on a stained Chinese modern table. He handed me a drink and kept one.

"Where's mine?" Angelica cried.

"I did not think you wanted one," Laddie said.

"He's afraid I'll drink too much and act silly during dinner," she laughed. "*He* drinks more than I do."

"I'll fix you a drink," Laddie said, moving toward the bar.

"Where're you living, Charley?" She started to paint her lips with a lipstick that lay on the Chinese table.

I told her how Sam Goldwyn had found me rooms with a Dr. and Mrs. Grey; and how across the street some fellow Louisianians named Culvers gave loud parties in Jean Harris' old house.

"Culvers?" Laddie said.

"Do you know him, Laddie?" Angelica asked.

"He's some oil millionaire, who's going to produce movies," Laddie said. "He wants his wife to become a star."

"Wasn't there a Culvers mixed up in the scandals, Charley?"

"I don't remember," I said, "but I could find out."

"He's a stupid old rich man," Laddie said, returning with Angelica's drink. "He has the six lousiest god-damn writers in town turning out scripts for him."

"Why doesn't he get somebody good?" Angelica said, taking the drink.

"Now how would he know what is good," Laddie said, sitting down. "He is only a stupid *burgher*."

"Oh. don't start talking about burghers," Angelica said.

Then she turned toward me. "I thought I'd lose my mind, Charley. He talked about burghers and for a long time I thought they were Communists or something. So one day I asked him just what burghers were, and I found out that in Germany they're nothing but nice businessmen like Daddy. Laddie doesn't like burghers, and he doesn't like high-brow intellectuals, and he doesn't like people like Jeannie and Sonny Cartwright — purely social people — and he doesn't like ninety per cent of the picture people."

Before Laddie could reply to her, a large-boned Swedish woman, wearing a soiled lavender uniform, announced dinner.

"Let's eat," Angelica said, slipping on her brown leather pumps. "I don't want any more of this old drink." And so, she looped her arm through mine, leading the way through a small living room that had a copy of a Toulouse Lautrec poster on one wall and imitation French Provincial chairs. Laddie followed, carrying our unfinished drinks.

After we had seated ourselves, Laddie asked me if I liked the inside of the house as well as I liked the outside. I looked around the dining room, which was furnished with Grand Rapids modern and decorated with silver candlesticks, and silver bowls, and a tea service that Angelica had received as wedding presents. I said, of course, that their house was charming. Laddie, looking very pleased, asked the Swedish woman to light the candles.

For dinner we had lamb chops, potatoes au gratin, a green salad with herbs, and very good red wine. Laddie talked about *The Treasure*, a high-brow western which Mark Harris, his boss, was then making for Worldwide.

"Why doesn't Mark do *Tender Is the Night*?" Angelica asked. "I adored *Tender Is the Night*."

“That’s all right for somebody else to do, but it’s not for us. Mark likes surefire pictures with actions, violence.” Then, looking at me, he said, “Mark Harris has done some of the best pictures ever made. He’s getting old now, and he wants to make good pictures that will make money. The only good pictures that you can count on to make money are westerns. Mark Harris has done for westerns what Faulkner has done for the South.”

“Oh, that’s very silly. We aren’t like Faulkner at all, are we, Charley? We have Bendixes, and cocktail parties, and golf tournaments and nobody I know spends their time brooding about the past, except maybe old Miss Julia Harrington, who lost her money in the crash,” Angelica said, laughing. “What are we going to do after dinner?”

For a moment Laddie did not answer her; when he did speak, he spoke as if he were teasing her. “That is always our problem, Charley: What are we going to do after dinner. She always wants to go somewhere. If there’s no party, she wants to dance. If she’s tired of dancing places, she wants to go to a bar. Sometimes we just drive very fast along Ocean Front Road.”

“I suppose you want me to become a contented cow of a woman,” Angelica said, “like in Germany.”

“No,” Laddie said.

“Then what is it you want?”

“I have everything I want,” Laddie said.

Angelica drained her wine glass, then flounced her dark hair. “Why don’t we go to the Montmartre?” she said.

“Isn’t this Helga’s night off?” Laddie asked.

“Oh, I’ll persuade old Helga to stay,” Angelica said. “Helga will do anything I say.”

And so, half an hour later, the three of us drove in Angelica's convertible to that swanky row of restaurants, shops, and night clubs on the Sunset Strip. The Montmartre, a small frame structure, once a private house — our point of destination — clung like a white bird's-nest to a hill that rose off Sunset. It was, according to Angelica, the one truly Continental night club in Hollywood. It had been started by an old baroness, rumored to have been the last of Edward the Seventh's many mistresses. ("Most of his mistresses," Angelica laughed, "seemed to have settled in Hollywood.") After starting the little night club in the downstairs of her house, the baroness developed arthritis and had to sell out to a San Francisco gambler, who at present owned the place. The Montmartre was divided into two sections. The bar, patronized entirely by elegantly dressed young men, had the reputation of being the most exclusive pansy bar in Los Angeles. The other section, a small room draped with green and chartreuse swags, consisted of banquettes and tables that faced two grand pianos. On the pianos, there stood bronze Louis XV candelabra, one of the many amorous purchases, so the story went, of the late King Edward VII.

They made a great fuss over Angelica at the Montmartre. A young man in a Brooks Brothers suit conducted us to a good table, directly in front of the pianos; and the owner, although we never saw him, treated us to a round of drinks.

"Has Grover sung yet?" Angelica asked the waiter.

"He's going on in a few minutes, Mrs. Wells."

Angelica waved aside the fricze of smoke. "I want to see who's here," she said. Apparently she saw no one whom she knew, because immediately after her surveyal of the room, she moved her head very close to mine, so close, in fact, that my close-cropped brown hair brushed one of her loose dark brown

curls. "Let's drink to Miro," she said. "I know you never liked Miro any better than I did." We touched glasses and looked directly into each other's eyes. "Do you remember the time I made you jump from the mimosa tree?"

"Sure I remember," I said. Somehow, it pleased me that she had remembered.

Laddie, who had sat drinking in silence, finished his scotch and water. Now he waved his hand to the waiter. After the waiter had brought us another round, Laddie said, "Let's drink a toast to Charley." And Angelica thought that was a fine idea. "To our one friend in California," she said, as the glasses clinked. The toast embarrassed me very much.

"Don't you like California?" I said.

"I would not live here if I did not," Laddie said.

A spotlight, aimed at one of the grand pianos, cut through the smoke in the blue darkness; and presently a good-looking young Negro, wearing a finely tailored navy blue suit, walked into the light while people clapped. "That's Grover," Angelica whispered, "Grover Cleveland Coone, and he's as nice as he can be."

Using a British accent, the young Negro began to sing. "Let there be you, Let there be me, Let there be oysters, Under the sea . . ."

And as he sang two young white men at an adjoining table began to whisper: "Didn't Grover go to Amherst for a year or so?" "Well, he says he did." "I like Grover but he just can't face the fact he's a Negro." "Don't be silly. He faces it every time he starts acting too high and mighty. Didn't you hear how those L.A. cops stopped his Cadillac and took him for a ride?"

Near the end of the song Bette Davis walked in with her new husband and a woman who looked like her mother. Her

entrance created such a commotion that you could hardly hear Grover's song. The young man in the Brooks Brothers suit wanted to place her on view at a table next to ours, but Miss Davis insisted on a banquette. Some people in the room acted blasé about Bette Davis being there; others strained themselves getting a glimpse of her. After Bette Davis smiled at Grover, he sang another chorus of the song with all his heart.

"Bette Davis is here. Grover's going to town," one of the young men whispered.

Grover sang "I've Got the World on a String" and "Summertime"; and then a Negro couple in evening clothes walked in and were seated at a table in a dark corner. The Negro woman removed a beautiful ermine stole and laid it across an empty chair. Then she folded her hands and listened.

"I wonder," Angelica said, "if she was a colored débutante?"

"Don't be prejudiced, Angelica," Laddie said.

"Who's being prejudiced? Anyway, I was talking to Charley, not to you." She turned her back on Laddie. "Laddie's awful when he's drunk. I hate people who're awful when they're drunk."

"I'm not drunk," Laddie said.

"Why don't you have some coffee?" Angelica said.

"I said I wasn't drunk. Do I act drunk to you, Charley?"

I didn't answer him, because I didn't want to become involved in their quarrel. But I did not think that he was drunk.

"Waiter! Waiter!" Angelica called. "Bring some coffee."

"Why don't we have some champagne?" I said. I didn't know why I wanted us to have champagne.

"I adore champagne," Angelica said.

So we ordered coffee and champagne, and by the time that Grover Cleveland Coone had finished singing, we all were

pretty high. Grover, who joined us for a glass, introduced us to Bette Davis, who seemed quite nice, then to the Negro couple in evening clothes. Angelica started to ask the Negro woman if she had been a *débutante*, but Laddie said, "Shut up, Angelica"; and the couple, thinking that there might be trouble of some kind, retreated to the darkness of their corner.

A redheaded girl with a long-nosed sugar-daddy said hello to Angelica, who said, "Oh hello, Irene"; Angelica said that Irene came from Winnfield, Louisiana; and shortly after this the waiter told Angelica that there was a man at the bar who wanted to speak to her. Angelica froze in her seat. "What man?"

"A dark-haired man, Mrs. Wells," the waiter said.

"Tell him I don't know any dark-haired man," she said. Then she looked Laddie in the eye: "Do you know any dark-haired man?"

"Why no, Angelica. Most of my friends have lost their hair," Laddie said. Then keeping his eyes on her face, he took a long swallow.

The waiter poured her another glass of champagne. After she had drunk some of it, she began to sing: "We're poor little sheep, that have lost our way, Bah, Bah, Bah . . ." Then the three of us sang it, and were doing fine until the young man in the Brooks Brothers suit asked us to please stop.

"Why — why don't we get out of this god-damn place?" Laddie said, pushing his chair back. "Only reason she comes here, Charley, is to see the niggers."

"I despise people who're awful when they're drunk," Angelica repeated, staring icily at Laddie.

"Aren't you glad you married me?" Laddie said, staring back.

"That has nothing to do with it," she said, thumping her

champagne glass with her ring finger. She wore a diamond she had got upon graduating from Miss French's, and Laddie's plain gold band.

"Sure you're glad," Laddie said. Then he faced me. "How much do *you* make a year, Charley?"

I told him and he grunted his contempt.

"Guess what I make. Tell him what I make, Angelica. Tell him. Tell him. Tell him. And tell him what I'll be making next year."

"You're boring the bejesus out of us," she said. "Let's go home."

"I make five hundred a week. After *The Treasure* they've promised to let me produce a picture of my own. I'll be making eight-fifty. I'm the luckiest young man in America, luckiest in America, Charley."

"You're drunk right now," Angelica said. "Laddie's the shy type, Charley, who gets big and bold when he's drunk. Help me get him out of here, Charley."

"*Nein*," Laddie said. "*Nein*."

"Come on, big shot," I said, taking Laddie's arm.

Angelica signed the check for Laddie. We finally got him out of the Montmartre, Laddie supported by Angelica and me. Soon we were speeding westward down Sunset Boulevard. Angelica wanted to drive to Santa Monica to look at the ocean, but I said that it was three o'clock in the morning. I felt glad that Angelica had insisted on me driving. As we turned into their driveway, Laddie said, "Come — come on in, Charley. We'll open some *real* champagne." Angelica did not tell me not to come in, so the three of us moved through the house to the playroom. Laddie took out a bottle of vintage champagne from the icebox behind the bar. Mark Harris had given him

a case of the stuff last Christmas. Sitting in a circle on the twill carpet, we drank from the chilled bottle, as though it were a loving cup.

"How — how do you feel?" Laddie said, putting his arm around my shoulder.

"I feel won-der-fullllll," I said. "Don't — don't you feel won-der-fullllll?"

"Ja," Laddie said.

"You're drunk," Angelica said.

"I am drunk, my darling, and I am glad of it. Hey — hey what are you going to do about Helga?"

"Oh, Helga can sleep in the guest room."

"I — I'm drunk too," I said. "Ver-ry, ver-ry drrrunk." I took Angelica's hand in mine.

Outside a rooster crowed, clear and beautiful in the early hours of morning. Angelica said that she had never heard a rooster in Beverly Hills.

Laddie said that was N—— C——, the sonofabitch, waking his writers. "Once," Laddie said, "there was a writer who stood for five minutes in the courtyard at N—— C——'s studio, smoking a cigarette. N—— C—— walked up to this writer and said, 'Writer, put that cigarette out. I expect you to be writing every minute of the day I pay you for.' The writer got angry and when he punched N—— C—— in the stomach, he broke his fist. It seems that when N—— C—— was just a little codger, he had contracted a disease that finally turned him to stone.

"You know, Charley, nearly everybody that you meet nowadays is a stone man. I knew you weren't a stone man, the first time I ever met you. I — I told Angelica so."

"I wish you wouldn't start your stone-man talk," Angelica

said. "This talk of his is supposed to be very deep, Charley, and every time Laddie gets drunk he spills off this kind of talk. At parties he bores the bejesus out of everybody."

"When — when are you goin' to do something big, Laddie?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Laddie said, removing his arm from around my shoulder. My question sobered him.

"Well, old man, from the way you talk and act everyone expects sssuch great things from you," I said. I squeezed Angelica's hand, and she squeezed mine back.

"I suppose you think that I have sold out to Hollywood?" Laddie said.

"Well, yeah," I said, "I do."

He said nothing; then he took away the bottle from my hand.

"Skip it, old man," I said. "It's no-no-none of my business anyway. I — I'm drunk."

"Why — why don't you sleep on the sofa, Charley? Why doesn't he spend the night on our sofa, Angelica?"

"Suits me fine," I said.

"No," Angelica said, freeing her hand from mine.

"*Ja*," Laddie said, eyeing his wife, "you sleep on the sofa, Charley."

"You ought to go home, Charley," Angelica said, looking out the windows. Outside a half moon reflected into the swimming pool; the night was lightening to the blue-green-blue of a technicolored dawn. The gauzelike curtains barely moved.

"Sleep there," Laddie said, rising, pulling me by my coat collar toward the sofa.

"No," Angelica said, "no." She rose suddenly and she

walked to the sink behind the bar and filled a glass with water. When she came back, she poured the water on my head. "Wake up, Charley. Go home."

"What's the matter with you, Angelica?" Laddie said, half quizzing, half railing her.

Suddenly she walked out of the playroom, the jingling noise of her bracelets diminishing like the passing of an April storm. I felt the flashes of Laddie Wells's eyes like lightning before me, and I moved my hand to my temples, feigning complete drunkenness. Laddie offered me his handkerchief to wipe my face.

"Thanks."

"Sleep there," Laddie said, pointing to the white sofa.

I crawled upon the sofa and he turned out the light. I lay there with a cross patch of moonlight playing upon my face, wondering about the curious behavior of Angelica.

I knew that she wanted me to sleep with her. Why had she wanted me to leave? Perhaps, I thought, she thinks that Laddie knows she wanted me, and only wished to fool him; and perhaps, Laddie did know and because of some awful sickness of his mind wants me to and wants to catch me with her. Or perhaps she's afraid; perhaps she doesn't trust herself. I lay there thinking these things.

And down the boulevard some poor wretch, locked out of his house, was calling to a woman named Josephine; and for a second time, then a third, the rooster crowed, as at the Mount of Olives. I fell asleep, I remember, listening to the beat of my own heart.

When I awoke, her heart pounded next to mine, her lips kissing my eyes. We did not speak at first. I remember I worried about my beard scratching her face; but this didn't matter

to her. There was no question that early morning of who desired whom; we desired each other equally. I was thinking, I remember, before the moment came, how I must have desired Angelica secretly for years.

When it came, she gave out a little cry of abandonment, turning her hot cheek to the whiteness of the sofa, releasing my hands.

“Why did you act so strangely,” I whispered, “throwing water?”

“I wanted you to leave.”

“Why?”

“Because he knew,” she whispered, her lips brushing my ear.

“He knew you wanted me?”

“I believe he knew everything,” she whispered. “Everything.”

ALL THIS HAPPENED ONE EVENING AROUND the end of March; then I did not telephone the Wellses for several weeks. I wrote them a short, carefully worded thank-you note, but tore it up, and finally sent them a box of chocolate turtles from Blum's. To tell the truth I expected Angelica to telephone *me*. She knew where I worked, and knew where I lived, for I had whispered her my address before I stole out of their playroom that morning. I expected to hear from Angelica but she did not call.

One evening a week after my evening with them I came home from a night on the town and was taking off my trousers when I heard a rustling in the caladiums beneath my bedroom windows. I put my trousers back on and opened the door. As I walked outside, Laddie Wells stepped from the flower bed. He wore a leather jacket and had loosened his tie. He always wore a suit to the studio, so I guessed at once that he had gone home, changed, and now had gone out again.

"Why, hello, Laddie," I said. "Won't you come in?"

"Ja —"

Laddie entered my rooms, his flushed cheeks apple-red from the night air. At first he seemed unable to give any explanation. He began to look around him, comparing, I suppose, his own setup with my two rented rooms; then he walked into the

bathroom, walked out, went into my darkened sitting room, switched a lamp, came out; it was as though I had stolen something from his house.

“Angelica said she left the car keys at your place,” finally he said.

Laddie was never a good liar. Angelica could get away with whoppers. Like most persons born into a little money, she was naturally suspicious, believing that you were capable of all sorts of villainies, because, I suppose, she herself was capable of them. She would do exactly as she pleased, and could lie her way out like a trooper; Laddie never could. He was honest with others and honest with himself — well, as honest as humans ever are with themselves — and was as gullible a young man as Dick Whittington.

“I don’t think she left her keys,” I said, “ — because she’s never been here.”

Laddie jerked his hands out of his pockets. He drew his fingers into fists, and his jaw tightened, and his gray eyes flashed yellow.

“I don’t know whether to believe you or not.”

“Well, call Angelica,” I said. “I’ll bet she couldn’t even tell you where I live.” I handed him the telephone receiver.

“I won’t do that,” he said, banging the receiver down. He must have known that I had told the truth, for as he moved toward the door to leave, he paused in the center of the red and white rag rug at the foot of my bed and glanced down at his feet, as though he wanted to apologize. Then he turned and he walked out of my rooms without saying a word. A moment later, I heard his Chrysler charging down Cove Way.

After Laddie drove away, I undressed again; I lay in bed, passing an hour or so, wondering about what had happened.

Was it that Laddie Wells had come home from the studio, and not finding Angelica there had waited for her, then had come here, believing that he would catch her with me?

It did not occur to me this night that Laddie might have had suspicions about his wife for a long time; that he had suspected her before I came on the scene; and that he may have wanted me to spend the night there only to get some proof for his own mind. I ought to have guessed then that there had been others; for had not Angelica said, as she lay naked in my arms, that he *knew*? Oh, he *must* have known. He must have known from the corner of his eye, as one notices a hideous deformed creature in a crowd without really coming upon it face to face.

So you can understand why I did not get in touch with them. When I did telephone Laddie — several weeks later from Culvers' house — the call had nothing whatsoever to do with his wife.

One April morning, when it was almost noon, a good-looking *Time-Life* secretary arrived three hours late for work. Her name — though you need not remember it — was Jo-Ann Winters; and she had come from some dry, proper midwestern town a year or so before to seek her fortune in Hollywood. Luckily, back home Jo-Ann had attended a business school so that now, instead of car-hopping, or operating an elevator in Saks, she was able to earn a decent salary typing in Beverly Hills for *Life*.

Jo-Ann would come to work wearing bright backless play-dresses, as though she were on her way to Palm Springs; and it was said that she carried in her purse more lipsticks, powders, rouges, and perfumes than a star. After office hours Jo-Ann dated an assortment of bit players, agents, photographers, and

publicity men; and it seemed a miracle that she could rouse herself to come to work mornings at all. Honestly speaking, until this April morning Jo-Ann Winters had never come late.

She did not act at all apologetic about her lateness. She strolled in to her desk, laid down her purse, and announced to all within hearing distance that she had but just returned from the most "absolutely fabulous" party of her life. An agent, who dated her, had dropped by her apartment around ten o'clock the previous night and said: "Get into your best rags, sweetie. We're goin' t' a great big party." Half an hour later Jo-Ann had found herself tromping around the grounds of a terrific estate, which was a "dead-ringer" for George Washington's, except that it was "finer." The party, attended by all Hollywood, Jo-Ann said, had cost "thousands"; and she had been at the party a whole hour before she ever found out the people's name. They were named Culvers, she said; they were the richest people on God's earth, and *Life* ought to do a story on them.

Perched on her desk top like a secretary in an *Esquire* cartoon, Jo-Ann told all this breathlessly, with wide eyes, as though describing a vivid dream.

"Don't you live somewhere along Cove Way, Charley?" Jo-Ann asked me. I had invited her to have a sandwich at the Della Robbia. I had wanted to hear more about my neighbors' party.

"Yeah," I said, "I live across the street from the Culverses."

"Then you ought to get to know them, sweetie, so you can go to their parties."

Now I had the conceit that summer to believe that what interested *me* very much would also interest *Life's* ten million readers. When I was a boy, I would get a passionate interest

in some of the people my mother talked about. My *interest* often grew enormous, as enormous as an interest in a movie star. For instance, when old Sylvan Ledoux gave his wife Margaret, our town beauty, a ten-thousand-dollar diamond bracelet, and she caused so much talk wearing it to the grocery store, I hung around Frosts' Grocery for a week trying to catch sight of her. Margaret Ledoux is dead now. One summer she smashed her Cadillac into a sea wall down at Gulfport, Mississippi. But people in Miro talk about her still.

By the time that we had eaten our sandwiches I knew that Jo-Ann Winters had stimulated in me a burning interest in my neighbors across Cove Way. I did not reveal, at first, any interest in them back at the office; they would have laughed because of Jo-Ann Winters. But that afternoon, going about our business quietly, Jo-Ann and I found out who Culvers was.

From a 1939 issue of *Time* Jo-Ann learned that "C. C. Culvers, fortyish, bearlike oil millionaire-businessman, friend of the late Huey Long," had come out of the Louisiana scandals with a clean name. The only other mention of Culvers in *Time* was under "Business" in an issue of 1942. Culvers' ship-building firm in New Orleans had been awarded big government contracts. In that same story *Time* mentioned that Culvers in 1940 anticipating war, had shrewdly bought a chain of movie theatres and a popcorn concern.

"You mean you're from Louisiana and you'd never heard of Culvers?" Jo-Ann gawked. And I had to explain to her how Miro lay three hundred miles north of New Orleans, how its inhabitants lived there in a bustling little world all their own. I had to explain how I had gone to Harvard and wanted a life in the East, how I had fled from the South, as she had the midwest. Still, this caused my stock to fall in her eyes.

A well-known society columnist, whom I telephoned, told us more. Clarence Culvers, who during the war had quadrupled his millions with junkyards, shipbuilding, lumber mills, sodapop, movie theatres, popcorn, and a famous patent medicine, had one son and an ex-wife back in New Orleans. On a trip to Los Angeles Culvers had fallen in love with a beautiful girl, Carol something-or-other, who had a part in a western. The first wife had agreed to accept a million-dollar divorce settlement if, for some strange reason, she could retain the right to use Culvers' name in Louisiana. Culvers had agreed to this. And so, according to the society columnist, there were two Mrs. Clarence C. Culverses: one rather stout middle-aged woman, who presided over a Tudor-style mansion on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans; and the second wife, an ex-starlet, young enough to be his daughter. The columnist said that within the last month alone she had received four invitations to parties at Culvers' house.

The next morning after I had confessed to Frank Camp, head of the Beverly Hills office, my *interest* in the Culverses, he told me to go ahead, work on the story for *Life*.

Jo-Ann's boy-friend, the agent, gave me Culvers' telephone number, though he couldn't recall who'd given it to him; and that afternoon — a pink and blue afternoon threatened with rain — I telephoned it: Crestview 5-33 —; and was presently speaking with a woman secretary, who had a rough, whiskey voice. This was Mrs. Murphy — "Butch" Murphy, everyone called her. She had been Culvers' private secretary for thirty-one years.

"You're who?" Butch Murphy growled.

"Charley Thayer of *Life Magazine*," I said.

"What is it you want with Mr. Culvers?"

"*Life* wants me to do a story on one of his parties," I said.
 "Hang on for a second, will you?"

I heard my call being switched to an extension in another room in the house.

"This is Culvers speaking," another voice said. His voice, as soon as I heard it, reminded me of a high-pitched, old-fashioned, rhetorical voice that we had laughed at in college — Crane Bixby's, nicknamed the Whooping Crane. I remember the Whooping Crane well, a pompous, sexless, rather learned Minnesotan, who had once cut off relations with his artistic kid brother because the brother had hurt his chances of getting elected to the Hawk club.

"Mr. Culvers," I said, "*Life* is interested in doing a story on one of your parties."

During the short silence that followed, I heard Culvers' heavy breathing like the muffled snorts of a caged bear, weighing what I had said.

"I don't care what you would write about *me*," Culvers said. "It's what you would write about *her*."

"*Life*'ll be very fair, Mr. Culvers," I said.

"It's not me, understand? It's *her* I would mind about. If you would be kind to *her* —"

I promised him that *Life* would treat Mrs. Culvers fairly.

"She's going to be a big star someday," Culvers said. "Did you see my wife's picture?"

"I don't think I did, Mr. Culvers."

"I'll run it for you. I want you men on *Life* to see it. My wife's going to be a great actress someday . . . like Garbo."

Another silence followed, as though Culvers waited for me to doubt this. "When can I see you, Mr. Culvers?" I said. "I'll have to see you to get some facts."

Culvers placed his hand over the receiver, probably consulting his wife. "I'll telephone you, Mr. Thayer. My wife wants me to thank you for your trouble."

"All right," I said. "I'll look forward to hearing from you soon."

After Culvers hung up I heard a second click; Butch Murphy had listened in. She listened in, I later learned, to all telephone conversations at the house.

I did not receive a call from Culvers that week. I heard in a roundabout fashion that Culvers, for his wife's sake, was afraid of *Life*. If I had not met Danny Hunts, an extraordinary young man, who moved to Paris, I might never have heard from Culvers at all.

As I look back over what I have written, I see that I have neglected to give you any picture of Hollywood society. It would be impossible to understand Danny Hunts without that picture. The Hollywood area — what the public calls Hollywood — was actually a sprawling American Riviera, stretching from Vine Street, the stomping grounds of pimps and religious quacks, to Malibu. Its capital was Beverly Hills, a small wealthy city, two thirds suburb, one third resort. Ball-bearing millionaires, clothing manufacturers, and hotel tycoons had mansions there; and there were as many oil millionaires as in Texas.

One met English novelists, Hungarian countesses, press agents, chiropractors, astrologists, and professional sunbathers; all the types necessary for a true Riviera. There were many sets and crowds, and these crowds lumped together made up Hollywood society.

There was the top-drawer set. Fifteen years before, Scott Fitzgerald had called it the "Marion Davies crowd." After Miss Davies retired from the scene, the top-drawer crowd

had no special name, and since her heyday, had narrowed down considerably. Functioning, this crowd included the heads of the five big studios, some of the top stars, some of the millionaires and international set, columnists Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, and sundry society-minded young men who were the greyhounds of the hangers-on. There were other crowds: the actor-ranchers, the boy-and-girl-next-door set, the intellectuals, the bohemians, and the professional night-clubbers, whose fights and romances at the Mocambo and at Ciro's made headlines.

But it was the top-drawer crowd that the Culverses wanted to crash; and Danny Hunts, a young man invited to top-drawer parties, elected himself to help them.

There was a legend about how Danny Hunts met the Culverses; a legend that was, he told me later, entirely true. I myself had heard a part of the story from Esther, who on the afternoon before the meeting strolled slowly reading *Movie Life* on the sidewalk along Cove Way. Suddenly, across the street a gray Cadillac stopped at the gates to Jean Harris' old mansion, and a colored chauffeur got out, opening the rear door. On the back seat sat Clarence Culvers, a heavy older man, and next to him a young woman with platinum-blond hair, his second wife. While the chauffeur stood holding the door, Mrs. Culvers argued with her husband: "Aw come on and look at it, Clarence, for crissake." She had one of those smoky-dry voices, which could say anything.

Culvers, who sat waiting for her to calm down, said: "I don't want to look at this house."

"You still mad at me because of last night?"

"It's not that," Culvers said.

"Then what is it?"

Culvers didn't answer. Culvers glanced out at the chauffeur

holding the door, as though he did not wish to carry on a personal conversation in front of him; but when the chauffeur glanced toward Esther, listening to all this, Culvers found his chance to speak. "I told you once, Carol, that it's crazy to sink a lot of money into somebody else's old barn. Nobody nowadays wants an old barn."

"I thought you wanted a great big place so we could give parties."

"I do," Culvers said. "But if I'm going to spend this much money, I want to build a place myself. I want us to build a place which is perfectly correct."

"So that's it," the young wife said, stepping out of the car. "You think movie stars are cheap and vulgar."

"I didn't say that," Culvers said, glancing uncomfortably at the chauffeur holding the door.

When Mrs. Culvers got out of the car, white fringe shimmered on her white silk dress; and white-gold hair came rippling to her shoulders like angel-hair on Christmas trees; and her skin in the sunshine shone white as sugar. Mrs. Culvers' lips were painted red, red, red, and she looked every inch a movie star, Esther thought. Esther, who was an authority on movie stars, believed that Mrs. Culvers was only nineteen years old.

"Then I don't want any old house," Mrs. Culvers said. "Anyway, it'd be more fun living in at the Bel-Air Hotel." She stepped back inside the gray Cadillac and although her husband said, "for Lord's sakes" three times, and before leaving agreed to look at Jean Harris' place, his young wife would not get out again. Within a minute the pearl-gray Cadillac had crawled away.

As I said, I had heard this much from Esther, who devoted

her leisure to keeping up with the lives of movie stars. She would come over to clean my rooms on a Sunday morning, and using her wild black eyes and pink palms act out a whole little domestic drama from the Dick Powell's married life.

On Sunday afternoons Esther would visit the graves of dead stars at Forest Lawn. It was Esther who, disappointed upon learning that Carol Culvers was not actually in the movies, predicted that one day she would be. Esther must have seen the Culverses a day or so before they met Danny Hunts.

The young Mrs. Culvers, of course, won her way. They came again a few days later, accompanied by the realtor who then owned the house. Culvers was now prepared to purchase it.

Since Jean Harris' death, the house had remained uninhabited. There had been other people interested in buying, but until this time no party had agreed to pay the realtor's price. Aside from the question of money, the house was not one of the most tasteful places of Beverly Hills. Although it was copied from Mount Vernon, the tone of the place was Los Angeles-colonial. The front gallery had a blue tile floor; the master bedroom had walls mirrored from ceiling to floor. And the empty columned house, standing on its hill of dry singing grasses, looked like the Isle of the Dead. Rats, which, so the story goes, had first arrived during the dark weeks before Jean Harris suicided, now swam like a swarm of water bugs in the white marble swimming pool. Cattails grew in the hyacinth beds. When there was a strong wind, ancient newspapers dumped there flew about the grounds like a covey of bodiless birds.

"When did Miss Harris build this house?" Culvers asked in a low tone as they crossed the columned portico. Already

Culvers felt an uneasiness. Though outwardly a man of bulky dignity, his calm concealed a complex nature, which had invented its own superstitions. Culvers did not like to be around death.

The realtor, a chicken-fat Greek, scratched his behind. "She built it after she made *Hello Broadway*. Cost over a hundred twenty thousand to build back in 1938 — the house alone."

"Oh, I loved her in that," Mrs. Culvers said.

The realtor unlocked a heavy white door and they walked inside. Some pieces of furniture, left behind after the house was sold, stood covered in sheets. The rooms reminded Culvers of New Orleans cemeteries — nobody in New Orleans was ever buried underground. A blue silk handkerchief lay on the marble floor of the hall, rotting with age. The fat agent started to kick it out of sight. "Don't," Mrs. Culvers said. "Maybe it was *hers*." Mrs. Culvers knelt and gently lifted the blue handkerchief from the floor. "I'll bet it *was hers*."

"It could have been," the realtor said, perceiving the value of a ghost. "She — she loved blue."

Suddenly Culvers believed he heard footsteps. Culvers shivered. He wanted to tell them what he had heard, but now the realtor led them into the drawing room, a pea-green and gold room that was more cheerful than the hall. The realtor was saying that Grace Moore had sung at a party in this room.

Culvers strained his ears toward the rear of the house. Did he hear footsteps? Culvers did not wish to appear a fool in front of his wife, so he suggested that they make a tour of the other rooms before it grew dark. They walked immediately toward the rear of the house, the realtor leading the way. Suddenly, moving into a small white room, the realtor screamed: "God!" and turned and ran square into the Culverses.

"What is it? What is it?" Carol Culvers cried.

"A man!" screamed the realtor. "I saw a man in there!"

Presently from the white room a young man walked out, laughing. He was gracefully slender, with curly brown hair, long-lashed eyes, and a pretty face like Tyrone Powers: one of those young-old types Carol Culvers thought, who most of their lives look around twenty-five.

"Of course you saw a man! What did you think you saw? — an anteater?" The young man's voice sounded hoity-toity like an Englishman's; smoking, he used a gold and tortoise-shell holder.

"You're a burglar! I've my witnesses! I'll have you in jail!" the Greek cried.

Danny Hunts in his left hand was carrying a stack of old letters.

"What're those?" Carol Culvers asked.

"They're Jean's letters. For a long time I didn't know where she had hidden them."

"I'm calling the Beverly Hills police!" the realtor cried.

"Were you a friend of Jean Harris?" Carol Culvers said.

"I'll say I was," Danny Hunts said. "During the last two years I came here nearly every day. I was with her the afternoon of the night she killed herself."

"I'm going to have you arrested!" the Greek cried.

"Oh, shut up," Danny Hunts said, lighting another cigarette. "I only came here for the letters." Then Danny Hunts glanced dramatically around the small white room. "She and her mother played gin here. The day the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor, they were playing gin over by the window." Then: "Are you buying the house?"

"Yes," Carol Culvers said.

"It's a fabulous house. Only Jean would have built such a place. Did you know," Danny said, "that there's a secret door in an upstairs bedroom? There's also a fur vault in the basement."

"It would be wonderful," Carol Culvers said, "living in Jean Harris' house."

"Yes," Danny said, glancing around again. "It could be exactly as it was when *she* lived here. There was a Fourth of July party. We all got high as larks and shot off skyrockets in our hands."

"Oh, do go on," Carol Culvers cried, "about how it used to be!"

And so, two days later Culvers handed the Greek a check for one hundred and seventy thousand dollars; and Danny Hunts attached himself to the Culverses like a wood-tick.

There was a great deal of speculation about Danny's relationship with the Culverses. Danny was supposed to have chosen the furniture, the chandeliers, and the rugs for the house; Danny was supposed to have decorated the place down to the silver ash tray in the ladies' powder room. People said that Danny Hunts, who could spot a soft bed for himself as a fox smells fowl, pocketed several thousand dollars, doing the house.

People claimed that Danny threw out Carol Culvers' old clothes and made her spend twenty thousand dollars for a new wardrobe; they claimed he even chose the jewels that Culvers gave her.

And here was the most fantastic story of all. After he learned of old Culvers' ambitions for his wife, Danny concocted what would be the most splendid foolishness, the great-

est “camp” — this was Danny’s favorite word for fun — of his lifetime. Using Culvers’ fortune, Danny would re-create the days when Jean Harris had lived in the house. The place would become what it had been during Jean’s heyday — a fun palace, a private week-end amusement park; and there would be parties such as Beverly Hills had not seen since before the war.

How much of all this was true nobody knew. Culvers had always done things in a big way; and setting out to establish his young wife in Beverly Hills, the large parties, I think, fitted into his scheme. Nevertheless, people told these tales about the Culverses and Danny Hunts; and, of course, the tales made out the Culverses to appear perfectly ludicrous. Danny himself must have first told the tales for they were the kind of stories he loved telling about others: something fantastic and extraordinary someone had done because it was such a “camp.” Yet I do not believe that Danny spread the tales to poke cruel fun at the Culverses. It was how the tales got repeated that did the harm.

There were other stories about Danny Hunts as unlikely as his using the Culverses to re-create the past. But I am not going to start setting down Danny’s escapades, first of all because Danny’s part in my story is not an important one. I have brought in Danny because it seems significant that Carol Culvers was later to become the darling of this kind of young man and was to be surrounded by them — not that there ever was another Danny Hunts.

As I have already said, there was no way of really knowing how much truth each story had. There was the incredible story of how his “career” began, when as a pretty-faced seventeen-year-old from some town in the Florida palmetto coun-

try he wandered into a Palm Beach bar late one evening and was befriended by a prince of Sweden. This prince, then visiting a certain hostess of the winter colony, took Danny with him back to Europe. This was Danny Hunt's introduction to the great world.

Danny's bills were footed in turn by a British cold-tablets millionaire, an Anglo-Iranian engineer, and a ladies' hosiery manufacturer from Newark. Danny ran up these bills in Stockholm, in London, in Paris, in Cannes, in Istanbul, in Cairo, in Rome. He had lived all over Europe before he reached the age of twenty-three.

After Hitler attacked Poland Danny decided that this was the proper time to see California. He had met a well-known motion picture director abroad, and it was this director who gave Danny his start on the west coast. By the time that war came to this country, Danny was a familiar figure at cocktail parties in Beverly Hills. With his English suits and gossip of the great world, Danny wormed his way as an extra man into the crowd that gave large formal dinner parties. At one of these parties he met the late Jean Harris, who liked having Danny around.

A "heart" condition kept Danny out of the army, and during the war years in Beverly Hills, Danny lived fast and well. He began to sell one by one the Picassos and Chagalls and Matisses which the cold-tablets millionaire had bought him in Paris before the war, and he took trips to Acapulco and Mexico City. By the time that Danny latched onto the Culverses, he had sold his last painting and was quite broke.

I do not know very much about Danny's relationship with the Culverses. I never saw him once with either of them. It was Carol who was Danny's friend. Although Culvers never mentioned Danny to me, he must have considered him a harm-

less fluke, a la-di-da young man, whom he could safely trust with his wife, for Culvers never objected to Danny's friendship with her.

Carol never seemed bored when Danny was there. On Saturday afternoons the two of them would entertain the crowd around the swimming pool. They worked out a routine where Danny would hold Carol around the waist, lowering her into "the splits." Or Carol would straddle Danny's shoulders and Danny would trot like a pony across the lawns. They roller-skated on the flagstone terraces; and once, joining the Sunday crowd at the pool, Carol fixed a collie's leash around Danny's neck, and he ran before her on all fours, barking like a dog.

For nearly a year Danny Hunts was Carol's playmate and good friend. By the time that I met Danny, he had grown tired of Beverly Hills and had made plans to live the rest of his life in Paris, where he had felt happiest. Although Danny had spoken often of leaving, nobody really believed that he ever would.

I shall never forget our meeting.

I met Danny Hunts — of all unlikely places — at State Beach in Santa Monica. It was one of those week-end afternoons, bright as fluorescent light, near the end of April. I had gone there because Angelica Wells, that dawn three weeks before, had told me she often came to this beach Saturdays. I did not want to run into Angelica, I did not want to be brought into their troubles; yet I had come here, looking for her.

Not far from where I lay in the sands, I noticed a thin-limbed young man, who could not have been older than twenty-six, surrounded by his court. He sat there, listening to their talk, drawing crescent moons, then rings around them, in the sand with his toe.

Yes, he was a pretty boy, as pretty as a girl, although I myself did not find his looks attractive. There was something about the face — I could not decide what — that reminded me of a blossom about to fall; the expression of a pampered child who has tasted every chocolate in the box; a languid look. As I watched him, I saw that the face was capable of remarkable change, but languidness was its usual look.

He sat there, half on his lower back, his smallish shoulders propped against a striped canvas back rest, drawing his crescent moons and puffing a cigarette through his holder. Over his brown curls he wore an old tennis cap, soiled to the color of putty; and the sun had streaked his black shorts with the colors of the rainbow. At this moment he was giving ear-service to a conversation. "Goodness, Sebastian," he would mumble, while his squinted eyes restlessly roamed the beach.

His court consisted of two sailors in uniform, a trim little middle-aged Englishman, to whom he addressed most of his remarks, and a boy who could not have been over fifteen years old. Such a group at the beach would have interested anyone; and when I heard the Culverses name spoken, I turned around and looked this young man square in the face. He snubbed me horribly.

It was then that I decided to swim. I walked down to the ocean and I put on the green rubber foot-flippers which I had bought at the movie stars' sporting-goods store in Beverly Hills. I stood for a minute or so on the damp sand, surveying the waves. Nearby a towheaded boy was bawling because his sailboat was floating out to sea. Suddenly this boy, looking down at my flippers, began to pull my arm: "Frog-man, frog-man, please bring back my boat!" And, of course, I promised him. Then I waded out.

The waves that afternoon were large and had the kick of

an angry horse. Before I plunged in, I lost my balance and was swept against the pebbly bottom. It bruised my cheek and my chest. I did not want to lose face before the child, so I dived through the waves like a flying fish; I am a good swimmer. Well, I grabbed the sailboat just in time.

From the shore arose hurrahs for me from a crowd of little children. I swam back, the conquering hero. After I handed the boy his boat, the children followed me, marveling at my flippers, to my place in the sand. Their adulation of me brought smiles to all the nearby faces.

"How does it feel to be a hero?" Danny Hunts said. "I've always longed to be a hero, but never had the chance."

I took advantage of this to join them. By now the two sailors and the fifteen-year-old had gone. The Englishman turned out to be Sebastian Saunders, the distinguished novelist, who had settled in Santa Monica. I invited both of them to have a drink with me, and so the three of us left the beach.

After we crossed Ocean Front Road, Danny led the way to the Friendship, a cozy, smelly bar patronized mostly by natives of Santa Monica Canyon. They all knew Danny and Sebastian there. When he wanted, you see, Danny could worm his way in with any crowd; and too, Danny was always much nicer when Sebastian was there.

"I overheard you mention the Culverses," I said, after we had ordered three Tom Collinses.

"I like the Culverses," Danny said quickly, "and I don't allow anyone to talk about them but myself."

"They're dull and rich," interrupted Sebastian. Sebastian Saunders had a youngness — a shank of faded brown hair falling to the side of a high forehead, merry blue eyes, and a broad grin — that went with his candor. "They're not a good influence on you."

"Sebastian is a champion of mediocrity," Danny said to me. "In his books he has glorified every person on earth I would never like to know."

Sebastian only grinned. Danny was to tell me before he sailed to France that the only persons he loved in the world were Sebastian Saunders and two or three others back in that crummy Florida town where he came from.

"Why do you need the rich, Danny? They're not good for you," Sebastian said.

"Oh, I need the rich like some people need stoves," Danny said. "I hang around them, and I feel warm and safe."

Then I told Danny about *Life* wanting to cover one of Culvers' parties. I told him how I had talked with Culvers and how Culvers had never called me back.

"I know all about it," Danny said. "He's afraid you wouldn't be nice about Carol."

"Why wouldn't I be nice?"

"You know perfectly well that there're a lot of things *Life* could be funny about."

"Is there anything to your Carol, Danny? And don't you lie to me," Sebastian said, covering Danny's hand with his own.

"Carol has a kind of American peasant shrewdness that would amaze you," Danny answered, "a very high instinctive intelligence like a child."

"That's Danny's way of saying she doesn't know anything," Sebastian said, grinning.

"Well, she's not as yet aware of an attitude, if that's what you mean."

"Tommyrot."

"I don't want to talk about Carol," Danny said. "I'm going away and I don't want to talk about her."

Sebastian nodded.

“Look, Sebastian,” Danny said, staring at me. “He has bruised himself on the rocks.”

Danny touched my cheek exactly where the sore places were; I almost jumped from my chair.

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry,” Danny said. Then he told me that he would arrange to have old Culvers telephone me.

I don’t know why I have set down so much about Danny Hunts, who as I have said, was to play no other part in the history of that summer. A week after we met, Danny packed his bags one day and without telling anyone goodbye, not even Sebastian Saunders, he boarded a freighter sailing from Los Angeles to Le Havre. Before summer ended we heard that Danny had a new friend. This one, the wife of an Arizona real estate millionaire, was supposed to be half Indian.

I don’t know why, except that I saw Danny as a kind of link between Jean Harris and the Culverses. It was as though evil lived on in Beverly Hills like a disease germ, to be spread by Danny’s.

At any rate it was Danny Hunts who persuaded old Culvers to trust me and to invite me to his house.

I HAVE ALREADY SAID HOW COVE WAY, EXCEPT for the Culverses' house, strove to look "New England." If you were to take a walk at evening through the streets of the city, looking into the picture windows, you would notice couples like the Greys, sitting among their pickled spinning wheels, Sandwich glass, and chintz, playing Canasta, looking at television, reading magazines and novels. Half of the city and half of the movie people rode in station wagons and tried to live like the Joneses.

It was the other half of Beverly Hills that flocked to the Culverses' parties: the English set, the columnists, the starlets, the hangers-on, the movie stars who behaved like movie stars, the decorators, the crowd that had hobnobbed with the late Lady Mendl, Elsa Maxwell, and Cobina Wright. The night I went to the Culverses' party eight or nine hundred of this half were there.

The Culverses' columned house, dancing with silver lights, reflected into a sea of glowing lawns, rolling from the top of the small rounded hill, where the house stood, to Cove Way. With its band playing, its floodlit orange trees, its circuslike marquees, it was like carnival night.

To the right of the house stretched the marble swimming pool, glistening like a liquid of rhine diamonds. At one end water rippled down marble steps in a miniature waterfall into

the pool. At the other end there stood a marble copy of the Venus de Milo with both her arms intact.

The bowling green and the tennis courts lay to the left, lighted up with huge spotlights as though some tournament were about to take place. Farther down on the left slope of the hill stood an ancient Japanese tea house, a blue-white with concealed fluorescent tubes. The late Jean Harris had bought this small building in Tokyo in 1938, and shipped it to her estate piece by piece. She had believed it was a temple of love.

Three days before the party Butch Murphy had telephoned me. "Mr. and Mrs. Culvers're having a party Saturday night," she had said, "and want you to come."

"May I bring a photographer?"

"Well, not this time. Mr. Culvers wants me to explain to you to come just as a guest."

"But *Life* wants to cover one of their parties."

"Later. Between you and me, Mr. Thayer, Danny Hunts had a hard time persuading Mr. Culvers to let you come at all. Mr. Culvers is very suspicious of the press, especially *Life*."

Twenty minutes after speaking with Butch Murphy, a Western Union messenger delivered the Culverses' telegram; they had sent a similar telegram to each of the other nine hundred guests. This telegram officially invited me to their party.

When Saturday evening I walked across Cove Way, cars had started to creep up the drive like hungry cats. People got out, and if they had no chauffeur, policemen parked their cars. (For his large parties Culvers hired four dozen policemen to handle his guests' cars.)

"I went through the receiving line two weeks ago," said a woman, dragging a mink stole. "I'm not going to go through it again."

The woman and her escort trekked across the lawn to the

left of the house, where a white canvas marquee, the size of a small circus tent, had been set up. Inside the marquee an orchestra from the Mocambo played swing music, rotating every half hour with a rumba-mambo-tango band; and here, where people danced, and drank champagne, and picked at two thousand canapes, was located the heart of the party. I followed the couple straight to the heart.

A starlet in lavender tulle sat sullenly at a table with a man who looked like Errol Flynn. The starlet complained that she had danced in the *Diamond Daisies* number at her studio since seven A.M. and her feet were killing her, and she couldn't possibly dance with the man.

"Just one dance, sweetie," the man said. "I've gotta see how you'll feel in my arms."

"You wouldn't kid me, now?" the starlet said.

"I wouldn't do anything you didn't want me to," the man said, leading her to the floor.

I moved on past a school of socialites from Santa Barbara, who had athletic complexions and kept to themselves; past a famous dress designer who sat yawning; past Mary Pickford's husband, who sat talking with a well-known news commentator who was a good friend of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor; past one of the Ritz brothers, dancing with a pretty redhead who kept pulling up her straps. Presently I passed under a white canvas canopy, which led from the marquee into the house.

I moved through french windows into a pea-green and gilt drawing room hung with an enormous crystal chandelier. There were no guests in this room, and three red-coated musicians played the songs of Victor Herbert. I kept on moving, toward the hall. The hall had a black and white marble floor

like a chessboard; and it was there I first saw the Culverses. They stood each on a marble square, like pieces in a chess game against the whole of Beverly Hills.

Mrs. Culvers, Carol, dressed up in ice-blue satin, ostrich plumes, and diamonds, looked like a Mardi Gras doll I had spotted once in a New Orleans toy-shop window when I was a child — and had longed for and could not have. Her eyes, which were the blue of certain dolls' eyes, could look large and dumb; and when she moved her head, standing there receiving, her mussed white-blond platinum curls bobbed up and down like a little girl's. The mouth, generally conceded to be her best feature, was a woman's mouth, voluptuous, delicately curved, exciting. Speaking with Carol, your eyes always went to her mouth; and she had a way of keeping her mouth always a little opened.

During all the months I knew her, Carol never looked well dressed, and she never looked neat. She was either wearing too much lace, or too many diamonds, or cloth play shoes with an afternoon silk print, or white wool bobby socks with a sweater and skirt. She had no clothes sense — I don't believe she cared enough. She had dressed well as long as Danny Hunts had been there to tell her exactly what to wear; but after Danny left she was either too pretty-pretty or too sloppy. When smart women were cutting their hair, Carol wore hers long. As I said, this night, in her satin and plumes, she looked exactly like a Mardi Gras doll.

Mr. Culvers, in his white tie and tails, looked like some great lumpy trick bear. He was the kind of large man who is neither muscular nor fat, a shapeless hunk of bones and flesh. He had long tubular arms and hairless thick-fingered hands, so large that they seemed to get in his way. His hair was the gray color

of nails. His long nose curved with wide nostrils like a police dog's. His eyes sunk deep under thin gray brows reminded me of the steel balls in a pin-ball machine. He ought to have had a powerful chest, and powerful arms and legs and neck — yet he did not. He looked like the kind of large man who had sat around in offices all his life and had his way.

A footman, standing at the doorway, would announce the name of each arriving guest. Carol, who apparently was not listening, would ask, "Who?" and Culvers would whisper the name to her. Now Grady "Slimy" Dugan, a well-known producer, owning a collection of French moderns, was entering with his fourth wife. With perfect timing, the Culverses extended their hands and said, "So nice you could come, Mr. Dugan, Mrs. Dugan," and the "Slimy" Dugans returned the greetings with melodious grunts. The Culverses had not yet been taken up by the top-drawer set, and were still more or less a joke. And "Slimy" with his platinum-edged fifteen-year contract at First National, certainly didn't need this rich man who, as yet, held no power in Hollywood. The Dugans must have considered amiable grunts quite sufficient greetings for them.

After I was pointed out to Culvers, he stepped out of the receiving line, advancing toward me, one of his large hands extended. It's for her, I thought, that you want me to like you; for, in spite of his coming toward me with his welcoming hand, Culvers was as cold as some jagged, lonely mountain peak.

"My wife and I are happy you could come," Culvers said. Culvers' handshake for so large a hand was disappointing — a loose grip that covered my hand as though it were smothering some small bird. When Culvers first met you, he looked you

in the eye, looked hard and straight and quick; then, immediately after this, glanced at some object over your shoulder. Oh, Culvers was a cold one all right, who hated meeting any other person on equal friendly terms. After I thanked him for his invitation, we walked in rather self-conscious camaraderie towards his wife.

At first Carol acted very nervous and shy. She would not look me in the eye, and she drew her hands together as though she were squeezing a handkerchief. When she finally spoke, however, her politeness, if it was an almost agonizing desire to do the right thing, was also a very real desire to have you like her. Carol wanted desperately for you to like her.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Thayer?" Carol said. "Are they giving you enough to drink?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

"Do you think everybody's having fun?"

"They're having the time of their lives," I said, smiling. "I'll bet you'll be glad when *you* can have some fun."

Carol's mouth quivered, as though she did not know whether or not she ought to smile, agreeing with me. Carol glanced toward Culvers for help.

Culvers said, "It's the proper thing to do at a reception."

"Mr. Culvers is right," I said. "But it's always a relief, isn't it, when you can join the party?"

"You said it," Carol said. Then she suddenly laughed, as a child laughs after he feels that the ice is broken and that you are on *his* side. Well, compared to her husband, she was indeed a child. Carol couldn't have been older than twenty or twenty-one, and Culvers must have been sixty-five if he was a day.

More people entered: one of the tobacco Dukes, who had

come to Beverly Hills with his string of polo ponies; and a young woman who looked a great deal like Marilyn Monroe. The Culverses went on receiving them.

I waited nearby, because Culvers, like some father wishing to show off his child's talents wanted me to dance with his wife. As people kept arriving and the receiving line stretched longer and longer down the checkerboard floor and out under the columned portico, I wandered off. I had walked through the pea-green drawing room, where the three musicians had got around to playing "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life," and had approached the green canopy leading outside, when a waiter came scurrying after me, asking me to return. I followed the waiter, who ordered the musicians to come with us. The hall had not yet cleared of people. Culvers stood in the center.

"My wife can dance with you now," Culvers said.

"Oh, we don't want to dance, Clarence," Carol said, laughing a little. She looked at Culvers, hopefully. Culvers commanded the musicians to play a waltz.

"Goodness no! Not a waltz!" Carol cried.

"What then?"

"Well, I don't know, Clarence," she said nervously. People were gathering to watch; both of us felt very embarrassed.

"Play a waltz," Culvers said. His back was turned on the musicians, and he spoke without bothering to face them. It was a real order that he gave them, an imperial command.

The musicians began to play a sickly, squeaky waltz, and I, blushing, took Carol's hand. As we danced, more and more people returned to watch. Carol hummed the words of the song under her breath, she was so embarrassed.

*"In my swe-et lit-tle
Al-ice blue gown . . ."*

Culvers stood like a statue of stone, watching us; and people in the hall stared at him as though he were an emperor, alone in the middle of the hall, while we waltzed around to please him. The musicians, afraid to stop playing, kept playing on and on; and the circles we made, waltzing, grew smaller and smaller because of the crowds gathering to watch. All of a sudden Culvers said: "That's enough." And the musicians stopped in the middle of a measure, and we stopped, and for almost a whole minute after this the crowds were stunned into a complete silence. Culvers coughed loud, and brought one of the clumsy hands to his mouth. Poor Carol, sticking close by my side, trembled with fright.

The noise of the party commenced again, and the crowds fled in droves from the hall, leaving behind only the Culverses and me. Carol excused herself and ran into the powder room.

"We'll go into the library," Culvers said.

The butler, Joseph, a Czech, strutted before us, switching on lamps and indirect lights in the bookshelves. I wondered if all the green and gold books were real. While Culvers spoke on the telephone to his secretary, I opened one of the books. It was real all right. It was a history of the Peloponnesian Wars; in fact, every book in the library was a book of history, bound in identical green and gold. The nameplate in the book I opened said, "Clarence Covington Culvers, New Orleans." Culvers, who had finished speaking on the telephone, glared at me, as though I might do some harm to the book; so I closed it and set the book back on its shelf.

We sat down rather self-consciously in deep green leather chairs, which stood on either side of a hearth with green marble facing. Culvers' hands rested on the arms of his chair, like the statue of Lincoln in the Lincoln memorial. Culvers had little talent for putting a guest at ease.

"Do you like books, Mr. Thayer?" Culvers said.

"Well," I coughed, "I like some books."

"I read histories," Culvers stated. "The rest aren't worth the paper they're printed on. I take it you don't like histories."

"I like histories," I said, taking out a cigarette. "I also like a lot of other books."

"I like histories," Culvers repeated, very stiffly. Then Culvers grew silent, as though all to be said on the subject had been said.

Outside a rumba band began to play. Culvers took out a gold pocket watch to check on what time they had started. A Seth Thomas clock chimed in the library with us; then slow, heavy footsteps sounded from the hall.

"Miss Murphy, my secretary," Culvers told me.

Butch Murphy paused in the doorway, a tall, stout, broad-shouldered woman with the complexion of a steaming red crab. She waited a moment, examining Culvers' expression, to tell if it was all right to enter; then she introduced herself and she shook hands with me like a man. After the introduction Butch Murphy said to Culvers: "Dallas wants you to call them."

"Did New Orleans call?" Culvers said, his lips poised. Later I learned that "New Orleans" referred to long distance calls from his son. Though Culvers seldom mentioned his son in Carol's presence, he did not despise him as she tried to have you believe.

"No," Butch Murphy said, leaving the room. There was no visible reaction on Culvers' face.

Then Culvers said: "What is it that *Life* wants with us?"

"*Life* wants to cover one of your parties, Mr. Culvers."

"Is that all?"

"We would want to get some shots of you and your wife."

"Could I choose the photographs?"

"The photographs are selected back in New York. After you agree to let *Life* do a story, *Life* doesn't allow you to choose anything."

"How do I know I would like what *Life* prints about me?" Culvers said.

"You don't know," I said.

Weighing the advantages and possible disadvantages of appearing in *Life*, Culvers never took his eyes from my face. The force of his eyes, a cool unrelenting force, caused me to cough. "What would you," Culvers said, "have to do with the story?"

"Me? I'll get the story together, write it up, send the whole works to New York. The story'll go into the magazine pretty much as I write it."

Culvers took a deep breath as though he had heard good news. "I would make it worth your while, Mr. Thayer, if you were kind to my wife."

I did not answer him at once. I had never been offered a bribe before, and if I had spoken that instant I don't know what I would have said.

"I would pay you two thousand dollars, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said. "I'll give it to you tonight." Culvers picked up the telephone receiver.

"Don't," I said, rising, taking the telephone from his hand. "If you want *Life* to do a story, you must leave everything entirely up to us. You must trust us, Mr. Culvers."

"I've never trusted a man in my life who didn't work for me," Culvers said.

My jaw flinched, I felt color rising in my cheeks. I looked for a cigarette in a cloisonné box but found none. I felt myself becoming very angry.

Culvers offered me a cigarette from an old-fashioned silver case which he carried in his coat pocket. "I never use them myself," he said. "I carry the case because it was a present to my father from President Taft. My father was a representative in Washington for six years. He once ran for governor but wasn't elected." Culvers rubbed the case on his sleeve. "I carry cigarettes for my wife."

I straightened my tie, preparing to leave. "Thank you very much for the evening," I said.

"I think, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said, "that you can go ahead and do the story."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I'm going to trust you, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said, rising. I thought that he was going to put his hands on my shoulder, but he didn't. He just stood there, his large hands fumbling at his sides, as though he had suddenly thrown his weapons away.

Whether Culvers trusted me, or whether he did not, or whether he liked me or not, had nothing to do with my opinion of him; and I am not going to set down that opinion, cut and dried, at this time; because there was Culvers' side of the story. But I did form an early opinion of Culvers, and though I did not change it, I put on blinders. I must have put them on the moment that he said he trusted me. It was clever of him to say that. It made me feel that I had gained some advantage over him; it made me feel that he had stepped down from his money and power and was no stronger than I.

As we sipped scotch and sodas in the library half an hour

later, I was telling Culvers about Miro. I was telling him all kinds of things which any young person will tell to ingratiate himself with someone rich and powerful. Culvers nodded, and smiled, and sipped, and finally he himself began to talk.

Although Culvers never once spoke a word about his businesses, he was very glib about his ambitions for Carol. He had organized his own small production company, Culvers Productions, to produce her pictures; and he had hired a "cultured young Irishman" named Flanagan, to run it for him. It was Flanagan who advised Culvers what stories to buy; it was Flanagan who had hired the six writers to write the screenplays; it was Flanagan, who was going to work out a deal with a major studio to distribute the pictures, after they were made.

"Who is this Flanagan?" I said. "I've never heard of him."

"Flanagan's all right, Flanagan's all right," Culvers said. "Flanagan's family's been in the theatre for years."

When I didn't say anything, Culvers, with his usual suspiciousness, said: "Have you heard anything about my company that I should know?"

"Well, I've heard that you've hired the six lousiest writers in town. I've heard you're throwing thousands down the well, Mr. Culvers."

Culvers rose quietly from his chair, picked up the telephone, and told Butch Murphy to try to locate Flanagan. Butch Murphy said Flanagan had called in and left a message that he was at the Mocambo that evening.

"Get Flanagan," Culvers said.

Five minutes later Butch Murphy had got Flanagan on the telephone at the Mocambo.

"Hello, Flanagan," Culvers said. "I want you to tell me who the writers are that you have hired. I want to know what pic-

tures they've written, what their reputations are as writers."

As Culvers listened, I pictured a snappily dressed Irishman at the Mocambo, talking against rumba music, his blonde waiting angrily at their table. Culvers hung up. To my astonishment Culvers called off the names and qualifications of the six writers:

John Earle Baber, screenwriter for thirteen years, wrote some of the Rogers-Astaire musicals. At one time earned \$2000 a week. At present down on his luck. Adapting a Saki story for Culvers in the manner of *Quartet* for \$250 a week.

Matt Roberts, a screenwriter for seventeen years, was one of the thirty-seven writers who had worked on *Gone With the Wind*. Recently fired from Warner Brothers, where he was earning \$1000 a week. Flanagan got him cheap.

Frank Heinberg, working for Culvers for \$200 a week, had no screen credits, but worked for six months at Twentieth, three months at Warners.

Louis Pokinos, wrote a successful mystery novel eight years ago. Flanagan hired him for \$300 a week.

Sam Fauston Adams, radio writer for twenty years, just getting started in pictures. Flanagan got him for \$400.

Sig Frankenburg, collaborated on two Broadway plays, that had short runs, came to Hollywood to get away from New York. Flanagan hired him for \$900 a week, but that was cheap for Frankenburg.

Culvers paused, waiting to see if all this changed my opinion of Flanagan.

"Mr. Culvers," I said, "I don't know of anything wrong with your writers. They may turn out to be swell. I only know what I've heard."

"Who was it that told you about the writers?"

"A young man very important in the picture business," I said, "a young man who's gone far."

"Perhaps he's jealous of Flanagan," Culvers said.

"I don't think he knows who Flanagan is."

A disagreeable expression passed over Culvers' face, as though he had a stomach-ache. "Flanagan gets ten thousand a year," Culvers said. "I can't afford to pay a man who's worth more. Flanagan's all right. He's new; he's learning; he'll make mistakes. On the whole I'm not dissatisfied with what Flanagan's done."

"What has he done?" I said.

"We shot an O. Henry short story last year. We were going to use it with the Kipling story and two others as a kind of American *Quartet*. It didn't turn out very good. We've scrapped it. We just shot a de Maupassant story.

"I want my wife to appear in fine pictures, Mr. Thayer. I'm not in the picture business to make money. I have enough money. I want to make something really fine like *Brief Encounter*, *Wuthering Heights*, like Bergman's pictures, like *Camille*."

"Don't pay any attention to what I said, Mr. Culvers. I think what you're trying to do is fine."

"Can you suggest, Mr. Thayer a good man for me?"

"Yeah, but he won't work for you."

"Why not?"

"He's under contract to a studio. He makes eight hundred a week."

"Maybe he would work on the side," Culvers said. "He might like some extra money. I need a young producer to work with Flanagan."

"I don't think this one would work for you," I said.

"I would let him do any story he wanted, if he's as good as you say. He would like that. Get him on the telephone."

"It's too late," I said.

Culvers buzzed Butch Murphy. "What is his number, Mr. Thayer?" And so I told him. I knew the number, for I had looked it up dozens of times in the directory and not called it. Culvers handed me the receiver.

"Hello," Laddie Wells's sleepy voice said.

"This is Charley," I said. "Now don't hang up. I'm not high or anything like that."

"Then why're you calling me at this time of night?" Laddie said, waking. "What the hell do you want, Charley? It's a quarter of two."

I told Laddie how I had become friendly with the Culverses, how old Culvers' desire to make a fine picture had impressed me.

"What does that have to do with me?" Laddie said.

"Well, Laddie, Culvers wants me to ask you if you would like to produce a picture for him. Something really fine."

"How the hell can I do a picture for that burgher? Didn't you tell him I'm under contract to a studio?"

"I told him. He says that he'll make any story you want. He says that he thinks you might do it on the side."

"He's crazy," Laddie said. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Please don't hang up, Laddie," I said. "This Culvers is a man with good intentions. His wife is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. She's going to become a big star, someday. He's doing all of this for his wife, Laddie. Everything is for *her*."

"What kind of picture does he want to make? You don't just *make* any picture," Laddie said.

"I've told him what you said about his outfit, Laddie. He wants to do something really fine."

"I think you're crazy, Charley, I'm going to Montana tomorrow morning on location. I've got to get some sleep."

"Think it over, Laddie. Maybe when you come back . . ."

"*Ja*," Laddie said sleepily. "Maybe when I come back. . . ." Then he hung up.

Culvers, who had listened quietly, wore a troubled expression. "Why won't he work for me?"

"He's coming to see you, Mr. Culvers, when he gets back from Montana. He's going to Montana in the morning."

Thoughts of Angelica came drifting like a lovely fog into the room with me. I started planning late drives along the beach and a day in the mountains. Culvers' high-pitched voice began to sound like words heard in sleep. "When is he coming back?" the voice was saying. "When is he coming back?"

"He didn't say. Sometimes a location trip lasts as long as two months."

Shortly after this, Butch Murphy was able to reach Clarence Culvers, Jr., by telephone, and I excused myself.

They sat drinking in sixes and eights around the tables under the marquee; and they would dance for half an hour to the bouncy music of an orchestra playing the songs of *South Pacific*. Then the orchestra would alternate with a rumba-mambo-tango band. People spread their fur wraps and lay down on the grass, and people had their fortunes told by a swank Beverly Hills numerologist. Two snobbish English actors arrived with Vera Velma the strip-tease queen, who wore pink dyed fur and was introduced as Mrs. T. Markoe Deering of Southampton and New York.

At two-thirty sharp the man who had played Washington in *Valley Forge* vomited over the buffet, and a sturgeon and three red herrings had to be taken away. Down the hill in the Japanese tea house two ensigns were having a crap game with Len Evansman, the columnist. Len Evansman wanted to know if I could change a thousand-dollar bill. At a quarter of three a dozen Hawaiian girls did the hula-hula and a dignified producer, who had an obsession for pinching young women's behinds, got his face slapped by the ukelele player. A thin man who did rope tricks followed the hula girls. It was during the rope tricks that somebody started throwing the plates out over the hill. "Look," cried a starlet, "flying saucers!" Forty-five people rose from their chairs to look. Three men started throwing plates, then a woman started.

Culvers, who had wandered to a table with his wife, forced a smile; but his jaw tightened and he drew the large hands into fists. Carol, gulping champagne, acted shocked.

"They're not goin' to act this way at our house!" Carol cried, rising from her chair.

"Sit down, Carol," Culvers said. "We expected this."

"They're not goin' to act this way at our house! I'm goin' to stop it," Carol cried, running from the table. Carol ran down the hill to where the plates were falling, and I impulsively ran after her. As I caught her, we tripped on a broken plate and tumbled on the grass.

"Let me help you, Mrs. Culvers," I said.

She shook her head. So we lay there: Carol sprawled on yards and yards of soiled satin, and I propped on my elbow at her feet. Suddenly, looking across Cove Way at the Grey's cute colonial cottage, she began to cry.

"I live over there," I said.

"Oh, Christ, Mr. Thayer, I — I need a drink."

"Call me Charley."

"Call me Carol. Please let's go get a drink. Please," she said. And so I helped her to stand.

Carol took my hand and we galloped over lawns, flower beds, and broken plates to Culvers' house. Inside the pea-green drawing room the musicians were playing "My Buddy" for a young man who had passed out on the sofa. Someone had placed a single white rose in his hand.

"It's in there," Carol said, pointing to a white and gilt grand piano.

We raised the top. From a spot near the bow she took out a bottle of gin. "Like gin?"

"Sure," I said.

We poured gin into two champagne glasses that were rolling on the rug. "Don't tell on me," she said to the musicians. "Mr. Culvers doesn't like me to drink. Won't 'low any liquor in the house except at parties." She gulped down her glassful of gin and refilled it. The gin tasted warm and strong, and when I coughed, she laughed at me. "Oh, you don't really like gin, do you?"

"It's better than nothing," I said.

"Much." She drank the second glassful. "Nobody knows about this bottle."

"You'd better put it back," I said, hearing footsteps.

"Is somebody coming?" she said, her blue eyes enlarging. She took a quick swig from the bottle.

Joseph, the butler, entered the room before she could put the bottle back. Carol held the bottle behind her. Joseph, pretending not to see it, took away the glasses we had used.

"It's a grand party, isn't it, Joseph?"

"Yes, Mrs. Culvers, it's a fine party."

After Joseph left, Carol took another swig, then offered me one. I shook my head. "You don't like gin, do you?" she repeated. Then she turned toward the musicians: "Le's have dancin' music, please." And so the musicians began to play "Blue Moon."

"I can do the splits, can you?"

I said that I couldn't do the splits.

"I learned the splits at acrobatics class in St. Louis. Daddy, my real daddy, wanted me to be like Shirley Temple. Here, grab me around the waist. Le's be crazy, huh?"

I held her, lowered her to the floor as she did the splits. After the first one she started to puff, and I took my hands away. "I guess I'm out of practice," she said. "Danny and I were swell. I'll have to train you. Want another swig?"

"No, thanks."

"You won't mind if I do?"

"No, but someone's coming."

Carol had lifted the piano top to put in the bottle when Joseph entered again, carrying a silver platter covered with little sandwiches; Carol ate little ham and cheese sandwiches late at night. This time Joseph saw the bottle; in fact Joseph even helped her to close the top.

"I didn't call *you*," Carol said nastily.

"I thought you would like your sandwiches, Mrs. Culvers," Joseph said.

"I won't have you spying on me. He's spying on me, Charley."

When Carol reached toward the piano, to support herself, she fell. Joseph bent to help her. "Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" she screamed. "Get away!" Carol clawed Joseph's

face with a great marquise diamond on her third finger. Blood trickled from Joseph's cut onto her dress. Joseph did not bat an eye.

"Get away. He's hurting me, Charley. Make him go away!"

"You ought to go upstairs, Mrs. Culvers," Joseph said. But when he took her arm she kicked at him; and when he finally got a hold she screamed loud.

"Please help me get her upstairs," Joseph said.

When I knelt to help Joseph, Carol slapped at me. "Knew you weren't my friend! Hate you. Hate you all. Danny, Danny, come help me. Danny, Danny, Danny." Sobbing, Carol buried her face in her hands.

"Help me, please, Mr. Thayer," Joseph said.

I told Joseph to get Mr. Culvers.

After Joseph went off to get Culvers, Carol lay there, crumpled on the floor. Her sobs and her cries roused the young man who had passed out. Now the young man sat up, as though he had just waked up in an insane asylum. When I watched him stealing, frightened, from the room, I noticed that the musicians had already fled.

Culvers approached Carol as though she were a dangerous cat — slowly, stealthily, prepared to retreat. "Carol, Carol, we're taking you upstairs," Culvers said.

"I hate you," Carol hissed, raising her head, staring at her husband from the floor.

"Let's go upstairs, Carol."

"Don't touch me, you filthy goat. Goat, goat, goat — that's what you are — Goat!"

"My wife can't drink, Mr. Thayer. Every time, it ends this way." Culvers moved nearer. She could hear his high wheezing breaths.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" Carol screamed. "I hate your god-damn movies, for crissake. Bastard, bastard, devil, goat. Old goat. — I wanna die, I wanna die. Danny, Danny, Danny, Danny." Carol's body began to shake with sobs.

When Carol hung her head, they pounced. Culvers grabbed one wrist, Joseph, the other. They dragged her, kicking and screaming, into the hall, and up the steps. As they dragged her into some upstairs room, her screams faded; presently, one hardly heard any screams at all. Three shocked women had seen the spectacle from a doorway.

"Did you hear the words she screamed at him?" the first woman said.

"And she knows she'd be nothing without him. Oh, she knows," the second woman said.

"She'd be nothing," the third said. "It's his money, his brains, his ambitions for her that are responsible for everything."

Culvers did not return, but he sent me a note by Joseph.

"Tomorrow morning my wife won't remember anything that has happened tonight. Please don't hold this against her. We are so very very grateful to you. Clarence C. Culvers."

I stuffed the note into my pocket before I left the house. I looked at my watch near a floodlighted orange tree; it said four o'clock. Though people had started to leave, the party showed few signs of ending. Four couples were dancing in the shallow end of the pool in their evening clothes, and by the side of the pool Vera Velma was doing bumps and grinds.

I stopped for a moment at the top of the hill from where you could see all the lights of Los Angeles. It looked as though all the Christmas trees in the world blinked out there.

“You don’t know me, Mr. Cooper,” a woman said, fluttering toward me from under the portico, “but — Oh! oh! I’m so sorry!”

I wasn’t Gary Cooper; I walked down the lawns through a snowfall of paper napkins and crossed to the quiet side of the street.

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK ON SUNDAY MORNING the Culverses' chauffeur delivered fruit to my rooms. It came in one of those mammoth wicker baskets, shaped like a horn of plenty, all veiled with golden cellophane.

Between a mango and a pear I found their card — Mr. and Mrs. Clarence C. Culvers — with an invitation to come to Sunday luncheon “around the pool.” I sent back word by the chauffeur that I would be unable to come.

As soon as the chauffeur left my rooms, I telephoned Angelica. Helga, their Swedish woman, said that Mr. Wells had gone to Montana that morning, and said that Mrs. Wells had left the house shortly after. Mrs. Wells would be away for the day. Helga promised that she would have Angelica call me. I killed Sunday hanging around my rooms, waiting for Angelica to call.

Across Cove Way twenty cars arrived, bringing people to lie around the Culverses' pool. At some time during the afternoon Carol Culvers had thought it would be fun to have the Hawaiians back, for around five o'clock Culvers' place began to hum with the music of ukeleles and banjos. By the time that I started out in my Chevrolet to take a drive, word of a party had spread; small crowds crossed their lawns like armies of ants.

I telephoned again at eight o'clock. Helga said that Angelica had called her fifteen minutes before, saying that she would not be coming home until eleven. "Did you tell her that I called?" I said. Helga said that she had told her I had called.

I telephoned her three times on Monday, twice on Tuesday, twice on Thursday. Each time Helga said Angelica was not at home.

Friday I did not call her, nor Saturday. Sunday, when Laddie had been gone a week, I dialed the number, planning to hang up if Helga answered. This time Angelica herself answered the telephone.

"Hello . . . hello . . . hel-lo . . ."

"Angelica, this is Charley," I finally said.

"Oh, Charley! Helga told me you'd called."

I waited for an explanation of why she had not called me back; and when none came — just a reciprocal silence during which I heard her breathing into the receiver — I said: "Why — why don't you have lunch with me?"

"I'm doing something."

"Tomorrow, then."

"I'll tell you what, Charley. I'll see if I can change my plans for today. I'll call you back, if you'll give me your number."

"I gave you my number, don't you remember? I gave you my office number and my number at home."

"Well, you'd better give it to me again," she said.

So I gave her my number a second time. Nearly an hour passed before she called me.

"Well, Charley, I broke my engagement," she said.

"Why, that's wonderful, Angelica," I said.

"Oh, Charley, it'll be so good to see you again."

"Good?" I laughed.

"Well, you're from home and . . ."

"I thought you'd broken away from all that a long time ago," I chuckled.

"I have, I have, Charley. But you know what I mean, Charley."

Foolishly, I believed this was her way of hinting that she wanted me again. I believed that she was embarrassed to come right out and tell me. I said that I understood.

"Oh, Charley, I know a lovely place on the beach where we can go," she said, "— and talk."

"Shall I pick you up at your house?" I said.

"No, no, no," she said. "I'll meet you at the Beverly Hills Hotel in the lobby. I'll meet you there at one o'clock."

So, you see, I had every reason to believe that she wanted me.

Angelica arrived there before I did. She saw me walk into the hotel, and when she saw that I had recognized her, she smiled beautifully, and she moved across the garish green lobby like a track of sunlight in a forest. She was wearing a pale lemon yellow play dress, scattered with pink daisies, which showed up her dark hair, and at least half a dozen tinkling bracelets of gold.

Angelica had always dressed beautifully and expensively; more expensively, perhaps than the O'Briens at one time could afford. I can remember a little ermine muff and cape which Angelica wore on a Christmas afternoon when she was nine. This was during the depression years when Porter O'Brien had just opened his plumbing equipment company, when nobody in Miro invited them to parties. And after Porter O'Brien made all that money during the war, Angelica at fifteen spent more for clothes than her mother. Now I don't actually know what Mrs. O'Brien spent, but this was what my mother and

my mother's friends said, when people first began to take notice of them.

I don't remember any of the dresses Angelica had worn. I remembered how yards and yards of chiffon and satin and lace had swept the floor, back at the Junior Dances. We were only fourteen and fifteen, when we were going to the Junior Dances. And I remembered her stone martens at Miss French's, and her mink coat. The O'Briens said that it was Mrs. O'Brien's mink coat; but that was because they didn't want people talking about their spending five thousand dollars for a seventeen-year-old daughter's winter coat. People used to ask, "Why does that O'Brien girl dress up so fine?" I don't believe that Angelica dressed up for others. She simply loved fine clothes. She was one of those small-town girls with money who could not resist indulging herself.

"Would you like a cocktail in the bar?" I said.

"No, let's go to the beach," Angelica said. "Nobody will see us there."

So we moved out of the lobby toward the porte-cochère. She wanted to go in her convertible, so that we could ride with the top down; and she wanted me to drive, so I took off my coat and my tie and threw them across the back seat.

Driving out Sunset Boulevard, Angelica said what pretty houses there were. We were as polite as strangers. We did not begin to talk until we had passed that impressive gateway, leading to Bel-Air — the one that looks exactly like the entrance to a swanky cemetery. "When will Laddie come back?" I said.

"Not until next Sunday," she said.

I reached, then, to find her hand, but after I took it, she withdrew it to get herself a cigarette.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I was out, Helga told you. I've been seeing friends of mine in Santa Barbara. Laddie doesn't like them. Thinks they're social butterflies."

"You wouldn't be kidding me, would you?"

"You don't have to believe me if you don't want to."

"The last time we saw each other —"

"What happened between us just — just happened. Can't we be just friends?"

I did not say anything, and we grew quiet. I felt her gaze upon my face. I did not want her to know about my hurt, so I began to whistle.

"You're not mad with me, are you, Charley?" she said.

"No, I'm not mad," I said.

I was going sixty miles an hour around those dead-quiet curves near the Beverly Hills polo fields. "Are you trying to kill us, Charley?" So I slowed; and we drove in silence through Pacific Palisades. Now we were taking the last curves of Sunset Boulevard. Angelica's golden eyes squinted for sight of the beach.

"Isn't it funny, Charley, us living in Beverly Hills?"

"What's funny about it?"

"I mean how we've known each other all our lives and how we've turned out so differently from all the others. You probably think I'm awful, don't you, Charley?"

"I don't think you're awful," I said.

It was a beautiful blue and yellow Sunday. In Louisiana children would be chasing butterflies and hunting for frogs; in Santa Monica children built sand castles on the buttermilk surfaces of the beach. Angelica inhaled a deep breath of ocean winds.

"Aren't you glad we came, Charley?"

"How much farther is your place?" I said.

"Not much farther. Oh, look, Charley, a Jaguar!"

From the corner of my eye I saw a sly, low-slung foreign automobile stealing like a black cat alongside the plain American cars.

"You ought to get a Jaguar, Charley. I think Jaguars are the sexiest cars in the world. Do you ever think about cars having sexes, Charley? Cadillacs, I think of as girl-cars; Fords are boy-cars." Angelica giggled.

I said that sometimes I thought of things that way.

Angelica's favorite place, when we arrived there, was one of those ultra-modern California restaurants, with walls of slanting glass and lamps of driftwood. The building extended far out over the ocean, and it was as though we were sitting in a boat. Built on the edge of a private cliff, the building had once been a retired New Yorkers' beach house. The New Yorkers had had so many week-end guests that he had been forced to go to work again, and he had converted his beach house into a high-priced restaurant-inn, and had called it The Week-End House. Important movie people came here for quiet week-ends with their lovers. The Week-End House was not too near Los Angeles and not too far away. A waiter seated us at a corner table, screened by ferns, and we had a splendid view of the Pacific. It was the perfect place — if only Angelica had wanted me and not George Martin.

I found out about George Martin, her lover, because of the blunder of a drunk.

The waiter had just brought our soup — two small cups of shimmering jellied madrilène — and had left us to ourselves. Angelica had said that there was nothing better than sour cream to go with madrilène, and had turned, facing the bar, to

call back our waiter. Meanwhile, this drunk, leaning on the bar, seemed to recognize her and started to stagger in our direction. "Hey, Martin! Hey, Martin!" the drunk called. The drunk must have seen Angelica lunching or dining here with George Martin in the past, for though he saw only my back and the nape of my neck through the ferns, he mistook me for George Martin. "Hey M-M-Martin! What about that ten-ten-ten spot? When're y' gonna come accccross with that ten I lent y' last week?"

Although I knew that the drunk was moving toward us, I did not turn around. I was counting on our waiter stopping him before he reached the table.

"Hey, Martin! You heard what I said. When-when y' gonna pay me back?"

It was then that I turned. The drunk had one of those pinkish pocked faces, bead eyes, and his brown slacks' zipper was half unfastened.

"I don't think I know you," I said.

"Y' don' know me?" the drunk said, brushing aside fern leaves.

"I'm not Martin, mister," I said, rising, laying my napkin on the table. "And I've never seen you before in my life."

"I suppose y' don' recall th' ten spot I lent you, either?"

Without looking closely, the drunk grabbed hold of my shirt. I gave him a sound shove that threw him backward on the floor; then two other waiters came running and dragged the drunk out before we had a real fight. Our waiter hurried over to apologize.

"I'm sorry, sir. I guess he mistook you for Mr. Martin. You see, Mr. Martin and — er — the young lady always sit at this same table."

That let the cat out of the bag.

Poor Angelica, who during the scene had sat there, paralyzed with shock and confusion, now pressed her napkin against one cheek. Her cheeks looked red as though all the blood in her body had suddenly rushed there.

"Let's leave," Angelica whispered.

"No," I mumbled, "I want to finish my lunch."

"Please. Please, Charley."

"Eat your soup. Why don't we have the waiter bring us that sour cream?" I said, lifting the spoon to my lips.

"Everybody in the place is staring at us. I want to get out of this place," she said, reaching for her purse.

"Eat your soup," I said. "They'll stop looking at you."

"I'm not hungry, Charley. I want to leave here."

"Look Angelica. Who cares if you saw this Martin a couple of times?"

I cannot remember what it was that she said immediately after that; I don't even know if she said anything. Her head jerked with a little nervous motion, and her hand went to the back of her neck as though she were about to fluff her hair, and her chin tilted out. And all of a sudden she was telling me about her lover.

Angelica first saw this George Martin, for that was his real name, at the Montmartre. She had gone there one evening after dinner with Laddie, as we had gone, and they were sitting at a table near the rear of the main room. There was a kind of window with a glass pane between this room and the bar, so that the men at the bar could watch the show. Glancing around the room, Angelica noticed George Martin standing at this window, holding an empty glass. Raising the empty

glass to his mouth, staring through the window, he looked as though he longed to be sitting in the main room. Then his eyes fixed upon her. Laddie, who felt peeved because she had forced him to come to this place, and was trying to hide his peeve, sat listening to Grover Coone's singing with exaggerated interest; so Angelica returned George Martin's stare.

She left the table three times, making phony trips to the Ladies' Room, and she lingered in the foyer near the bar; but George Martin never sought her there. After they went home, she could hardly carry on a conversation with Laddie for thinking about this man. For several hours — it seemed the whole night — she lay awake, after Laddie had dozed off beside her. Her legs ached, and her head felt heavy, longing for George Martin. It was as though a powerful ink had spilled in her brains, blotting out everything else but George Martin's face.

The next day Angelica drove past the Montmartre fifteen times, simply because she had seen the man there; and she persuaded Laddie to take her back that night, and the following night. When she did not find the man, she told herself that he was some traveling salesman who had gone on his way.

One Friday afternoon after a week had passed, Angelica, driving along Sunset, stopped her convertible at a drive-in restaurant, the one that advertised the largest hamburgers in the world; and it was there that she saw her man. He was sitting in a broken-down old Dodge which looked about a thousand years old. He recognized her at once, and she smiled at him.

At first he ignored her. He even looked out the opposite window. He told her much later, Angelica said, that he had thought at first she wasn't "nice." Imagine a two-bit rascal

like George Martin thinking that Angelica wasn't nice! He told her that he could make love only with nice girls. Why, it was as though a tramp marched from door to door announcing that he could only eat steak. George Martin was not handsome, he was not well-mannered, he was not entertaining in the least; in fact, every remark he made, every opinion uttered, was something stupid and inane; yet when George Martin entered a room, the eyes of every woman in it went to him.

Well, after George Martin so pointedly ignored Angelica, she opened the door of her convertible, stepped out, and walked across the pebbled parking area to the restaurant — in order for him to judge better what she looked like. Inside, she bought a package of cigarettes; and as she was returning to her car, opening this package, he called to her. "Come over and have a drink with me," he said, holding up a bottle. He had a fifth of Old Taylor, which some friend had given him, and had been quietly drinking it alone, chasing it with Coca-Cola. Angelica shook her head. No, she would give him back his own bitter medicine. She would not go over to his car. You would have thought that this would have wounded George Martin's ego; for he was horribly, horribly vain.

George Martin waited five minutes to tell if she would change her mind. When Angelica did not budge from behind her wheel, he got out of his old wreck of a car, and came over with his bottle to hers.

"How long have you known George Martin?" I said. We had finished eating — at least, I had finished. Telling all this, Angelica had just sat there, smashing a cracker to bits with the handle of her knife.

“Almost five months,” she said. She glanced down at the mess she had made on the cloth. “It was George, wanting to speak to me at the Montmartre that night. Don’t you remember how a dark-haired man wanted to speak to me, Charley?”

“I remember,” I said.

The waiter came, bringing us two brandies with the compliments of the drunk, who turned out to be Jack Swayze, the famous tennis star of the thirties. I used to have Jack Swayze’s photograph tacked up over my desk beside Joe DiMaggio’s, Dolores del Rio’s, and Edward the Eighth’s. The waiter said that Mr. Swayze had gone home.

“We don’t want his drinks,” Angelica said, stopping the waiter with her hand.

“For Lord’s sake, Angelica, let’s let the poor fellow make his amends.”

The waiter set the brandies before us. Angelica, who didn’t really like to drink, would not touch hers; so I drank both of them. Angelica kept saying, “I bet you think I’m awful, don’t you, Charley, I bet you think I’m awful . . .” until I thought I would go off my rocker.

I didn’t know what I thought about her — not really. The knowledge of her affair, helped along by brandy, caused me to feel excited and warm and sad, and a little afraid for her.

“Why don’t you order a drink?” I said.

“I don’t want anything to drink.”

“Well, I want another brandy, and I’m not going to sit here, drinking alone,” I said.

I had forgotten about Angelica’s not liking to drink. She would take a drink; I have seen her down three or four martinis at one sitting, but it was like drinking your early morning orange juice, or medicine. She held back her head and drank

until the last drop was drained. When she got tight, she acted crazy as a loon and was the life of the party, and most people liked her better after a drink or two. But she did not really like the stuff.

Somehow, Angelica's distaste for liquor did not fit in with my conception of her. I thought of Angelica as very spoiled, very passionate, very unconventional, and very mixed up. Yes Angelica was screwed up all right.

Angelica beckoned to the waiter. I ordered a brandy and soda, and she ordered a sweet Tom Collins. She liked a sweet Tom Collins because it tasted like lemonade, she said.

After the waiter left, Angelica pressed her fingers over her temples. "Sometimes don't you wish, Charley, that you could just black out for a while? I do. I just want to sleep and sleep. And sleep and sleep." She felt this way because I had found out about George Martin, and because both of us knew that sooner or later she would have to have a showdown with Laddie Wells.

Angelica despised a showdown of any kind. She preferred to let matters ride along, drift, slide. Angelica did not know, I suppose, what to do with herself. I do not mean that she could not find ways to amuse herself — she thought of nothing else but how to amuse herself. What I mean is that she never took hold of her life and said: I am a certain kind of person; I am going to do thus and so.

As I said, Angelica's distaste for alcohol gave the lie to one's conception of her, hinting that perhaps she possessed a strength you never suspected her to have.

There was something so young, so foolish and weak, so perfectly pathetic about Angelica. She was so tiny — even wearing high heels she barely reached your shoulder. What

happened was this: I began to feel sorry for Angelica and I began to want more and more brandies and sodas.

"Come on, Angelica. Come on," I cried. "Let's get good and stinking."

The waiter came running, after I cried out, and kept taking our orders for an hour or so; and after we had got looped — it only took one Tom Collins for her — Angelica wanted me to meet George Martin, so we left the place.

Halfway between Marion Davies' old beach house and Malibu we came to the Dolans' house, or rather George Martin's, for though he supposedly rented only a room from them, the household revolved around him. It was one in a row of monotonous small frame houses, cramped side by side, their entrances level with Ocean Front Road, their rears supported by great stakes driven into the beach. The row of houses looked like shoe boxes overhanging a narrow shelf.

We got out of the car. Angelica pressed a doorbell that chimed "Jingle Bells." When no one came, she beat the door with her fists. Finally, Mrs. Dolan — Lois — let us in.

"Why hello, sweetie," Mrs. Dolan said.

"What took you so long?" Angelica said, brushing past her.

"Did you ring, sweetie? *I* didn't hear you."

Lois Dolan, chasing after Angelica into the living room, reminded me of some miserable, unwanted cur running after a poodle. Lois Dolan was one of those thin, pushy women who rush about like wasps. She had large myopic brown eyes, longish orange-red hair, which shook violently as she ran about her little house. She was somewhere between thirty-five and forty years old. Although Lois acted servile toward Angelica, she behaved very imperiously toward her husband and ordi-

nary strangers. Like many aggressive plain women it was impossible to utter an opinion in her presence without that opinion being challenged or ignored by her. For instance, when Lois's husband, Herbert "Doc" Dolan, a jellyfish, if I ever saw one, commented that it was pleasant living at the beach in summer, dismal the rest of the year, Lois Dolan jumped down his throat:

"I suppose you think it's just jim-dandy in Los Angeles and Beverly Hills in the winter? So thick with smog that you think the atom bomb has exploded. It isn't half as nice as out here."

Doc Dolan, who had been wiping his rimless glasses, put them on again to take another look at the ocean. "Lois is right, Mr. Thayer," Doc Dolan said, taking a seat in one of the maple armchairs, that crouched about the small living room like camels. "There's nothing quite like our ocean."

Although Doc Dolan had got his degree as a doctor of medicine, for some reason he held only a modest job, working for a pharmaceutical firm. When I asked Doc Dolan why he did not practice, Lois said: "Why, I wouldn't want Doc to be a plain old doctor. As it is, we can go away on nice trips two weeks every year, and Doc can be at home with me after five, where he's his own boss."

Poor Dolan was never his own boss for one minute in his life after he married Lois. I suppose that a woman like Lois has her points — certainly, whatever belonged to Lois was described so it looked superior: Dolan's job; the lower-middle-class seaside bungalow with its lumpy maple furniture, its plastic cups and plates, its Hollywood beds; — and George Martin, for George had belonged to Lois since the summer Sunday the year before, when he had driven out in his old

Dodge to rent a room in Santa Monica. George Martin had noticed the Dolans' Room For Rent sign, and gone there to have a look.

At the time George Martin moved in, he worked as a shoe salesman at a large store for women in Beverly Hills. If Lois Dolan had wanted to know why he wished to live so far away from where he worked, she was soon to find out. Every Sunday George Martin passed four or five hours hanging around State Beach. He did not swim, he did not play volley ball, he did not lie still long enough to get a tan. He simply hung around there in his bathing suit, looking at the teen-age girls. I know all this, because I was to see him there one Sunday near the end of summer.

Lord, what did Angelica see in this man? In the first place he was too old for her. He was forty, perhaps even forty-five, and for all I knew he might have been older. I'm positive that he touched up his hair. His hair was black, blacker than a Mexican's, and he slicked it straight back with not a strand out of place. He had a heavy wide tomcat mouth, creased with two lines deep as ditches; and a mouthful of huge square teeth. In fact he apologized for his late appearance, telling me that he had been brushing his teeth. George Martin must have brushed his teeth five times a day. Lois told us that he took two daily baths.

His eyes, I must not forget his eyes. They were hot, brown eyes. Behind their red-streaked corneas they looked like two small roasting nuts. He sat there quietly, folding his hands, crossing his legs, like the president of a New England bank.

While Angelica and Lois did the talking — Angelica was saying how we had grown up together and how now I worked in Beverly Hills for *Life*; and Lois was telling about her ambi-

“George is one hundred per cent correct, Mr. Thayer. It’s publicity that counts with them. Now since you’re such a good friend of Angelica’s you ought to try to get a little picture of George in your magazine. Why don’t you show Mr. Thayer your photographs, George?”

George brought out a stock of photographs from his bedroom. These photographs showed George in evening clothes, wearing a top hat; in a mackintosh like Alan Ladd; in a tweed sport coat, smoking a pipe; in a dark, dignified business suit; in a yachting outfit; in a summer tuxedo, wearing a paper boutonniere; in a smoking jacket looking into a phony log fire. There was one, which he hadn’t meant to show, of himself in the uniform of a Marine, standing before a Spanish stucco house, shaded by palms.

“Were — were you in the Marines?” I said.

“That was taken when I was stationed out here during the war. Good friend of mine owned that house. Used to go to lots of big parties, met lots of big stars. My friend and I. Some of ’em were real nice to me. They always said I ought to be in movies.”

“Do you know anybody in the business?”

“I used to know a few during the war. My friend, who knew all of them, has since got married and moved to Minnesota. I know some people who know people. I’ve been promised a part in a Tarzan picture.”

“Well, that’s interesting.”

“How do you like the photographs?” George said.

“They stink,” I said.

Do you know what George Martin did? His head lowered, his eyes narrowed to two little slits, his ears turned as red as blistered flesh; but he took it. It was as though a cat which

had been scratching at some thick-feathered fowl had at last clawed into meat. He sat there and took it.

“Oh, Charley will do something for you!” Angelica cried, jumping from the maple sofa. “It’s just that Charley doesn’t like to be bothered on Sunday. Lois, Lois, why the hell don’t you give us a drink?”

While Doc Dolan handed us highballs, and Lois passed crackers with cream cheese spread, three of their friends arrived: a portly overdressed dentist’s widow, moved to Los Angeles from Kansas City, Mrs. Gladys Hendrix; and two brothers, Bill and Bob Titson. The Titsons were identical twins, natives of Texas, who were engaged in making ceramics near Beverly Hills. Then Angelica telephoned Grover Cleveland Coone to come to the Dolans’ house.

“Isn’t he the nigger singer?” Lois said.

“Don’t be an old fuddy-duddy,” Angelica said.

“I just can’t imagine myself entertaining a nigger,” Lois said.

“Well, you won’t have to imagine much longer, Lois, because he’s on his way here,” Angelica said.

“Well, I never . . .” Gladys Hendrix chuckled, noticing Lois’s drooping lips.

Gladys Hendrix typified the sort of well-off older woman who goes around with swish young men; and the Titson twins with their talk of “stunning” this and “smart” that were horribly, horribly swish.

I have remembered Gladys Hendrix, chiefly because she turned out to be Carol Culvers’ mother’s best friend.

“So you know our Carol?” Gladys Hendrix said to me. “Well, I’ll tell exactly how I came to know her. Back in Kansas City, it was customary for me to visit my beauty parlor

once a week; and so, after the doctor passed away, and everybody kept telling me that I ought to travel and see something of the world, I fooled them. I just up and moved completely away. Well, as soon as I arrived in Los Angeles, I set out to find myself a good beauty parlor.

"You know how men depend on golf and tennis to get them started in a new city, and some women, on church work? Well, I count on my beauty parlor. I looked, and looked, and looked, before I found a parlor I really cared about. At last I found one. Do you know the reason I liked it?"

"No, I don't."

"It was because of Marie Vadnum, Carol's mother. Not only was she the best hair-setter in Los Angeles, she could keep you spellbound, telling you the story of her life. Why, it was better than listening to a serial on the radio! Well I never. . . ."

I paused waiting for Gladys Hendrix to continue talking; but she made a sucking noise with her tongue, indicating that she had finished her story.

"Did you know Carol well?" I said.

"Know her? I guess I do know her. She'd be a corpse under the ground if it hadn't been for me! You just don't know all I've gone through with that girl!"

One of the Titsons interrupted to tell Gladys Hendrix a bit of gossip about J—— P——, her favorite actor.

"Call me some evening, and we'll go out — and I'll tell you plenty," Gladys Hendrix said, raising her plucked eyebrows, handing me her card. I slipped the card into my pocket and fell back into my chair.

What a strange crowd we were: there I was, a Harvard Southerner, so looped that I could not raise an arm, trying not to seem a snob. There was Mrs. Gladys Hendrix, this doctor's

widow from Kansas City, turned, sitting on one fat thigh, listening to an anecdote about some actor she worshipped. There were the Titson twins, dressed in identical powder-blue suits, sitting on the sofa with their right knees crossed, whispering like girls.

George Martin's confidence had been restored by the arrival of the Titsons. He now strutted around the little cage of a room like a bantam rooster. Doc Dolan, a bird-watcher, was letting his pale blurry eyes soar with a seagull into the afternoon sky. Lois, I remember, sat staring with envy and hatred and admiration at Angelica, who suddenly opened her small mouth in a yawn. "I'm sleepy," Angelica said, leaning her head against the back of the sofa.

"Do you live in Beverly Hills?" said Bob Titson, the twin wearing a cameo seal ring.

"Live on Cove Way," I said.

"Do you know the Culverses?"

"Met them."

Bob Titson started to give a long, picturesque account of the Culverses' party, telling me all that had been served to eat and drink, to the last olive-and-bacon canapé.

"How long did you stay?" I said.

"Well, I didn't actually go to the party, but I heard all about it. You see Mrs. Culvers' mother used to set Gladys' hair."

We turned our eyes toward Gladys Hendrix's hair. Her hair looked like an arrangement of silver-blue steel wool.

The Titson twins have since gone home to Fort Worth, where one of them — I cannot recall which one — married a widowed schoolteacher. When I knew them that summer, they provided the Dolans with a link with the great world in

Beverly Hills. Although the Titsons knew none of the rich fabled persons themselves, they knew people who did. For instance, Danny Hunts was a friend of theirs, and the baroness who had started the Montmartre, and Queen Mother Nazli's social secretary came to casserole suppers at their apartment off the Sunset Strip.

As the afternoon passed, Grover Cleveland Coone, the colored singer, arrived, wearing a poplin waistcoat, sapphire cuff links, and spats. Grover Coone sat down in a chair next to Lois's and announced that he was flying to Paris soon. Lois moved her chair two inches away.

Bob Titson and Grover were discussing good restaurants in Paris, when Lois said, "If people like Europe so much, why don't they go and live over there? We can certainly get along without them."

The Titsons glared at Lois, but said nothing; Grover Coone drew himself up stiffly in his chair.

"I don't see why everyone who has a few thousand dollars saved up runs off to Europe," Lois said. Lois leered at Grover from the corners of her brown pop eyes.

"Don't talk nonsense," one of the Titsons said.

"Sometime when I've had a couple of drinks I'm going to tell you a thing or two," Lois said, snapping her lips at the twins.

"You don't go to those parties," Lois said to Bob Titson. "You don't know those people. I don't see why you talk about them all the time."

Lois's mentioning "those parties," "those people," caused the world in Beverly Hills to seem like a planet that thousands of persons like the Dolans gazed at through a telescope. These quarreling people, crowded into Lois's tiny living room, be-

gan to seem like small snarling animals, penned up together in a cage. I rose from my chair and I staggered toward the door.

"Don't get up, Mr. Thayer!" Lois cried. "I'll get you another drink."

"Don't want another drink. Need some air," I said. I managed to get out of the house before the Dolans, or Gladys Hendrix, or the Titsons, or Grover Coone could stop me. Angelica and George Martin had gone off into a bedroom.

I stumbled down twenty steps which led from Ocean Front Road to the beach. When I reached bottom, I fell across a stretch of dirty sand patched with beach grasses. I vomited on a sand castle which some child had built. As I began to get my breath, Lois appeared, carrying a mauve aluminum glass of ice water. "Drink this," Lois said. "You'll feel better."

The late afternoon shadows seemed to soften Lois's pinched face. As she stood gazing out at the Pacific, I could not help but wonder if George Martin . . . No, I don't believe that George would have laid a finger on Lois Dolan. The odd, queer thing about George was his fetish for young, "nice" girls. George Martin would not look at a woman under twenty-five. It was because of this that he never became a gigolo in Beverly Hills. He must have had plenty chances, selling women's shoes there.

I took the glass from Lois and I drank the cold water. I did not invite Lois to sit down, but she took a seat beside me just the same, and her feet began to kick sand over where I had been sick.

"Are you a friend of Angelica's husband?" Lois said.

"Sure, I know him. I don't know him well enough to squeal about George Martin, if that's what you mean."

"I wasn't thinking *that*," she said. "I wouldn't want anyone

to hurt poor Mr. Wells. I think that it's very sweet of Angelica to think of *him* first."

"What on earth are you getting at?"

"Why, the steel plate in his skull, the plate! That's the only reason she won't divorce Mr. Wells and marry George. Didn't you know about the plate? Didn't you know that he was wounded in the head in the war? That's the only reason Angelica won't file for a divorce."

I almost laughed out loud at poor Lois's believing that.

"She and George are so in love, Mr. Thayer. She told George she couldn't live without him."

I stood up, and I started moving toward the steps. Lois picked up the glass from the sand and followed me. "I wanna go home," I said.

"You'll be all right," Lois said, "I'll make you some coffee."

When I reached the road, I headed toward Angelica's car, but Lois grabbed my arm, pulling me through the door. Inside the house Grover Cleveland Coone was playing a guitar which had stood in a corner near Doc Dolan's chair.

*Brown eyes, why are you blue,
Brown eyes, honest and true . . .*

Angelica, who had returned from the bedroom, was heckling George Martin, who had changed his clothes.

"You've been changing clothes ever since I met you," Angelica said. "Why don't you try to change your stupid mind — or do you have a mind? Do you? Do you?"

George Martin coughed; and he put his hands into his pockets, and moved toward the kitchen.

"God knows you're a dumb so-and-so. Well, aren't you?"

George, pretending to ignore her remarks, began mixing a highball.

"And you're too dumb to know how stupid you are. You do know you're dumb, though, don't you, George? *Don't you?*"

George walked out of the kitchen, rattling ice cubes in his highball glass. He took a long swallow. His red eyes looked at her uneasily; his hand scratched at his crotch.

"I wish — I wish — I wish I'd never met you!" Angelica flopped down on the sofa beside Gladys Hendrix and began hunting for a cigarette in her purse. When she could not find a cigarette, she looked up at us, watching her, then she burst into tears. Not one person moved in the room. You heard Angelica's pitiful little sobs and the roar of the waves.

Grover Coone took out a red silk handkerchief from his coat pocket. "Here, Mrs. Wells," he said.

Before Angelica could take it, George Martin walked over and snatched the handkerchief. "No girl of mine's goin' to use a nigger's handkerchief."

Grover Coone's lips drew together proudly. He rose from his chair to leave.

"I don't think you realize you're a nigger," George Martin snarled, setting down his drink. He was drawing his large hands into fists, moving toward Grover like some great tensed animal. One fist grabbed Grover's black and red silk tie. "Do you — do you — do you — you black sonofabitch?"

"I think you've made me realize my color," Grover said, with elaborate calm.

"Don't go getting smart with me, nigger!" George's free fist swung into Grover's face like a club; it swung a second time, a third, and a fourth.

Angelica screamed; then the Titsons sprang on George like two brave dogs. One twin got a stranglehold around George's throat; the other got a hold on one arm.

"Clear out of here, Grover!" they cried.

Blood spouted from Grover's nose and mouth onto Lois's linoleum rug. Grover kneeled, picked up his silk handkerchief from the rug, and held it to his nose. Leaving, he had tears in his eyes.

"You aren't fit to lick George's shoes, don't you know that?" Lois said.

Angelica grabbed her purse and fought her way to me; together we ran from the Dolans' house.

As I said, George Martin had thought Angelica wasn't "nice"; and this had angered her, knocking her, I suppose, with the same stinging, funny, aching sensation of bumping one's elbow hard. For Angelica, if she was anything at all, was "nice" in the way that George Martin meant.

She had had all the advantages in the world. She had been reared among the well-mannered children in a city where manners counted. She came from parents who cared very much what other people said. Angelica took "niceness" for granted, as though it were a freckle on her nose.

I shall not, however, go on and on saying that Angelica was not downright common and bad. If you choose to believe the spoiled childhood produced the rotten young woman, then believe this, for the cold facts point it out. I myself cannot help but feel more kindly. Looking back on that summer in Beverly Hills, Angelica reminded me of a canary escaped into a garden, flying from flower to fig.

Sunday night, for instance, she had told me how she would

never see George Martin again. We had driven to a high point near the top of Coldwater Canyon when she had told me this. Quivering like some badly shaken child, she had snuggled into my arms. They did meet again, however, and I ought to have known better than to have believed what Angelica had said.

Three nights later a telephone call from George Martin awakened me. There had been a change in the weather. The air felt as chill as New England's, and I lay sleeping beneath two wool blankets. It was around one o'clock when George Martin's call awakened me.

George Martin lay in pain in a room in the Good Samaritan hospital, and he used a soft urgent tone of voice, trying to arouse my pity. "I think you'd better come at once," he groaned. "I was the one who was driving, and we were going along Sunset, when this bus stopped suddenly, and before I could put my foot on the brakes, we smashed right into it and . . . Angelica's pretty badly hurt. When they pulled her out, they thought she was a goner. I can't talk any more. I hurt all over."

"How badly hurt?"

"Who, me? Oh, I'll live, I'll live."

"Angelica!" I cried. "How is she hurt?"

"Concussion. Both arms broken. I don't know, I don't know what else. They've got her in surgery now. Will you come?"

"Yes, yes, I'll come."

"There wasn't anybody else I could call for her," he said.

I jumped out of bed, put on a suit over my pajamas, and ran out to my car.

At Culvers' house only the office light burned. There the young man who relieved Butch Murphy after ten kept a vigil

at the heart of the empire. I drove through the dull well-groomed streets of Beverly Hills, deserted, shiny as glass after their midnight bath.

When I arrived at the hospital, the square clock over the desk said a quarter of two. The nurse at the reception desk said, "Why, Mr. Wells! It's hardly been an hour since I spoke with you in Montana!"

After I explained that I was not the husband, her mouth opened disapprovingly. I said that I was a family friend.

"Mrs. Wells ought to be coming out of surgery soon," the nurse sighed.

"Was she very badly hurt?"

"Well, she's in no small pain. I suppose such goings-on always end badly for everyone."

I said nothing.

"I imagine that this is going to be quite a blow to poor Mr. Wells."

I still said nothing. The nurse eyed me shrewdly, trying to tell if I had known about Angelica and George Martin's affair. Other nurses paused, glancing at me; and there were two reporters and a camera man sitting in the waiting room.

"We were tipped off," one reporter said, "that this accident spilled the beans about the boy-friend."

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

"Did Mr. Wells ever meet George Martin?"

"You'd better ask Mr. Wells when he comes. Personally, I think you're trying to get a story out of nothing."

"He's right," the other reporter said; "besides, what's an assistant producer! I haven't met anybody yet who's ever heard of this Laddie Wells."

“You’re right,” I said, as the reporters rose to leave, “he’s not important at all.”

I never learned for certain who it was that tipped them off. I wouldn’t have put it past George Martin himself, who might have thought that here was a chance of getting publicity. At any rate, the story leaked out, and there was a fifty-fifty chance that it would hit the Los Angeles papers before noon: *Producer’s Wife, Lover in Crash*.

In spite of the nurses seeming to know the circumstances, Angelica and George Martin had been given adjoining rooms. When they were rolling Angelica down the corridor to her room, Lois Dolan came out to look. Lois Dolan stood just outside George Martin’s door, one arm akimbo at the waist of a brilliant blue and green peasant skirt, her myopic eyes popping out of her head. Oh, Lois looked triumphantly alive and strong, as poor Angelica came rolling by. A sheet covered Angelica’s body up to her chin; a white dressing covered her head. Her eyes were closed, and her skin had a bruised white-camellia look.

They would not allow me to enter Angelica’s room. The rest of the night I waited outside her door, reading a detective magazine given me by the nurse. Every twenty minutes or so the nurse came out, saying that it would have been better if she could have slept. Because of her concussion they would not let her sleep, and she had to lie there quiet, conscious, thinking.

At around four I had words with Lois. Lois said that George had not been drinking before the crash. I said nothing to this. She stood before my chair, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. Finally I said: “Don’t you think you

ought to have him moved into another room before Mr. Wells comes?" Lois walked away angry, I suppose, because I hadn't inquired about her George. George Martin had come through all right — a leg broken, two of those giant teeth knocked out. When they rolled him out, moving him to another floor, the rascal was reading a comic-book.

At around seven I saw Laddie Wells walking down the corridor, followed by a swift-gaited Jewish doctor. Laddie brushed past me, going into Angelica's room with the doctor. I still waited, hoping that Laddie would come out, so that I could tell him what I knew about the accident. He never came. He must have sat in a chair beside her bed for hours. After I left the hospital, I telephoned the studio and his house, trying to find him. Each time they said that he was with his wife.

Toward the end of the second week I heard that Angelica's arms were healing, that she had passed any real danger from the concussion. My mother wrote that the O'Briens were not going to fly to Beverly Hills. Though Angelica was healing, her spirits were low. I went to the hospital every other day, but Laddie was always there. Laddie would not speak of the accident. Whenever I was there, he would stand by the window, gazing down at a marble statue of the Good Samaritan in the hospital gardens. Once, as I came into the room, a priest was saying a prayer for her; but she was not listening. She was staring at pink water marks on the ceiling, that reminded her of a badly burned face.

It must have been agony for both of them. During the two weeks in the hospital they never spoke once of the accident or of the stories that had come out in the papers. The papers had even printed a photograph of Laddie with Mark Harris

and a star taken on a set during his first year in Hollywood. Snide items about the accident had appeared in the gossip columns. Laddie Wells practically lived in Angelica's hospital room. All this time they kept their thoughts like hunks of undigested food inside them.

On my last visit I saw their child for the first time. I had pictured, I suppose, a three-year-old Angelica, a wild, spoiled, enchanting little girl with dark curls and golden eyes. Little Florence Wells, the child I saw in the doorway, clutching her father's hand, was puny and plain. She had skin the color of floor wax, legs and arms thin and knotty as bamboo cane. Little Florence, when I was introduced to her, shrank back timidly into her father's shadow and had to be pulled into the room. At first, the child even shied away from Angelica, as though she dared not show any emotion before a stranger. When I turned to gaze out the window she flew to the white hospital bed and began to claw the sheets. "You're so white, Mummy darlin'," Little Florence whimpered, "that I had to cry — so buuuuteeeefulll and white like the angels." Laddie brought a chair for the child to stand on, and she climbed up and she stood there, chattering like a tiny old lady, about the imaginary activities of her dolls.

I did not see Angelica again for several weeks. They brought her home one Sunday not long after my visit, and she spent another week in bed, nursed by Helga, the Swedish woman. Soon, with both her arms in slings, she was able to wander around the house.

The Wellses never did have any violent conclusive scene. Laddie moved into the guest room, so that Helga could sleep in the other twin bed near Angelica. Whenever Laddie came

in, she would avoid his eyes. Laddie bought a small television set, and if Laddie came in to watch television she would stare at his face in the dark. Oh, she must have composed a thousand little speeches to say to him!

Helga telephoned me several times at the office and at my rooms, and held the mouthpiece for Angelica to speak. The newspaper stories must have upset her very much. Although she assured me she didn't care a fig what anyone wrote or said, she kept mentioning "the filthy Los Angeles press." One day when we talked, she said: "It's two weeks now, Charley, that I've been home, and he hasn't breathed a word about the accident. I'm going loony crazy if he doesn't say something." She would plead with me to come to see her, when Laddie wasn't there.

I don't know how Angelica bore the first month. Helga had to light her cigarettes and put them between her lips and take them out; Helga had to hold glasses, and to feed her. It was Helga, I suppose, who kept Angelica from losing her mind.

The needling began the last Sunday of her first month at home. They were stretched out on butterfly contour chairs; she on one side of the pool, looking at the sky; Laddie, fully clothed, on the other side reading the airmail edition of the *New York Times*. All day they had not spoken.

"Why don't you put on your shorts?" Angelica said suddenly. "Why don't you get a tan? I can't stand the way you're so pale."

"I didn't think you'd noticed," Laddie said.

"How could I help but notice? It's disgusting being so white in California."

"I don't think you've any right to say what is and what's

not disgusting. You're lucky I allow you to live under the same roof with the baby and me."

This started it; and although their needling each other must have released some of the tension, I heard that Laddie had stopped coming home evenings. I heard nothing of Angelica. She suddenly stopped telephoning me; and I did not let myself telephone her. For all that I knew she could have flown to the moon.

PART
TWO

IGELICA'S ACCIDENT OCCURRED ON THE twenty-eighth of April, 1950. Then for five weeks nothing happened.

I must go back to the Monday after the Culverses' big party; it was then that I spoke with Culvers again on the telephone. "Mr. Culvers," I said, "when are we going to get together about the story for *Life*?"

"You mustn't think I've forgotten about *Life*, Mr. Thayer." Culvers went on to say how fond of me he was, how Mrs. Culvers and he wanted me to make their house my home. Oh, spread it thick; and I, well, I was twenty-four and still believed that I could twirl around my finger every other person in the world.

"What about Friday afternoon at four?" I said.

Culvers said that that would suit him fine.

On Friday morning, however, Butch Murphy telephoned me, changing our meeting to the coming Wednesday. When Wednesday came, Culvers begged off again. Mrs. Culvers was not very well; he would get in touch with me soon. A week later Butch Murphy telephoned me at my rooms. Mrs. Culvers was well now; so we set a date for the coming Monday five o'clock. This Monday I received another basket of fruit though not so grand an offering as the first one — and a

card, putting me off until the *next Monday*. Thus, a month went by and Culvers still had me sitting on a fence.

During that month except for the few days when Mrs. Culvers was "ill" they gave six or seven dinners, a cocktail party, and on Saturdays and Sundays there were the mobs around the tennis courts and pool. I noticed that their importance had risen with the columnists. One columnist, who had called him "Oil-Can Culvers," switched to "King Culvers." Another informed her readers of a colossal financial empire, stretching from Newfoundland to Vera Cruz. There was a story about Culvers and Patino plotting to corner the tin market of the world; a story about Culvers tying in with Nazis in Argentina to buy the Krupp Munitions Works. Within a month's time there were so many fantastic stories that many persons, including Jo-Ann Winters, believed that this man, who in reality owned some oil lands and controlled a dozen or so businesses around New Orleans, was one of the richest men on earth. All this raised Culvers' stock with the press. Columnists and reporters telephoned his house every other day. *Life* began to wonder if Culvers was in contact with another magazine.

"We're counting on you, Charley-boy," Frank Camp would say each morning, passing my desk, "and they're counting on you back in New York." With Culvers breaking appointments like snapping matchsticks, I began to worry myself sick.

On a Monday morning at the beginning of the fifth week I telephoned Culvers' house, made another date to meet in the afternoon at five. Around two I telephoned to check with *Life* from Paramount, where I was interviewing Crosby. Jo-Ann Winters told me the bad news. Culvers' secretary had called five minutes before, canceling our date.

I dialed Culvers' number right away; Butch Murphy started

giving me a song and dance about the “meetings” going on. “Look here. I’ve been standing by for nearly five weeks, waiting to see Mr. Culvers. I’ve gotten myself out on a limb about this story. Either he’s going to keep an appointment with me within the next few days or everything’s off.”

“Mr. Culvers was awfully sorry about today,” Butch Murphy said.

“Cut out the sorry routine, Miss Murphy. What’s his game?”

“I don’t think Mr. Culvers is playing any *game*. We have reporters calling up here every day or so. He hasn’t seen any of them.”

“He may not see them but plenty of stories are leaking out. Stories just don’t spring out of nowhere like rabbits. What’s his game, Miss Murphy? What’s he trying to do in Beverly Hills? What’s his game with me?”

“Mr. Culvers’s not the kind of man who wants to get his name in the papers. Mr. Culvers’s never had anything to do with newspaper people until now. Mr. Culvers can’t help what they print about him. I happen to know that Mr. Culvers’s most anxious to see you again — soon as the meetings are over. The men have just arrived. The men fly out to the meetings once a month, and our lives are turned inside out. Mr. Culvers’ll get in touch with you, Mr. Thayer, within the next few days.”

“Why did Mr. Culvers make an appointment with me when he knew he wouldn’t be able to keep it?”

For half a minute not a sound came from her.

“Miss Murphy, Miss Murphy, are you there?”

“You know what they say, Mr. Thayer; it’s always darkest before dawn.” Then she hung up.

As it turned out, I was to see dawn, as Butch Murphy called

it, before the end of the day. I met two people, one of whom was to give me information, which I have used, setting this down.

After the terrible thing happened and the lid was slammed tight upon the case because of "lack of sufficient evidence" — and I do not know if I myself do want the lid opened — the man who gave me information warned me against setting this down. I ought not to go poking around a powerful man's closets, he said. I ought to let the thing become a Beverly Hills old wives' tale.

That is exactly how I shall set this thing down. I shall imagine myself by the side of some Beverly Hills fireplace, gas logs burning blue; sipping sherry in a Steuben wineglass, surrounded by Sandwich glass, pickled cobbler's benches, chintzes; a Grandma Moses hanging above a Magnavox. And I shall go on talking this thing out to some imaginary sympathetic soul.

I do not wish any real harm to come to any of them because of this; and I do not think any harm will. The only witness to the thing lies somewhere on the ocean floor of the Pacific off Chile, drowned together with a fourteen-year-old Indian girl he had seduced, swimming one night; his tough flesh by now chewed away by sharks, and rotted and washed away from his bones. Eleven months after he witnessed the "crime" and seven months before he was to face his judgment, this scoundrel, dressed up in purple linen shorts, sandals, and a purple and rose madras cloth play shirt, walked up to me on the beach at Acapulco and told me the whole incredible thing that he had witnessed the early morning of September 22, 1950. I am speaking of George Martin, the women's shoe salesman, Angelica's love, whose front teeth were knocked

out in the accident. Well, he was able to replace those teeth before he died with the finest false ones money could buy. I do not know why George Martin ever told me what he had witnessed. I would guess that at that moment in a foreign country, feeling rich and safe for the first time in his life, he felt that he could afford to tell anything. Or perhaps every man, sooner or later, must tell his story, as I must tell mine.

But I must not look back from the distance of time. I must imagine how it was that summer, when at twenty-four, I was seeing these people and Beverly Hills for the first time. I must tell this thing as an old-fashioned story, as I saw it happening day by day, week by week, that summer in Beverly Hills, 1950.

Let me think where I was. Oh yes — those two men I met. Monte Rizo had been hired by Culvers to handle his public relations in Beverly Hills. Culvers had met Rizo through Flanagan, the Irishman who bossed Culvers' motion picture enterprises. And Culvers had hired Rizo for the same reason that he had hired all those third-rate bum screenwriters: because he could get Rizo cheap. Flanagan was always trying to impress Culvers with the money he saved him. It was a strange thing that Culvers, who had gone into the movie business prepared to spend thousands making artistic, profitless pictures, supported a pack of hacks and leeches who could not have got jobs with any other outfit in town. Culvers was no fool; yet he allowed himself to be most shamefully taken in by bargains.

After I called Butch Murphy from Paramount, I drove back to the *Life* office in Beverly Hills. I had no sooner sat down before my desk than the receptionist announced that a Mr. Monte Rizo wanted to see me in the foyer in connection with

the Culvers story; so I walked out and met Monte Rizo.

Monte Rizo was one of those dark-haired gangster types you saw shooting about Hollywood in flashy yellow convertibles. Rizo wore moccasins, a loud sport coat, and a shirt opened at the neck, revealing a thick patch of blue-black chest hair.

"I'm here about that story you're gonna do on Mr. Culvers," Rizo said.

"What about it?"

"Well, I want you t' give me some idea what kind of story this is gonna be, before we start workin' together."

"Working together?"

"Sure. I handle all Mr. Culvers' publicity. Mr. Culvers wants me to find out exactly what you're gonna say in the story."

"Look here," I said, "you'd better go back and tell Mr. Culvers that as far as I'm concerned, there's not going to be any story. I don't like the way he's acted with us. The story's not that good."

Rizo said that he hadn't wanted to come to *Life*, that it was Culvers' idea. Rizo said that he knew you couldn't high-pressure a large outfit like *Life*. I said that I had a lot of work to do that afternoon. Rizo said, "Let's shake hands and be friends." After we shook hands, he pushed the elevator button, and the elevator came at once and he stepped inside. I never saw this Rizo again. He once telephoned me to give me a piece of "friendly advice" when word got around that I was writing a book. He frightened me neither time.

I do not believe that working for Culvers affected Rizo in the least. Rizo picked up a check once a week for getting all that vulgar publicity into the papers and spent a hunk of the

pay taking out hard, beautiful dumb girls to nightclubs; played tennis on Sunday afternoons to keep fit; then Mondays came. There were a lot of Rizos around Beverly Hills, as many Rizos as cockroaches.

I left *Life* around five o'clock, went to my rooms, shaved, showered, and changed into a dark blue suit. As I drove down Cove Way at seven, I noticed a line of rented black limousines, fastened like great beetles in Culvers' drive.

This brings me up to Monday evening, when I met Riley White. I had invited Jo-Ann Winters to have dinner with me at La Rue, one of the most expensive restaurants in the world. Jo-Ann, as ambitious as ever about getting into movies, had to go to a dramatic class at nine; and we had nothing to celebrate. There we sat, eating oysters Newburg, butterfly steaks, and imported wine — discussing the Culverses.

Most of Jo-Ann's notions about life could be traced to some motion picture she had seen. Jo-Ann believed that Culvers had dark underworld connections and was afraid of *Life* poking around. I laughed: "He's only showing me that he can push me around. He's just a new rich character, who wants to make a splash before he dies. Did I tell you I met his publicity agent this afternoon?"

"There's something spooky about it all," Jo-Ann said, starting to paint her lips for dramatics class. Then at ten of nine she left me with the remainder of the evening to kill.

I sat down at the bar at La Rue next to a man wearing a white linen suit. He was a tiny man, barely five feet tall, in his late fifties. He wore pince-nez, carried a large old-fashioned gold watch, which he kept taking out of his watch pocket to look at the time; and he had long pointed rabbit ears, with

tufts of white hair sticking out like wads of cotton. He had that type of pale pink tissue-paper skin which gives you a good look at all the blood vessels and veins.

When the man caught me staring, I turned my head away. For five minutes I felt him watching me; then he shifted on his stool and fixed his sad little eyes on a crème de menthe, which a young woman was sucking down the bar. I paid no more attention to him, until I overheard the bartender telling the headwaiter that there was one of those rummies who cried at the bar. When I looked again, the tiny man had removed the pince-nez and was wiping his eyes with a handkerchief as large as a tablecloth.

"Look," I said, touching the man's arm. "I'm going to take a walk. You're welcome to come along."

The man pretended at first that he did not understand why I had invited him. He tilted his tiny pink chin with affront. Anticipating an unpleasant scene, I paid my check and walked out to the street. Minutes later the tiny man, puffing and hopping along, caught up with me, walking down the Sunset Strip.

"You're sure, sir, you won't mind me coming along?" he asked, cocking his head. "If I do come along, I don't want to be a bother to you."

"Oh, you're no bother to me," I said.

"Very well then," he said. He bent slightly with the suggestion of a bow. The little man's exaggerated old-school mannerisms made me laugh.

Although no one in Beverly Hills ever walks, we walked nearly-two miles that evening. The tiny man knew about the heavens, and as we moved along Sunset, he told me that according to an old Indian legend the sun, the moon, and the

stars were one big family. The sun was the great chief and ruler of the heavens; the moon was his wife; and the stars were his children. The sun had to eat his children to keep himself alive. Every month his wife, the moon, grieved because the sun ate some of the stars, and put black over her face to show her sorrow. This gradually wore off, and by the end of the month, the moon was bright again. "The stars are always happy with the moon," Riley said, gazing up into the night sky, "and they sing and dance as she passes among them. After a time other star-children disappear, and she has to put on mourning all over again. It is a happy moon tonight."

Then the tiny man wanted a cup of coffee, so we went into Schwabs.

"By the way," he said, bowing again, "my name is Riley White."

I introduced myself and we shook hands. His hand felt as delicate as Little Florence Wells's.

"It wasn't too presumptuous of me, introducing myself, I hope?"

"Not at all," I said. Then I told him how his white linen suit made me think of home.

Riley White made another little bow, acknowledging this. He passed the sugar; I shook my head. He served himself three large spoonfuls.

"I don't enjoy my trips to California," he said, "— if you'll forgive my saying so. I live in New Orleans, and New Orleansians are like Bostonians. We don't really care for any other city in the world — if you'll forgive us that."

I told him how I had been born and reared in Louisiana too.

"But *I* wasn't born there," he said. "I'm a Virginian by birth. I went to New Orleans to work for a young man I

met at the University. One might say that I have been in his pay since the day we met."

Riley White smiled rather cynically, showing a mouthful of small nicely formed teeth, decaying around the gums. Speaking, the tiny man used a whole bag of tricks.

"Now the young man's become a rich old man, and I have had to fly to California twelve times a year. Perhaps you even know of my boss — Clarence Culvers?"

I spat a mouthful of coffee on the counter. Riley White handed me his handkerchief, and after I had wiped up the mess, I told him how Culvers had behaved about *Life*; how Culvers acted so pleasant to my face, and broke dates as if he were the emperor of Rome.

"But Clarence has been acting that way all his life," Riley White said, daintily stirring his coffee. I have forgotten about Riley's Panama hat. He always wore a wide-brimmed Panama hat in spring and summer, and this hat had a narrow black band. He wore soft, costly handmade shirts of the lovely pastel shades, and black silk bow ties as thin as ribbons. You can imagine how the blue-jeaned crowd in Schwabs stared at this overpolite tiny man in his costume. While we sat there, a young woman with a six-inch pompadour told her soldier that she remembered having seen Riley in *Gone With The Wind*.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Thayer, Clarence has always played the emperor of Rome."

Somehow, this surprised me. As I said, I had thought of Culvers as making a killing late in life, now throwing his money around to make a splash. I told Riley this.

"No," Riley said, "that was Clarence's father. The father was the rough diamond. Owned a small hardware store up-state, near Shreveport, and one day sold his store, went into

the oil business with a man named Frosting. They brought in the Roseana field. You've heard of the Roseana field. Well, the father made a small killing in oil and started buying up timber lands. He quadrupled his money in timber, and moved his wife and only son, Clarence, down to New Orleans. Bought a great big Tudor-style mansion on St. Charles, that had a pipe organ on the stair landing, and a sprinkler system. The father keeled over dead on the stairway one evening, while Clarence was a senior at the University of Virginia. Left Clarence and his mother two and a half million dollars. Oh yes, during the last years of his life the father served two terms as representative in Washington. Came to Charlottesville once or twice to call on Clarence. I never saw the old man.

"But I did know Clarence's mother. She had a voice so soft that you thought you were listening to the wind. Once upon a time she had been a schoolteacher. I don't know how her pupils ever understood a word. When I knew her, she was giving musicals and play-readings in the big house on St. Charles. Used to entertain herself playing Baptist hymns on the pipe organ.

"And once she allowed the Baptist orphans to hold a picnic on her lawns, and Clarence, the devil, turned on all the sprinklers. Those poor orphans got drenched as river rats. Do you know what the old lady did? She bought a new outfit for every single child. Never scolded Clarence with one word."

"What was Mr. Culvers like at the University?" I said.

"Why, much the same as he is now. Clarence had more life then, of course, and was always playing the most elaborate practical jokes on his professors. Clarence did the pranks to

make the boys like him. Clarence was never popular with the boys, you see. He was one of those large clumsy young men who want to be the whole show.

“Let me tell you how Clarence and I became friendly. It was about thirty years ago. Clarence, who had political ambitions in those days, prided himself on his oratory. He could roll words and phrases like a hard-shell Baptist preacher, and he would beat his fists, and shake his fingers, and rant and rave in that high-pitched voice for hours on end. Well, I was the one teamed against Clarence in the big debate in Government class. In those days I was going to become a trial lawyer. Dreamed of saving poor devils from hanging, all that kind of thing. Well, I walloped old Clarence, and after the judges announced that I had won, the whole class stood up and cheered and clapped and picked me up and carried me around the classroom on their shoulders. When all the hullabaloo had died down, Clarence had fled. Do you know what Clarence did? He walked over to my rooms that evening and he invited me to go into Charlottesville with him for dinner. Clarence bought me the largest, juiciest steak I’d ever tasted, my first real French champagne. Imagine Clarence doing all this, Mr. Thayer, after I had made such a fool of him before the whole Government class!

“Don’t you ever underrate Clarence Culvers for one minute. Look at me! Look at the boy who everyone thought would become the most famous trial lawyer in the country. I suppose I brought Clarence the greatest humiliation he ever suffered in his life. And look at me, Mr. Thayer. Clarence’s been my boss ever since the day.”

“What about the first wife?” I said, “and the son?”

“Both of them are very nice,” Riley said. “Etta Culvers was

just a pretty country girl with a peaches and cream complexion, who worked in a lunchroom in Jackson, Mississippi. Clarence married her right after the first war. Today when Etta Culvers steps out of her long black Cadillac, people bow and scrape to her, and this tickles her pink. Etta's finally made the grade with the crowd that always bored Clarence to death.

"The son's a pleasant well-mannered young man, normal as apple pie.

"But let me tell you who holds Clarence's heart." Riley picked up a knife that lay on the counter; and he held up five fingers and pretended to chop away the thumb, the first finger, the second, and the third, until only the little finger stood. "Clarence loves the tip of Carol's little finger, more than all the rest of the world.

"Why, he's gone into the movie business to make her a star. Wants to make her as famous as Coca-Cola. Wants her to become a great lady out here. Wants to make her a queen. That's why they give all those parties. That's why Clarence has hired a publicity agent. That's why Clarence has the big house, and the pool, and the tennis courts, and the servants. Clarence never cared about seeing his name in the papers. Clarence hated Etta Culvers' parties. It's for Carol, man. All of this Hollywood foolishness is for Carol. Clarence wants to give poor Carol the world.

"That's why Clarence keeps stalling you, Mr. Thayer. Clarence doesn't want anything written about Carol that people would laugh at. Now, don't you understand it, man?"

I told Riley how in the beginning Culvers had practically told me all this himself.

"Then Clarence told you the truth, and you ought to have recognized the truth. That girl's his sun and his moon and his

stars and if any harm ever came to that girl, it would kill Clarence!”

After we left Schwabs we walked down Sunset and La Cienega under the starry night sky. The legend of the unhappy moon and the sun that ate little stars came to my mind. The legend fitted the Culverses as close as a glove.

We rode in a taxi back to where I had parked my car. Riley climbed inside the car, settled himself grandly upon the plaid upholstery, and said: “Now we’ll go to Clarence’s house. I’ll put you in Clarence’s good graces.”

“I don’t think Mr. Culvers wants to see me,” I said.

“Don’t argue, Mr. Thayer. Hurry along to Clarence’s,” Riley said, gazing out at the sleepy, velvet streets of Beverly Hills.

When we turned into Cove Way, lights burned in every window of Culvers’ mansion. The other houses, where families were asleep, looked peaceful and still.

AS WE ENTERED THE SMALL OFFICE IN THE left wing of the house, Butch Murphy, lolling in the swivel chair, suddenly straightened like a roused watchdog. And Mrs. Culvers — Carol — thumbing through the *Saturday Evening Post*, bounced up from a leather chair beside a filing cabinet.

“Well, well! Where the hell have you been?” Carol cried, throwing her arms around Riley’s neck.

Carol wore blue slacks and a cheap little rayon blouse, pinned at the neck with a blazing cluster of diamonds and rubies. The dark roots of her platinum hair showed, and there were half-moon circles under the doll eyes. As she hugged Riley, she faced me with embarrassment.

“Jesus, Mr. Thayer — I mean Charley —” she said, her hand going to her mussed curls. “You certainly caught me looking a sight!”

Riley said how much he had enjoyed talking to me, and I said how we had met at La Rue and gone for a walk. The doll eyes, as we spoke, went from Riley to me. She kept saying, “Uh-huh, uh-huh”; but I was never certain about whether she believed my story. She half acted as though she suspected that little Riley had been tricked by *Life*.

Meanwhile, Butch Murphy, good watchdog that she was, had stolen out of the office to inform Culvers.

"Have a seat," Carol said to Riley. "You shouldn't have let those louses get you in a huff today. Do like I do, honey." Suddenly, Carol stuck out her tongue. "That's what you ought've done to them this afternoon."

We laughed; then Riley asked how she had entertained herself that day.

"Well, Butch and I went shopping for some pure white parakeets. I thought it would be sort of cute to have some pure white parakeets up in my bedroom, which is practically pure white too. But we couldn't find any, except a pair in Westwood that were so old they couldn't control their bowels.

"So I gave up the idea of parakeets and we went to Robinsons to look at evening dresses. I found a peach satin one, exactly like one Lana Turner wore in *The Three Musketeers*. Then we came on back here and found everybody upset over how you had just walked out of the meetings — the louses. I couldn't go anywhere else because Clarence thought I needed to rest, so —"

Carol stopped speaking. Culvers now stood frowning in the doorway, his long iron-colored hair tangled and frowsy, like some old animal's. He was wearing old brown slippers and a green velvet smoking jacket, whose pockets were stuffed with pieces of blue notepaper — Culvers' personal memoranda of the meetings. Behind Culvers in the hall stood a strapping young Irishman, rather thick under the chin. I guessed that this was Culvers' henchman, Bill Devlin of whom Riley had told me; behind Devlin, a sea of faces, each face wearing glasses. These men I took to be the other directors. They were loping up now, more and more of them, like tired old cows, to get a look at the one that had returned to the fold.

"Look who's back, Clarence!" Carol cried, skipping over to

Riley's chair, hugging Riley. "Isn't it grand, Riley's back?"

Looking directly at me, Culvers still frowned. Riley noticed the frown, and said: "Mr. Thayer didn't want to come here tonight, Clarence, but I insisted. He's been very kind to me this evening, Clarence. Mr. Thayer's a fine young man."

Culvers walked over and shook hands with me. "Well, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said, "I see we've finally gotten together."

I didn't say anything.

"Please make yourself at home, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said. Then Culvers faced Riley, who slumped in the leather chair, staring into space. "Riley, could you please come into the library with me for a moment?" Culvers walked out of the office as a path was cleared for him through the herd of bespectacled men; then Riley stood up and followed his old friend.

"Each one wants me to influence Clarence to *his* way of thinking," Carol said, with an air of childish importance. Butch Murphy chuckled. Carol shot her a look of malevolence. "Now what are *you* cackling about?" Butch Murphy, starting to make some list, did not reply.

Carol picked up the *Saturday Evening Post* and showed me a photograph of the Windsors. "The *Post* is getting awfully social, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "They'll be wanting to do a story on you before long."

"On *me*?"

"Certainly," I said. "You're the most talked about party-giver in Beverly Hills. Didn't you know that?"

Carol laughed. "No kidding?"

"Yes," I said, "you're getting famous." When I asked how they went about planning such grand affairs, she flounced out

of her chair, went to a green metal filing cabinet, and started pulling out drawers, containing hundreds of small white cards.

"These are the musical people," she said, running her finger through the cards. "When we want to have a musical crowd — Jeannette MacDonald, and opera singers, and composers — we just look through this drawer and pick out thirty or forty names. Then Miss Murphy sends out a bunch of telegrams. We even have names of nice single men who just appreciate music."

She pulled out an "Intellectual" drawer; a "Strictly Social" drawer; an "Interesting People" drawer — explorers, big-game hunters, senators, Ruth Draper, Ali Khan; and finally, the small drawer which contained the names and addresses of Hollywood *crème de la crème*.

"Who decided who's cream and who's not?" I laughed.

"I wouldn't know," Carol said seriously. "But I'll find out if you want me to."

"I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble," I said.

"For a *great big* party, Butch Murphy sends out telegrams to just about every name in the file, and all those people arrive with dozens of others."

Carol passed a box of Whitman's chocolates; I took out the Brazil nut.

"Where on God's earth did you get so many names and addresses and numbers?"

"Oh, there's a lady in Beverly Hills who makes her living supplying lists of people to be invited to parties."

Carol pushed the drawers back into the olive-drab file, walked to the desk, snatched the list Butch Murphy was making, glanced at it, handed it back. Butch Murphy did not bat an eye.

The telephone rang. Butch Murphy placed her hand over the receiver, saying that it was Mrs. Culvers' mother calling; she waited for Carol's reaction. Carol shook her platinum curls from side to side; Butch Murphy told the mother that Mr. and Mrs. Culvers had gone to bed.

Not long after this a buzzer sounded. After Butch Murphy had picked up the telephone and listened, she walked out into the hall. The office suddenly seemed as peaceful and as still as Forest Lawn. You could hear crickets chirping; down by the marble swimming pool a bullfrog croaked.

"Do you enjoy the meetings?" I said.

"Oh, they're all right," Carol sighed, swinging a pair of dark glasses in a circle. "Of course sometimes they're pretty interesting just like going to a gangster picture. Everybody double-crosses and triple-crosses everybody else. All of them play up to *me* while they're in Beverly Hills. When they go back to New Orleans they play up to Etta Culvers and the son. If you want to know the truth, it's just a bunch of louses battling bedbugs. I could flush all of 'em down the toilet and never miss a one."

Suddenly Carol lost hold of the dark glasses. The glasses smashed into a hundred tiny dark green pieces on the floor. "Oh, Lord!" Carol cried, her wide eyes growing wider. "Now I'll have to explain in detail to Clarence just how they broke!"

Using my handkerchief I helped her sweep the pieces into a manila envelope, which she sealed, then placed in a drawer in the desk used by Tommy Meek, the other secretary. "I have six other pairs," she explained. "Maybe he'll never find out."

"I don't think he'll find out," I said.

"I have to explain everything I do. Isn't it boring? Danny

went down to Laguna one week end and brought me back a silly little water pistol. One morning I hid behind the bathroom door, while Clarence was taking his steam bath. When Clarence came out, red as a boiled crab, I jumped out and aimed the water pistol at his navel. Clarence nearly fell over dead — thought I was really going to kill him.

“Well, by the time I got through explaining how I had got the damned water pistol, and so forth, and so forth, and so forth, I was ready to flush the damned thing down the toilet.”

Joseph came carrying a pyramid of little ham and rat-cheese sandwiches on a magnificent silver plate. He set the plate down beside Carol, who took a sandwich from the top of the pile.

“Whatever happened to that young producer you were going to bring here?” Carol said, biting into the sandwich. “Clarence — Clarence was anxious to get in touch with him.”

“I haven’t seen Laddie Wells in about five weeks,” I said. “He’s not a producer, anyway. He’s an assistant producer.”

“That doesn’t matter. Why don’t you introduce him to us?”

“If you want to know the truth, we’re not very friendly these days.”

“Why not?”

“We just aren’t, that’s all.”

“I saw his picture in the *Mirror*, when his wife was in the accident,” Carol said.

At twelve-fifteen Butch Murphy came back; she said that Mr. Culvers was going to show his picture. Carol sat cross-legged in the tan leather chair, still munching sandwiches. “Oh, Jesus,” Carol giggled. “Why does he want to inflict *that* on us!”

“Is it that bad?”

“Oh, no, Charley,” Carol said, the doll eyes narrowing, “it’s really a wonderful picture.” Carol began to tell about her husband’s having gone wild over Maugham’s *Quartet*, and wanting to make an American Quartet, starring her. She told me that Clarence Culvers was one of the most brilliant men in the world.

I said nothing.

“He is; Clarence is *that*, no kidding. Clarence knows what’s real art.”

I still said nothing. One of the faults of my character is that I cannot listen to refrigerator salesmen expounding their views of modern art; or society women, on books. I like squares fine as long as they stay in their own territory. When Carol spoke about Culvers’ hatred of modern art, modern books, modern music, I just sat there bearing it all in silence, as I used to put up with those businessmen out at the Miro Country Club running down Harvard and New York. “Why don’t you go into your dad’s insurance business, Charley-boy? Miro’s growing, man! Miro’s going to be the third biggest city in the state!” If they’d just left me alone, I wouldn’t have minded. But they brought up the subject of Harvard and New York every time they saw me, because, I suppose, I stood for a lot of things they did not understand, and hence could not like.

In many ways, Culvers was one of them. Culvers was built on a grander scale, that was all. Culvers had broken away from the “little woman,” and had fallen in love again. Nevertheless, in spite of all his fabulousness, Culvers deep-down was a square, and was suspicious and contemptuous of what he could not readily understand. Carol’s seriousness did not come off, but Carol was no opinionated square.

I don’t know what one could set Carol down as. Here was

this perfectly beautiful young woman, full of fun and life, married to a wealthy older man who wanted his sweetheart to become the sweetheart of the whole world. . . .

By one o'clock Butch Murphy had located a man to operate Culvers' projector: a red-eyed creature in a shabby green suit, glad to get work, who told us that he had come to this house in the old days to run pictures for Jean Harris. This pleased Carol, and she stuffed the man's pockets with sandwiches.

After Butch Murphy showed the man the way to the projector, Culvers came looking for Carol. This time Culvers acted more pleasant toward me; I suppose Riley had told him I was fond of Carol, or something. Culvers wanted to know if Joseph had served me a drink. I said that I would like a scotch and water; and he rang the buzzer for Joseph to come.

While I waited for my drink, the men wandered outside in the hall, probably composing praises for the picture they were about to see. Then Riley came. Riley looked like an elf who had had the spirit knocked out of him. Riley's lips were arranged in a polite little artificial smile. He took a seat in Butch Murphy's swivel chair, folding his tiny hands. "I hope you haven't been too bored," he said in an undertone.

"We've had quite a time," I said. I caught Riley's eyes, but the eyes gave no hint of what had taken place with Culvers.

Butch Murphy came back and telephoned Flanagan's apartment two or three times; then I heard Culvers' high-pitched voice announcing that we would go ahead and see the picture without Flanagan. Clutching Carol's hand, Culvers led the procession out of the office down the hall to the pea-green and gold room. There, three rows of gilt side chairs had been arranged before an enormous blank screen. Culvers and Carol occupied two plush armchairs in the center of the first row.

I was assigned a gilt chair next to Carol's, and Riley White, a chair beside his old friend's. The lights went out.

The picture, based on one of Maupassant's poorer short stories, lasted around sixty-five minutes — far too long. The camera work was undistinguished; the dialogue trite; the realism, which could have given the trick story a credibility, was old-fashioned and weak. As I have said, it was too long and drawn out. Culvers had had the girl's part blown up in order to show off his wife.

On the other hand, the picture had some nice touches. For instance, while the girl dresses herself in patched finery to go to the Duchess's ball, a mouse, just before nibbling cheese in a mousetrap, pauses to gaze at her. There was one other nice touch: as Carol enters the ballroom, you are watching her through a gross dowager's lorgnette.

You had the feeling that a person of taste could have brought it off. The director, aiming to get a straight performance out of Carol, had changed her into an ordinary pretty-girl. Carol's performance in the picture was so poor that it made you embarrassed for her. When the lights were turned on, we all just sat there, staring at the huge blank screen.

Carol saved the day. "Give us our money back! We want our money back, Clarence!" she called out, laughing; and, of course, we laughed too. Then the men, all but Riley, walked forward, praising the picture. Culvers ignored their praises. Culvers' eyes were fixed on Riley White, who sat expressionless, still as a church mouse, in the chair next to him.

"What did you think?" Culvers said.

"I liked two or three bits very much," Riley said.

"Which bits?"

Riley had liked the same touches I had liked. When Culvers

looked at me, I backed up Riley's opinion. Culvers nodded several times, and said, "The director was clever there, wasn't he?" The men, standing around us, looked bewildered. The men hadn't thought the mouse was so important. They began to talk all at once about the mouse; but Culvers wasn't listening. Culvers' cold gray eyes, looking at Carol, had got a curious glow.

"What did you think of the picture, Carol?" Culvers said.

"You know what I think," Carol said, smiling at Culvers like some sweet, lovely child.

"Then that's all that matters," Culvers said, rising.

We began to file out of the green and gold room into the hall. The men, anxious to get to bed, stood near the front door, talking in undertones. Riley White stood in the center of the hall, making his short bows to each of the men leaving.

"Why don't you come over tomorrow, Charley?" Carol said.

"I thought Mr. Culvers was afraid of *Life*?"

"Did Riley tell you that?"

"I don't remember who told me, but that's what I've heard."

"Don't you believe it, Charley. You come over here as much as you like." She took out a Kleenex from the pocket of her slacks and blew her nose. "Are we really going to be in *Life*, Charley?" When I nodded, she giggled and moved, as though she were about to clap her hands; then she bounced off toward the office to get another Kleenex.

The men got into the limousines hired for them, and one by one the large black cars growled and stole away. Riley White walked with me to my car. The grounds were floodlit that night, even the marble statues and the orange trees. The place looked like a palace out of the *Arabian Nights*.

“Isn’t this preposterous?” Riley said. “Whenever I think of California, I cannot help picturing this preposterous place of Clarence’s.”

“This isn’t the real California,” I said, stupidly. “By the way, how did things go tonight?”

“It’s too late to talk about me,” Riley said; he moved toward the columned portico. “I’ll see you again sometime. . . .”

I started the motor. I saw Riley’s tiny chest inhale a deep breath of strong California night air; then, drawing himself together, he walked into the house.

I heard much later that Culvers stripped Riley White of his powers that night. Riley White would continue to draw his huge salary, but was made weak and impotent in the organization, as through the years he had become in life.

ALL THIS HAPPENED ON A MONDAY NIGHT.

Wednesday afternoon a telegram was delivered to me at *Life*: "Please come for dinner at eight o'clock tonight if possible. There will be no one else. Your Friend, Carol Culvers."

At eight o'clock that evening during the first week in June I crossed Cove Way and walked up the drive. Their roses were in bloom and a summer wind stirred the branches of the palm trees; the house and grounds were lit up like Coney Island.

At nine o'clock the three of us — Culvers, Carol, and I — were seated at a fourteen-foot Chippendale table that had been specially made for them in Grand Rapids. In the center of the table, beneath an intricate crystal chandelier lit with orange-pink globes, a cattleya orchid bloomed in a Mexican silver urn, decorated with cupids and bull horns. The urn had been given Culvers by the President of Mexico. There also stood on the table two large silver-gilt candelabra; four Meissen peacocks; and a splendid silver meat dish that had once belonged to Alexander II. With all this grandeur we used paper napkins, because Culvers manufactured Sweetheart paper napkins; and we used lime-green plastic pepper-and-salt shakers that came from Woolworth's. The house was full of cheap little objects

which Carol went out and bought on her afternoon shopping trips through the stores of Beverly Hills.

The dining room was Hollywood-English. Its high walls were of tufted dark brown leather, in spots water-stained and cigarette-burned; and it had the odor of a saddle room. At one end was a huge mahogany breakfront, whose lighted shelves held Carol's collection of Toby jugs; at the other end was a carved walnut fireplace ten feet tall, which burned great gas logs.

Culvers wore a short-sleeved shirt of sarong cloth, which made his heavy hairless gray-white arms look pale as death. Carol wore white sharkskin slacks, a mauve silk blouse, a diamond bracelet, white leather sandals, and had pinned a gardenia in her platinum curls. Each time Joseph passed food, crystals tinkled in the chandelier, Carol would look up. This annoyed me, for I had finally maneuvered Carol into talking about herself. Every time she looked at the chandelier she would make some silly remark, which made me afraid that she would change the subject. She had started telling me about her dead father, to whom she had been "deeply, deeply devoted."

"My daddy was an electrician," Carol said, chewing a mouthful of au gratin potatoes.

"Your father was an electrical engineer," Culvers interrupted, catching her eye.

"Oh, yes, an electrical engineer. Clarence is right."

"Carol was so young," Culvers explained to me. "Carol was only twelve when he died."

"Anyway," Carol said, "Daddy was wonderful. We lived in St. Louis in a little stucco house on a street with arbor-vitas,

and I was the only child. I took dancing lessons, singing lessons, and lessons in speech elocution. Daddy always wanted me to grow up and be like Shirley Temple.”

“Carol’s father was a very cultured man,” Culvers interrupted. “Carol’s father had an appreciation of music.”

“That’s right!” Carol exclaimed, her doll eyes rounding, as the daddy’s stature rose.

“There was an upright piano in the living room next to Daddy’s armchair, and every afternoon when Daddy came home from work, he would ask me to go to the piano and play ‘Glow, Little Glowworm, Glimmer, Glimmer.’ Everytime I hear ‘Glow, Little Glowworm’ I think of Daddy. . . .”

Joseph entered; Carol stopped speaking as the chandelier’s crystals tinkled. Culvers coughed for her to go on.

“Well, Daddy died,” Carol said, serving herself a slice of rare roast beef. “Daddy was burned crisp as bacon up on a pole during a lightning storm. It was awful, and Sweetheart — that’s my mother — wouldn’t allow me near Daddy’s coffin when we went to the funeral home.”

Culvers coughed. “Are you sure about the way he died?”

“Why, sure I’m sure,” Carol said. “Ask Sweetheart if you don’t believe me. Ask Sweetheart.”

Although Carol had spoiled Culvers’ “electrical engineer” theory, after dinner we sat in the library, where I had to examine papers tracing her father’s family back to a Duke of Northumberland. Culvers also showed me sketches for a portrait of the electrician that a Beverly Hills artist had been commissioned to do. Culvers told me a yarn about Carol’s father’s family owning a great castle in Salisbury. While I sat examining all the papers he showed me, Carol whispered to Culvers: “What did I say that was so wrong?”

"Be quiet," Culvers said.

"Oh, go stick your head down the toilet," Carol mumbled; she sat there, pouting.

Butch Murphy came shortly after this, telling Culvers that Mrs. Culvers' mother had arrived, and was waiting in the office with a friend.

"I don't see why you're telling *him*," Carol said, glaring at Butch Murphy. "It's not *his* mother. And don't have my mother waiting in the office like a common salesman, for crissake."

Butch Murphy walked back to the office to invite the mother into the house.

At this time I didn't know very much about Carol's relationship with her mother. There was a story, told around Beverly Hills, that the mother had forced Carol to marry Culvers. Now the mother was not welcome at Culvers' house.

The mother, Mrs. Frank A. Vadnum — or rather, Mrs. Marie Vadnum she was called, for Carol's stepfather had deserted them in Chicago — had dyed golden-blond hair, which she wore in a glamour bob; a straight forceful nose; and heavy-lidded, passionate blue eyes. She had prominent cheekbones, painted so heavily with rouge that it looked as though a candle burned inside her skull. She wore a black crêpe dress, a silver fox jacket, which was a present from Carol; a bulbous modernistic gold watch; a microscopic diamond solitaire, which had been her engagement ring from Carol's father, the electrician. She looked, I suppose, exactly as one would have expected a beauty operator to look, whose only daughter had married a millionaire.

As Butch Murphy conducted her down the marble hall to

the library, Mrs. Vadnum took easy careful steps, as though she was afraid of slipping on the marble and disgracing herself. Her friend Mrs. Gladys Hendrix, whom I had met at the Dolan's, was decked out in black crêpe and yellow fox. Gladys Hendrix followed at a distance, puffing.

We had walked just outside the tall library doors.

"Hello, Baby," Mrs. Vadnum said, reaching Carol. They held each other for a moment like two sisters who had quarreled. Culvers watched, his heavy old face frowning with disgust. How he must have hated Marie Vadnum's visits, this mother who gave the lie to the fine background he had concocted for his wife.

"Why, Sweetheart!" Carol said. "You look just grand!"

Marie Vadnum and I were introduced; then I said hello to Gladys Hendrix. Carol must have imagined that a Harvard man had only acquaintances among blue-bloods. She seemed surprised that Gladys Hendrix and I knew each other. "Did you already know Charley?" Carol asked.

"Oh, yes, sugar," Gladys Hendrix said, chuckling. "Mr. Thayer and I have mutual friends together." Then Gladys Hendrix turned toward me. "Well I never . . . what are you doing here?" Then without waiting for an answer, she said: "Marie took dinner with me at my apartment and I was surprised to death when she told me that she hadn't seen Baby in a week or more. So I just told her to march right on out here. Well I never . . . What are you doing? Getting material?"

"If you want to call it that," I said.

"I thought you were coming to take dinner with me, so that I could tell you a few things," Gladys Hendrix said, winking at me.

Then Gladys Hendrix turned toward Culvers, who still

wore an expression of agony. "Why, Clarence!" she exclaimed. "Where did you ever get such a darling shirt?"

Culvers said that one of his men had bought it in Honolulu.

"Well I never . . ." Gladys Hendrix chuckled. "Say, Marie! Get a load of Clarence's hula shirt!"

Mrs. Vadnum said that it was just too darling for words.

We began to move toward the drawing room, Joseph marching ahead of us switching on a chandelier and half a dozen lamps. The Culverses sat down on a plush gilt sofa beneath a fake tapestry depicting Adam and Eve.

Mrs. Vadnum asked Culvers how he was; Culvers said that he was fine. Then Culvers asked Mrs. Vadnum how she was; and she was fine. During these exchanges, Gladys Hendrix, looking back and forth from Mrs. Vadnum to Culvers to Mrs. Vadnum, crossed and uncrossed her legs. I was thinking how differently it had all turned out from what Mrs. Vadnum had expected, for Culvers plainly despised Mrs. Vadnum. Culvers sat there, his thin lips turned down, holding long breaths, as though he were smelling rotten fruit.

To please Carol, Culvers suggested that we have champagne; Gladys Hendrix and Mrs. Vadnum said that that would be very nice. It must have pleased Carol, indeed, for she leaned over and kissed Culvers' cheek and said, "Ummmmm." Culvers rang a buzzer on the marble-topped table beside the sofa. Joseph came.

"We would like some champagne, Joseph," Culvers said.

Joseph bowed and walked out of the room, as though he understood everything. Minutes later Joseph came carrying glasses, monogrammed C. C. C. in gold. While Joseph poured the champagne, Culvers asked Mrs. Vadnum how she liked her new apartment.

"It's just as attractive as it can be, Clarence. Today I bought myself a pair of boudoir lamps with figurines of a little Dutch boy and girl. They look just lovely on either side of my bed. Didn't you think my lamps were cute, Gladys?"

Gladys Hendrix said that she'd never seen cuter lamps anywhere.

After we had had champagne, Culvers grunted twice, then excused himself. Whenever Mrs. Vadnum came, Culvers excused himself, went into the library, and closed the door.

Carol invited her mother to come upstairs to see her new dresses.

"Well, Mrs. Hendrix, have you seen the Dolans lately?" I said, when we were alone in the room.

"The Dolans are just fine," Gladys Hendrix said. "Of course, Lois says that George Martin's career is simply ruined because of those teeth being knocked out. But they're fine. Doc bought Lois a television set, and they invited me out last Sunday, but of course I didn't want to go out by myself. The Titsons and the Dolans have fallen out. That makes things hard for me. What about Mrs. Wells — your friend? I could have died when I picked up the paper and read about the accident. Well I never . . ."

I said that I had not seen Angelica in a long time.

"She certainly got the worst of it. Personally, I hope she drops George Martin like a hot potato. I'm inclined to agree with the Titsons about George, even though Lois *is* a friend of mine. I just can't understand why Lois lets George Martin keep on living there."

I said nothing to this; then Gladys Hendrix said, "I thought you were going to get in touch with me."

"I will," I laughed, "if you'll talk."

"Talk? Talk about what?"

"You know *what!*"

"You mustn't ever mention what I told you." She glanced toward the tall double doors opening into the hall.

"But you didn't tell me anything."

"Didn't I? Well, I can't remember if I did or not. I remember I told you to call me. I —"

I said that I was the kind of person who could keep something to myself.

"I'll tell you about Carol Culvers. I know plenty too, believe you me. She still telephones me all the time. But I wouldn't want to be the one to hurt Marie."

I frowned.

"Why, he might cut off Marie's allowance. He's very nice about Marie, you know; and besides, Mr. Thayer, I wouldn't want to get Clarence mad at *me*. Clarence has always been nice to me.

"The Doctor, my late husband, hated people who talked too much. The Doctor never, never told me anything. Why, I never even knew he had a brother living in Miami Beach, who painted china cups and plates, until this man wrote me after the Doctor died, asking for money. What do you think of that?"

I said that the Doctor must have been a sensible man.

"The Doctor *was*; the Doctor *was*," she sighed; then making a face, Gladys Hendrix drained the last drop of champagne from her glass.

"He wouldn't let me smoke, and he wouldn't let me touch a drop of anything with alcohol in it," she tittered. "Why, if the Doctor could see me now, he'd try to crawl out of his grave!"

Now Mrs. Vadnum and Carol returned. Gladys Hendrix listened to Mrs. Vadnum describe Carol's new clothes. Five minutes later Mrs. Vadnum and Gladys Hendrix rose from their chairs. They wanted to "put in an appearance" at a Christian Science lecture. Both of them, good Methodists back in their old home towns, had become Christian Scientists in Beverly Hills.

After they left, Carol and I sat for a while in the office; the office, it seemed, was Carol's favorite room of all the rooms in the mansion. I must not forget to describe this office, for here was where poor Carol sat, after Culvers had gone to bed. Carol would sit there in slacks or in silk pajamas, drinking her gin, nibbling her sandwiches of ham and rat cheese, swearing out against her sheltered, lonely world. This is where, after leaving the studio, Carol must be sitting out her nights now. . . .

The office was a small room ten feet by twelve, with its own entrance to the grounds, an entrance into the kitchen, an entrance to the servant's wing, and an entrance into the marble hall of the house; it was the nerve center and the center of life in Culvers' house. There was always a secretary, like a policeman, on duty there; and the room with its off-white walls, cold tile floor, desks, filing cabinets, tan leather chairs was always lit as bright as day by a dozen fluorescent tubes. I don't know why Carol preferred this glaring, uncomfortable passageway, except that here there was always someone to talk to; there was life.

We were sitting in the office, drinking the rest of the champagne, when the buzzer rang. Butch Murphy answered it, then suddenly walked out of the room.

"Do you like to dance, Charley?" Carol said.

"Well, yes," I said, "but I'm not very good."

"Would you mind dancing with me?"

"We don't have any music," I said.

"I can hum," she said.

Carol took my hands, and I stood up. Carol began to hum "Stardust" and I put my arms around her and we moved in a small circle in the center of the brown tile floor.

"You're a grand dancer, Charley."

"Thanks."

"Charley, that young producer —"

"What about him?"

"What's he like?"

"Look. Mr. Culvers had better find somebody else to work for him. I don't think Laddie Wells would walk across the street, if I told him to."

"Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's one damned mess."

We heard Butch Murphy's footsteps crossing the marble squares; I let go of Carol.

"Don't stop," Carol said, grabbing my arm. "Please let's dance a little longer. Please . . ."

"It's late," I said, pulling away.

Butch Murphy, pretending to have noticed none of this, walked into the room, sat down in the swivel chair, picked up a newspaper, and started to read. Then Culvers came into the office, wearing pajamas, his old brown slippers, a purple wool robe, piped in gold. Culvers had rubbed talcum powder on his large, sagging cheeks, and had given his hair a good brushing. He took Carol's hand.

"You'll have to forgive us, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said. "Ordinarily we try to get to bed at a reasonable hour."

"I was just leaving," I said.

"Did you get enough material tonight for your story?"

"Of course, I won't be able to turn in any of this until we get photographs and —"

"Yes, yes, I understand. Well, call us anytime," Culvers said, moving toward the hall door.

I thanked them for a pleasant evening. I put my hands in my pockets and walked out of the house down the drive to Cove Way. From my bedroom windows I watched the lights go out in Culvers' windows, twenty lights at a time, as a stage darkens after a play — all but the office lights.

Three weeks after Carol's father got killed — (said Gladys Hendrix, settling herself after dinner in a clutter of satin souvenir pillows on her sofa. I had gone at last to "take dinner" with Mrs. Gladys Hendrix at the Marie Antoinette Apartments, where she lived with a pet canary) — Marie Godsen was receiving visits from a Mr. Frank A. Vadnum. If you ask me, Marie was meeting this Vadnum for some months before her husband Will Godsen died; but that's neither here nor there. Now Marie is nobody's fool, so I don't understand how Marie was ever taken in by Vadnum; but she was. Vadnum was nothing but a common dago; had eyes as black as night, and was as bald as an egg. Vadnum swore to Marie that he wasn't any dago, but I've seen photographs. Marie has kept dozens of photographs of Vadnum — she's still wild over that man, I tell you — so I don't think Marie really cared what Vadnum was.

One good thing was that Vadnum was very fond of little Carol. Oh, he was wild about Carol. When Carol couldn't eat apple dumpling because of four sugar bumps on her chin —

she was just twelve — Frank Vadnum wouldn't touch his; said that if Carol couldn't have apple dumpling, he didn't want apple dumpling either. The next time he visited Marie he brought Carol a gold-plated vanity stamped with her initials; and he insisted that Carol go along with them to the movies that night. It became customary for the three of them to go to movies together. Oh, he was crazy about Carol. Marie gave Vadnum a snapshot of Carol, holding a Japanese parasol, and Vadnum carried this in his wallet, next to his heart, he said.

Marie knew very little about Frank A. Vadnum. He claimed to be a realtor, but when Marie told him about not being able to find his office in the yellow pages, he shut up like a New England clam.

One evening Vadnum arrived earlier than usual. He had Marie go to her window and look out at his new Buick convertible, parked in front of her house. Then he took out his wallet and laid it before Marie on a table. "Look what's inside," he said, a sly grin stretching his soft reddish lips — Vadnum had lips full and colored, like a woman's. Marie opened the wallet and counted five one-thousand-dollar bills.

Two days later Marie and Frank were married by a justice of the peace in Louisiana, Missouri, which is just outside St. Louis. Marie sold her house, her furniture, in fact Marie sold everything that she had owned with Will Godsen except the photographs of Carol. There were dozens of photographs of Carol: Carol in a sailor suit; Carol tap dancing in tights; Carol in her Easter dresses from the time when she was one year old; Carol riding a pony in the park; Carol laughing; Carol looking sad; Carol doing cartwheels in her acrobatics class. With eleven thousand dollars — five from Will Godsen's insurance and six from the sale of property and goods — Marie and Carol

moved with Frank A. Vadnum to Chicago, where Vadnum was supposed to have connections and friends.

Frank Vadnum bought a Tudor-style house on the brink of Oak Park. Marie decided that it was up to her to furnish it so she spent over four thousand dollars; Marie wanted their house to look fine for Frank Vadnum's friends. Frank insisted that Carol go to a girl's school, so Carol was enrolled in an expensive private school in Lake Forest.

The bumps on Carol's face disappeared after a few months in Chicago, and by the time Carol was thirteen she was beautiful. Unfortunately her beauty brought her no happiness at the school. Whenever Carol was around, the girls put up a united front against her. They said that Carol was pretty, but had no personality. They said that no one knew her mother. They said that Carol didn't seem to care whom she associated with; that she smoked; and that she was subject to the most terrible states of the blues. The remark about whom she went around with was directed against a girl named Christy Platt, Marie says, who couldn't help wetting her pants. (Christy Platt, Carol's best friend, is now happily married to a Lake Forest C.P.A. Carol telephoned her, when she and Clarence passed through last year, but Christy didn't have a baby sitter and couldn't come in.)

The Vadnums went to parties, to night clubs, and to American Legion dances in big hotels — Frank was a beautiful dancer. Once when Frank made a lot of money on a deal, there was a party at their house that lasted nine hours. Two famous night-club singers came to the party, and big politicians, and a cousin of Al Capone's, and three stag women in beautiful ermine coats. Life with Frank seemed like a roller-coaster ride to Marie, after being married to Will T. Godsen.

After coming home from school every afternoon, Carol would sit on Frank's lap, put her arms around his neck, kiss his cheeks, and talk to him. Frank disapproved of the neighborhood boys who came to flirt with Carol: no one was good enough, and when a Lake Forest boy drove sixteen miles to take her to a movie, Frank said that he used bad language. Carol, who didn't like any of the boys very much, used to tease Frank telling him things boys had said and tried to do with her.

In May — 1942 — Marie's mother had a fatal stroke, working in her nasturtium beds. Marie flew to St. Louis and stayed four days. When Marie came back, she knew that something terrible had happened. Carol locked herself in her room every evening, coming out only to eat supper and to go to the bathroom. During supper, Carol avoided Frank Vadnum's eyes. Once late at night, standing outside Carol's door, Marie heard sobs. Then Frank, who explained that they had quarreled over one of Carol's boy friends, went away the next week end on business. He came back, bringing Carol a heart-locket of solid gold. But Carol continued to act strange toward Frank. She began to act strange, Marie said, around all males, except a red-haired sissy nicknamed Prince Albert, who encouraged her ambition to become a movie star. Then one week end Frank Vadnum went away and never came back, and Marie found that he didn't actually own their house, and that he hadn't invested her money in any stocks, and that he had drawn all but \$400 from their joint bank account. Well I never —

(Gladys gasped, wiping her forehead with a handkerchief embroidered with teddy bears.)

— I met Marie Vadnum in July 1946. As I said, I had spent

my first two weeks in Los Angeles trying to find a beauty parlor that suited me. I was on the verge of going home to Kansas City, when I walked into Ceil-et-Cecile's, a lovely parlor, decorated in lavender, around the corner from Schwabs. There were only three other persons in the parlor that day: a Mexican actress, getting her hair washed by Monsieur Ceil, who wore a pretty lavender smock; and a woman, also in lavender, who wasn't busy. I collapsed into the nearest booth. "Give me the works, dear," I said; I always have a new parlor do everything, so that I can tell all at once whether I'll like the place.

By five o'clock Marie Vadnum had given me accounts of her first marriage in St. Louis, her second marriage in Chicago, and had told me about her beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter, who had already acted in a movie, under the name of Carol Clayton. I had never heard of a Carol Clayton, so Marie opened her purse and took out a movie magazine, which had a photograph of Carol Clayton posed as a cow girl on Santa Monica beach. "I'm very proud of Baby," Marie said.

"Is that what you call her?" I said.

"We're very close. I call her Baby, and she calls me Sweet-heart."

When I first knew them, Marie Vadnum and Carol had moved out of a dump in downtown Hollywood into a sixty-dollar-a-month apartment on North Doheny, practically in the limits of Beverly Hills. Their apartment had three rooms, if you counted the kitchenette and bath, and a tiny terrace, which went unused because Carol didn't like to lie in the sun. They had had twice as much space in Hollywood, they said,

but Hollywood was a bad address. Everybody who was anybody lived in Beverly Hills.

They had lived in Hollywood four years. Marie Vadnum had arrived there the summer of 1942 with three hundred dollars in cash and this beautiful daughter, who had spent her fourteenth birthday on the Greyhound coach. They found a room through a kind waitress at the Hollywood Pig 'n Whistle. The room, three floors above an antique shop on Highland, had a Mae West type swan bed and an office chair repaired with chicken wire. In a room next door lived a down-and-out English actor, who raised hamsters under his bed. While Marie looked for a job, Carol played with the hamsters. Carol liked the Englishman, who, she claimed, was the same type as Prince Albert; and it put Marie's mind at rest to know that her daughter was playing with hamsters instead of wandering through the streets of Hollywood, crowded with soldiers and sailors and marines. Marie saw a Help Wanted sign in Ceil-et-Cecile's window at the beginning of the second week.

After Monsieur Ceil hired Marie, they moved to a gloomy vaulted apartment in a Spanish-type apartment house, where Randolph Scott had once lived. That summer Carol spent most of her time sitting around the beauty parlor, where Monsieur Ceil worked out his inspirations on her hair. It was Monsieur Ceil who decided that Carol was the Jean Harlow type and ought to become a platinum blonde.

Carol liked Hollywood High a great deal better than the all-girl's school in Lake Forest. Nearly everybody at Hollywood High had ambitions of becoming a movie star; and nobody gave a damn about not knowing your mother. Carol

began to act normal around boys again. Although none of the boys came up to the boy who moved through her dreams, she had sodas and root beer with them and let them hold her hand, and peck her cheek in movies, and wore their basketball sweaters and sailor caps.

At any rate, Carol had got over whatever had happened with her stepfather in Oak Park. About this time a picture about a sex crime was being planned in a producer's office at Magnum Pictures. One April afternoon during her senior year Carol Godsen was spotted on a street corner near Hollywood High by Hal Entrican, a small-time movie agent, who had stopped for a red light there. That summer Carol played the murderess in the sex crime picture, and was given a contract at Magnum, paying her \$100 a week. Hal Entrican believed that he had discovered a star.

— The telephone rang. Gladys Hendrix answered it, then placing her hand over the receiver, glanced at me. "It's Carol," she whispered, "drunk as a sailor." Gladys Hendrix gave her attention to the telephone: "You mustn't say those things, Baby. You mustn't say those things about your mother, or God'll punish you. Your mother loves you . . . Uh-huh . . . Uh-huh . . . Uh-huh, uh-uh . . . You know as well as I that your mother would cut off her fingers and toes if it would make you happy . . . Yes, Baby, I promise. Good night, Baby . . . Good night."

Gladys put back the receiver and sighed.

"She calls me up every time she gets polluted, and starts attacking and blaming poor Marie."

"What's it all about?" I said.

"It's all in Carol's mind," Gladys Hendrix said, "all in her mind. I'm going to take an aspirin, Mr. Thayer. Would you like an aspirin too?"

I shook my head.

Gladys Hendrix went into her bathroom. The toilet flushed, a glass clinked, a water faucet was turned on and off. When she came back to the living room, she opened the door of her canary's cage. "It's terrible of me not to have let Archie out today, but I've been so busy, Mr. Thayer." Archie flew out of his cage, circled the room twice, finally perched on a sterling silver frame holding a photograph of a man who looked like Calvin Coolidge. I asked Gladys if she had known Calvin Coolidge. "Why, that's my late husband!" Gladys Hendrix exclaimed. "That's the Doctor, Mr. Thayer. My, he would have loved your saying that!"

The telephone rang again. Gladys Hendrix looked at me knowingly, nodded, then made a sucking noise with her tongue, indicating that she wasn't going to talk to Carol any more this night. "It'll go on and on and on. She must have got stinking early today. Sometimes she calls up fifteen times in an evening. Blesses *me* out, Mr. Thayer, as if I had had anything to do with it. Blesses me out because I'm a friend of Marie. I have to tell myself that the darling doesn't know what she's saying when she's like that. Otherwise, I . . ."

"When did Carol start to drink?" I said.

Gladys Hendrix settled herself again among the pillows.

— In the early spring of 1947 Carol brought a young man to my apartment. Naturally, this surprised me, knowing how little Carol seemed to care about boys. Until she met Jack Lonsdale, Carol had thought of boys as puppy dogs, who followed you around. Now she stood in my doorway, clutching a young man's hand.

"Well, come on in, Baby," I said, "come on in."

Carol and the young man walked inside. They stood near the coffee table, looking at each other, looking at me, looking

back at each other, as though each waited for the other to speak first. Finally, Carol said what his name was and where they had met.

She had met Jack Lonsdale the evening before at a U.C.L.A. prom. The studio had arranged for her to attend this prom as The Ideal College Man's date. The week before, Carol had appeared at a dairy convention, and the week before that, had been a Lemon Queen. All this was part of a starlet's business, like showing up at Ciro's or getting your teeth capped. It was as though Carol had met the young man of her dreams, getting her teeth capped, or something.

While I fixed Tom Collinses, Carol and Jack Lonsdale sat on the sofa, their hands still clasped, their eyes still caught, Carol snuggled close to his cashmere sweater. When they thought I wasn't looking, he kissed the tip of her nose, then he kissed her lips —

Well, Mr. Thayer, I dropped and broke the ice bucket that the Titsons had given me on my birthday. If you'd seen them together you'd have dropped your ice bucket too.

— Later that evening Carol telephoned me from a drive-in, where they were having supper. Carol wanted to know what I thought about them getting married. "Well, Baby," I said, "if you don't marry that young man you'll be the craziest and miserablest girl in the world."

"Oh, Gladys," Carol said, "I love him so much I could die!"

They went everywhere together that spring. They went swimming out near Malibu, and they went on little trips to Laguna and Carmel, and they ate together, and shopped together, and talked about getting married. The love affair displeased Carol's studio. Carol had been given a role in a high-

budget western. The studio planned to give her a build-up and wanted her to go around with a star.

"Jack's taking up too much of Baby's time," Marie Vadnum would say to me. "Baby's neglecting her career." It was understandable, Marie's thinking this. Marie spent her evenings, now, ironing Carol's dresses, daydreaming of Carol as a star. As far as I know, Marie had nothing personal against Jack.

Besides being elected The Ideal College Man, Jack Lonsdale came from nice people; you could tell this right away. His people weren't millionaires, or anything like that; the father, I believe, owned a Pontiac agency back in New Jersey, and had given Jack a convertible and a suitable allowance; and the father was perfectly willing for Jack to play around Los Angeles that summer after he graduated. Marie knew this much about the Lonsdales.

One evening in late August Carol had to break a date with Jack. Her producer wanted her to go to the Mocambo with an oil man who had been kind to him in New Orleans. The oil man had come to California to recuperate from pneumonia. So they all went to the Mocambo, Carol, the producer, and the oil man; and by two o'clock back at her apartment, Carol had forgotten the oil man's name.

His name was Mr. Clarence C. Culvers; he was sixty-two years old, had a son as old as Carol, and was separated from his wife.

The next day six dozen white roses arrived at Carol's apartment; and the day after that Clarence Culvers was paying a visit on Marie. Although Carol saw Clarence Culvers only one other time that month, items about them began to appear

in the gossip columns. It was during the first week in September that Marie bought a Cadillac; and it was the same week that Jack Lonsdale told Carol that his father wanted him to come home.

The evening before Jack Lonsdale left California, they drove to Pasadena, Carol said. The next morning around six o'clock my doorbell rang. Half asleep I stumbled to the door.

"Who is it?" I said.

"Carol," a weak voice said. "It's Carol."

I opened the door; she stood in the doorway, her shoulders stooped, her hair straggled, her make-up worn off, her skin a pale gray-green.

"He's gone," she said.

"Don't try to talk about it, Baby," I said. "You're all tired now. You ought to get some sleep."

"He's gone, Gladys."

"You've got to get some sleep, Baby."

"He's gone and I don't wanna live any more."

"Come on in, Baby. I'm going to put you to bed so you can sleep."

Carol lay on my bed, her head buried in a pillow, until six o'clock that evening, and would not eat, would not drink anything, would not even go to the bathroom.

Carol never received a single letter from Jack Lonsdale. She wrote him letters every other day for a month, but he never answered them.

Carol believes Marie had a hand in it. The poor girl gets polluted and sits down in that office at night, and telephones me, and tries to get me to say that it was her mother, who ran him away —

All this happened in September 1948. Carol and her mother were shipped off to Mexico City, shortly after this, under the chaperonage of Butch Murphy. They passed the winter and spring months in Mexico City, while Culvers arranged for his first wife to divorce him.

“IS THIS YOU, CHARLEY?”

“Yeah,” I growled sleepily. “Who’re you?”

“You don’t remember me?” a young woman’s voice said. “So you don’t remember me.” Through the receiver came the sounds of water rushing and the clear early morning whistling of birds.

“Who is this?” I said, my eyes still closed, smiling.

“The woman you love,” she said. She giggled, as though to remove any meaning from the words. Then I heard the crash of a glass on stone; the giggling stopped. “Christ!” She screamed for someone to come clean up the mess.

“Hello,” I said. “It’s six o’clock in the morning and I don’t love anybody.”

“Anybody who doesn’t love anybody, re-gard-less of six o’clock in the morning, ought to be flushed down the toilet,” she said, rather nastily. “The sonsofbitches have come out now, and they’re cleaning up the mess. Do you think I ought to break another? Do you? Do you?”

“If you want to,” I said. My eyes were opened now; and I sat up in bed.

“They’re coming out to get me,” she whispered, “to put me to bed. They think I might ac-ci-dent-tally drown myself in my swimming pool. Get away! Get away, goddammit . . .”

The receiver must have been jerked from her hand, for I heard her cursing them at a distance from the telephone. "Take your hands off me. I'll report you, I'll report, I'll report . . ."

Her servants must have won out. Several minutes later the receiver was put back on its hook, and buzzing began like the noise of some poor fly beating against a window screen. If I had had binoculars, I could have watched the servants from my window, dragging Carol Culvers into the house.

That week, the week after my evening with Gladys Hendrix, Carol telephoned again. This time she called about one o'clock in the morning from her bathroom. Culvers had hired a nurse to take care of her, and she had got drunk again, and locked herself in the bathroom so that the nurse couldn't give her a knockout shot.

"Hello, Charley," she said. "Whatcha doin'?"

"I'm lying in bed," I said, "smoking a cigarette, trying to go to sleep."

"I can't sleep either. I'm just like you, Charley. Why don't you come on over?"

"Oh, it's late, Carol."

"Are you in love with me?"

"Of course I'm in love with you," I said.

"Anyone who doesn't love me ought to be —"

"— flushed down the toilet," I added.

"Tha's right. Charley — I —" Suddenly Carol began to cry; I could hear the nurse pounding on the door. "Why don't you come over here, Charley?"

"I can't," I said.

"I'm — I'm goin' to New Jersey, Charley. Wanna come along?"

"What's in New Jersey?" I said.

She didn't answer at first; I could hear her breathing fast into the receiver. The nurse started pounding again.

"Nothing's in New Jersey," she said, "but I love New Jersey. New Jersey's a grand state, isn't it, Charley?"

"All right," I said, "I'll come along."

"We'll leave in the mornin'," she said. "Goo' night, darling."

"Good night," I said.

She did not telephone me again.

By this time, Gladys Hendrix had told me about Carol's "good nights" and "bad nights." "Good nights" were the nights when she didn't drink anything, and could sleep, and didn't need shots. On "bad nights" she drank until morning, sitting in the office with the night secretary, Tommy Meek, or the nurse, and telephoned and played the record player. Once she forced the nurse to dance with her.

Culvers, who went to sleep at midnight, didn't know very much about the "bad nights"; and the servants, if they had told him anything, would have been fired; and probably Culvers would not have believed them. Ordinarily, Gladys Hendrix said, two nights in a week were bad nights, but there was no real way of knowing. During the recent meetings, when Culvers had been occupied with his businesses, Carol had stayed up six nights in a row.

Butch Murphy, who worked only until twelve, had heard about six bad nights from the servants' grapevine, and had suggested to Culvers that he hire a nurse. Culvers hired a spinster, a carrot-haired woman named Miss Martha Thornhill, who babied Carol: read to her, waited on her, and held her in her arms when she was drunk. After the nurse was

hired, Carol looked upon Butch Murphy as her enemy. No one knew how Carol had found out about Butch Murphy's squealing; but she did find out. Eleven servants and two secretaries worked at the house, who, with the exception of Butch Murphy, feared and fawned over Carol. I suppose that Carol could have found out anything that she wanted to know.

During the day Carol amused herself. There were always people, using the tennis courts, and using the pool; and these people brought other people there. While Carol played, old Culvers would sit on the terrace in the shade, reading histories, or dictating letters to Butch Murphy, or speaking on the telephone. Every ten minutes Culvers' heavy face would look up to see what she was doing. When Carol grew bored with people, she shopped, or visited her mother, or visited Gladys Hendrix, or went for a hamburger with a girl-friend. And, of course, Culvers' ambitions for her took up a great deal of time.

I don't know what lay behind those ambitions; whether he wanted to "show" New Orleans, which had sided with Etta Culvers during the divorce; or whether in his sixties he had tired of his "empire" and his business power and wanted to conquer some new world with this girl he worshiped. Culvers was enormously ambitious for Carol. It was because of this ambition and not out of kindness to me, or because of his promises, that he suddenly telephoned me the last Saturday in June, inviting me to bring a photographer to the house — and get on with the story for *Life*.

I went to Culvers' house with Bob Leamus, a *Life* photographer. At two o'clock when Butch Murphy telephoned upstairs, announcing us, Culvers wanted to know what Carol was supposed to wear. Leamus, who had a flair for "camp,"

wanted to get shots of her lying around the marble swimming pool beneath the two-armed Venus de Milo; Leamus wanted her to wear a bathing suit, or shorts. Butch Murphy told Culvers this.

"Mr. Culvers doesn't think a bathing suit would look dignified," Butch Murphy said, placing her palm over the mouth-piece.

"Who wants a doll to look dignified!" Leamus cried.

"Shut up, Leamus. Let me speak to Mr. Culvers," I said.

I explained to Culvers why we wanted Carol to wear a bathing suit, and Culvers listened quietly. After I thought that I had persuaded him, he said: "I don't consider bathing suits necessary to a serious acting career."

"All right, Mr. Culvers," I said. "Tell her to wear what she usually wears in the daytime."

"I don't want her photographed in those slacks either," Culvers said.

"Tell him to have her put on a tea gown with ostrich feathers," Leamus said.

"Anything will be all right, Mr. Culvers," I said. I handed the receiver back to Butch Murphy, who, after a half-dozen "yes-sirs," hung up.

"Nobody wants to see a picture of a rich woman taking a walk around the estate," Leamus said, kicking his toe against Butch Murphy's swivel chair. "That's no story. What I wanted —"

"I know what you wanted," I said, frowning. I wanted Leamus to stop sounding off around Butch Murphy, who sat, leaning forward, a Ticonderoga pencil point pricking her sharp teeth, listening, observing us for her boss. "We can't always get exactly what we want, Leamus," I said.

Leamus wanted to show a beautiful blonde, married to an

old Croesus, who had locked her up in a platinum cage. Butch Murphy, grinning at Leamus, said that Mr. Culvers had his own ideas about Mrs. Culvers' career.

"I'll lay you ten to one there's not going to be any career if he keeps his hand in it," Leamus said, lighting a cigarette.

Butch Murphy leaned back in her swivel chair, chuckling to herself.

Waiting for the Culverses, we walked out by the swimming pool, where a young Greek with cold cream on his face lay sunning. As we approached, the Greek's heavy-lidded turtle eyes opened, then closed again.

"Thought it was *her*," the Greek said.

"Mrs. Culvers is upstairs, dressing," I said. "We're going to take some photographs."

"Good," he said. "Maybe I'll have some peace for a while."

"Why do you come here if you don't like her?" I said.

The turtle eyes opened, and the Greek gazed up aggressively. "No pool at my apartment house. What's it to you anyway?"

"It's nothing to me," I said.

The young Greek raised himself, leaning on his elbows.

"I ain't got nothing against her, except I wouldn't like to get the old man sore on me, now, would I?"

"I suppose not," I said.

"She ain't really bothered me much this week. Maybe she's found herself somebody. Me, I just want to get a real pretty tan."

The Greek gave his swarthy face a fresh coating of cold cream, wiped his hands on maroon sateen trunks, then lay again beside the pool. We walked on.

Down at the tennis courts two agents were playing doubles

against a manicurist from the Beverly Hills Hotel, and a Balkan spy. According to Leamus, the Balkan had actually done some spying once upon a time for Tito. Now the Balkan spy played rich-bitch society-girl roles in Hollywood.

As we sat down to watch the tennis, Joseph came, saying that Mr. and Mrs. Culvers were waiting by the swimming pool; so we followed Joseph up the hill. Culvers, sweating through a tan linen sport coat, stood holding Carol's hand. Carol wore a white lace cocktail dress, diamond earrings, a diamond bracelet, and diamond clips.

"Hi," Carol said.

I introduced Leamus to Culvers. Culvers put his hand on Leamus' shoulder and said, "Do you think you'll be able to get some good ones, Mr. Leamus?"

Leamus surprised me. "I'm going to try to get good ones, sir," Leamus said, giving a broad, obsequious smile.

Carol poked her hand in Culvers' pocket, took out his old-fashioned silver cigarette case, and offered us cigarettes. We shook our heads.

"Where shall we start?" Culvers said to Leamus.

"Well, sir," Leamus said, "I think it might be a good idea to get some shots of you and Mrs. Culvers walking around your estate. You know: by the swimming pool, by the tennis courts, etcetera. Then we can get some shots in the house."

Culvers said that that sounded fine.

The Greek sunning himself would never have batted an eye if Carol had not tripped over his body.

"Oh, goodness!" Carol cried.

"That's all right," the Greek said, settling himself again.

"*Who's that?*" Culvers said.

"Now how would I know who that is, Clarence," Carol

said. Carol moved into a position near the two-armed Venus de Milo. "How's this?"

"Swell!" Leamus shouted. Leamus had set up his camera across the pool. He was getting a long shot of the Culverses and Venus, reflecting into the pool.

"Don't you want him to move?" Carol said, pointing to the Greek.

"He won't show," Leamus said, squinting into the camera. "Now, Mrs. Culvers, you and Mr. Culvers please look to the right. Look like you've just come outside to see what your guests are up to."

"Oh, that's a cute idea," Carol said.

"Don't talk," Culvers said.

Carol stuck out her tongue at Culvers; Leamus shot her sticking out her tongue.

"Why, you old sonofabitch!" Carol cried.

"I'll give you that one," Leamus said.

Leamus took six long shots from the end of the pool.

"Now, we'll go by the waterfall," Leamus said. "Why don't you look very happy, Mrs. Culvers, with Mr. Culvers by the waterfall?"

"I'm mad at him," Carol said. She reached over and pinched Leamus' flushed cheek. "Leamus-cleamus!"

"How's this?" Culvers said, squeezing Carol's hand.

Leamus said that that looked swell.

"Now, look happy, Carol. Smile and look happy," Culvers said.

"All right," Carol said, and she smiled beautifully. After Leamus got his shot, Carol gave Culvers a push. Culvers stumbled backward and almost fell into the pool. Leamus wasn't sure whether he ought to laugh or not. Culvers said

that he was going to give Carol a good spanking, when he got her inside the house. Leamus laughed very weakly.

*“I think that I shall never see,
Clarence climbing a coconut tree . . .”*

Carol sang. Culvers took Carol's hand again.

“What do you say we move on?” Carol said, freeing her hand.

As we approached the tennis courts, the Balkan spy blew the Culverses a kiss. “No, no, don't stop,” Culvers shouted.

“Keep on playing,” Carol cried, “we're supposed to be watching the game.”

Leamus took ten shots of the Culverses pretending to watch the tennis match. Leamus also photographed them crossing the lawns, leaning against the white pillars of their house, and gazing up at clouds.

During the photographing, new people arrived. Cobina Wright's secretary; and the Abe Abramses, who had money in Vari-color; and an Egyptian princess, who had drifted to Beverly Hills in the entourage of the Queen Mother Nazli; and a blank-faced Dutchman, who owned a pepper business; and a man in pink shorts, who sold Fords; and the man who had once played Dagwood Bumstead. A producer's wife had brought canvas, easel, brushes, and oils, and had started to paint the artificial waterfall.

Around four o'clock, climbing the last hill, Culvers began to puff. Leamus said, “Don't you think we've had enough photographing for one day?” Culvers said his doctors didn't like him to feel tired.

“Mine don't either,” I said.

“We'd better go,” Leamus said.

A messenger boy on a motorbike came flying up the Culvers' drive. The boy stopped the bike in front of the columned portico, and he rang the bell.

"What have you got there?" Culvers said.

"You Mr. Culvers?" the boy shouted.

The boy ran across the lawn, handed Culvers a large brown envelope, and ran back to his motorbike.

"What is it, Clarence?" Carol said.

Tearing open the envelope, Culvers took out some yellow pages fastened with a paper clip. "It's from our new producer," Culvers said. Culvers read a short typed letter attached to the pages.

"What does he say, Clarence? What does he say?"

"He says he's sent me an outline of the story. He says he's thought up a title for the picture."

"What does he want to call it?"

"He wants to call it *The Thousand-Dollar Day*," Culvers said frowning.

"Oh, that's cute!" Carol said, kicking a rock. Then she glanced up and she saw Culvers' frown. "Don't you like it?"

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Culvers said.

"It's not only cute, it's *good*."

"We'll see what Flanagan thinks."

"*Flanagan?*"

"Flanagan's head of my production company and I don't want him to feel I'm going over his head. Flanagan's all right," Culvers said.

"I don't see why you go and hire a fine young producer, then let a dope like Flanagan decide whether what he says is good or not."

"You've never liked Flanagan, have you, dumpling?" Culvers pinched Carol's forearm; then turned to Leamus and me:

"She's never cared much for Flanagan."

"Flanagan could never get a job in Hollywood, until you came along. You ought to hear how Clarence met Flanagan," Carol said. "Clarence is down in Mexico City seeing Sweetheart and me and is having this terrific argument in the lobby with the manager of our hotel. Clarence thinks the manager's cheating him on our bill. Clarence can't speak a word of Spanish except two or three dirty words, and he kept saying these dirty words over and over to the manager. So this guy Flanagan comes over and tells Clarence that he speaks Spanish. Flanagan gets into the argument and saves Clarence seven forty-eight on our bill. So Clarence thinks he's discovered a wonderful, brilliant, clever man, and takes Flanagan along with him everywhere he goes, even takes him along with us to Acapulco. At this time in my life, I was in no mood to have anybody else along, especially Flanagan, and anyway *I* was on to Flanagan from the start. The next thing I know this Flanagan is put in charge of Clarence's production company, which has just been formed, and which I'm supposed to be the star of."

"Flanagan wants to make artistic pictures," Culvers said, "not the kind of pictures Hollywood turns out. Flanagan and I are in complete agreement."

"Who doesn't want to make artistic pictures, for crissake?" Carol cried. "Flanagan — Flanagan can't even turn out crap. Know what Flanagan was doing before he met Clarence? He was playing the saxophone in some two-bit flophouse down there."

"Flanagan knows what's artistic," Culvers said stubbornly. "Flanagan's all right."

"It's god-damned stupid of you, Clarence, to hire a thou-

sand-dollar-a-week producer, then let a dope like Flanagan — ”

“Flanagan’s not going to interfere,” Culvers said.

“Flanagan’s no good!” Carol cried. “He’s no good, I tell you. I don’t see why you like having men who’re no good around you. You just want louses around. You just want louses you can push around. You’re going to ruin the new producer the way you ruined Riley. Don’t think I haven’t heard how much smarter than you Riley was. You’re afraid of anyone smarter than you!”

Her doll eyes had narrowed, as though she were thinking and saying those thoughts for the first time; and as the June wind blew her white-blond hair, her ears above the diamond cluster earrings turned deep rose with anger.

At first Culvers stood there, looking at her, saying nothing; but when her painted lips opened to cry out again, Culvers spoke. “What’s come over you? Why has this producer got you so upset?”

“The producer hasn’t got me upset,” Carol said, her lips quivering, her wide blue eyes clouding with tears. She pulled at a strap beneath the shoulder of the white lace dress. “I just get mad when I think of all those louses you have around when I think of what’s going to happen to Laddie Wells.”

“Laddie Wells?” I said.

“I hired Mr. Wells a week ago,” Culvers said, “but you mustn’t say anything about it, because he’s working on the side and this might get him into trouble with his studio. Aren’t you the one who told me about Laddie Wells?”

“I was the one,” I said.

The next afternoon, Sunday, I dressed up in linen trousers

and a pink shirt and walked out of my rooms, heading toward Culvers' place. Dr. Grey, my landlord, lay in a green canvas hammock, puffing on his pipe. "Looks like they're having another party," Dr. Grey said, glancing across Cove Way.

"That's just the week-end crowd," I said.

Mrs. Grey, tying back yellow cabbage roses, gazed toward Culvers' place, a mixture of smugness and hate in her dulled blue eyes. "It looks like the whole world's over there, doesn't it, Mr. Thayer?"

"Yes, it does," I said; then I quickened my steps, for though I did not admire the Culverses, I had no feelings whatsoever about the Greys. I did not like believing that all life had to be boiled down to a choice between Culverses and Greys, as Mrs. Grey's tone had implied.

Mrs. Grey had been right about a *world* over there. The Culverses did have their world: a nightmare world, peopled with sun-tanned social gypsies and servant spies and gentlemen wrecks; and wide-eyed Rastignacs and gray-flanneled leeches; and fair-weather acquaintances, soft and sugary as marshmallows, baking in the sun; a whole world in miniature, complete with struggles for power, office politicians, neutrals, pawns, favorites, and a chief of state.

At three o'clock a large part of their world had come to sit around their marble pool.

A white yachting cap cocked over one eye, wearing a one-piece white satin bathing suit, Carol Culvers sat beside the pool's edge, playing two-handed Canasta with the Greek.

"Hi," Carol called.

"Hi, yourself," I said. "Has Leamus arrived?"

"Yeah, he's here," she said, looking around. "Leamus-cleamus was on a big drunk last night. Last time I saw him he

was sitting out his hangover on the terrace. He may have gone to sleep somewhere.”

“Why didn’t you freeze the pack?” the Greek said, picking up a fat stack of cards.

“I don’t know why, for crissake,” Carol said.

I spotted Leamus kneeling on the terrace steps, vomiting into a putty-colored terra cotta urn. I walked over and I offered to drive Leamus to his apartment, but Leamus didn’t want to leave. “You ought to let me take you home,” I said. “Aw go lay an egg,” Leamus said. Leamus sat down on the flagstone steps, burying his head in his arms. A lovely girl walked across the terrace and down the steps, painting her lips with cherry-colored lipstick. “Hello, Agnes,” Leamus said. But the lovely girl kept on walking and would not speak. Leamus watched her moving toward the crowd around the swimming pool. “That’s Beverly Hills for you,” Leamus said.

“That’s everywhere for you,” I said. “Don’t start blaming Beverly Hills.”

I wandered toward the pool.

“I’m painting a portrait of Reggie,” said a honey-skinned beauty.

“I got it straight from the front office that they *don’t* want Reggie for *The Raging Sun*. They don’t want any lush,” said her friend.

“Say, Sam,” she said. “Why don’t I just go with you to the Foster McWhortens’ on Friday?”

An old man wearing lime-green shorts was saying that he remembered when coyotes cried in Beverly Hills.

It was then that I noticed Culvers, wearing a linen suit, standing on the flagstone terrace, surveying us all. Culvers’ heavy gray face expressed his resignation and amusement and

contempt. When, for instance, poor Leamus, crouched on the steps like a leper, looked up at him, Culvers moved away with barely a glance.

"Why did you go down so soon?" the Greek was asking Carol. They had moved their Canasta game to the diving board, and the Greek now wore her yachting cap.

"Haven't I warned you not to keep asking me stupid questions?" Carol said.

Leamus rose from the terrace steps, and started to stagger down the drive.

Leaving, Leamus must have passed Laddie Wells, parking his Chrysler. Five minutes later I saw Laddie Wells walking up the Culverses' drive. Laddie was wearing white flannel trousers, a navy blue blazer, clean white buckskin shoes, and a crimson silk scarf, tied like an ascot inside an opened pale blue collar. I wondered if he had consulted his tailor about what to wear.

Before Laddie joined the crowd, he took out a pocket comb and ran it through his long brown hair; then he put one hand in his trouser pocket, as though this would put him at ease.

It upset him, finding me at the Culverses'. Walking toward the pool, he singled me out, keeping his eyes fixed on me until he stood on the edge of the crowd. Then he moved his eyes to the producer's wife, painting, and spoke to her first, trying to hide his upset.

"Well, well, if it isn't Culvers' new hired hand!" I said.

Laddie's eyes looked pink around the edges; a fever blister had popped out at the corner of his mouth. He took a long deep breath, as though my presence here was the last straw.

"How've you been, Laddie?"

"Where's Mrs. Culvers?" he said.

Carol had spotted him walking up the drive; she had been waiting for him all afternoon. She threw down her cards, and they scattered into the swimming pool. Carol hopped down from the diving board and ran to him.

"Hi!" Carol said. "Did you bring your wife?" Carol had made him promise to bring Angelica; she wanted to know what his wife was like.

"My wife couldn't come," Laddie said.

"No kidding? Well, let's have a drink," Carol said, taking his hand, leading him toward the house. "Come on, Charley," she called; so I followed them.

As we crossed the blue tile floor of the portico, Carol jerked her hand away. We met Culvers, lumbering around the marble hall. Culvers wanted to know where we were going and what we were going to do.

"We're going to have some tea," Carol said. "Have you seen Joseph anywhere?"

Culvers said that he would ring for Joseph.

"Whew!" she pulled at her white bathing suit, her bare feet making slapping sounds on the black and white marble squares.

"You're pretty quick with answers," I said.

"You'd be quick too, if you were married to Clarence; but of course you're not a girl," she giggled. We walked into the small white room where the Culverses were supposed to have met Danny Hunts. It had been changed into a blue room with blue china candlesticks, blue chintz chairs, and a soft, low blue chintz sofa. The walls were blue, the rug was blue, even the flowers were blue — tall stock in Chinese blue vases. Carol said that this was the morning room. Apparently all she did in the morning was read movie magazines, for on the blue leather coffee table I saw dozens of them. Carol and Laddie sat on the

blue chintz sofa, and I sat in one of the blue chintz chairs.

"Did you tell him what I said?" Laddie asked her.

"You don't have to worry about Flanegan. If Flanegan opens his big trap, I'll put a dead roach in it from the swimming pool. Anyway, Clarence thinks it's just grand, your producing a picture for us."

"I won't have any cheap Irish trombone player shooting off his mouth to me about my picture."

"Don't worry about Flanegan," Carol said, trying to catch his eyes.

"I won't have anything to do with that crook," Laddie said.

"Don't worry so much." Carol squirmed to a position closer to him on the sofa. "Why didn't your wife come?"

"I didn't come here to talk about my wife," Laddie said, rising from the sofa, walking to the window, looking out at a faded pink sky. Against this sky a young woman in a bloomer-type play dress was standing on her head, and three middle-aged men, watching her, were making bets. Laddie smiled.

"Why — why did *you* come here?" Carol said.

"I had nothing better to do," Laddie said. "Where's that drink you promised us?"

Carol sank into the sofa until the white bathing suit became submerged in blue chintz. With one arm she wiped away a mustache of perspiration and a tear.

"I've been living in Beverly Hills for five years," Laddie said, looking out the window. The bloomer girl still stood on her head and the betters were shouting. "We flew out to Los Angeles from New York exactly five years ago today, and took a room at the Beverly Hills Hotel. They told me you had to do that."

Joseph entered, carrying a heavy silver tea service, carved

with cupids and fruit, and blue china cups. He placed the service on top of the movie magazines, then left us.

"That's a fine-looking tea service," I said.

"The corporation gave it to us for a wedding present," Carol said, starting to pour tea. "I remember three bellboys came, carrying six big boxes, to our honeymoon suite; and Clarence and I sat down on the carpet and opened the boxes one by one — just like kids." She gave a silly, sad little laugh. "And after we had opened all of them, Clarence had Room Service send some tea, and showed me how to use it. I thought I'd never learn to use this damned thing. I burned my thumb awfully bad the first time."

"Where're the drinks?" Laddie said. "Nobody wants tea."

After glancing toward the doorway, Carol knelt on the blue rug, raising the sofa's chintz skirt. She stuck her hand under the sofa and brought out a bottle of gin.

"Whoever heard of drinking gin in the middle of the afternoon," Laddie said.

"Well, go on out by the pool!" Carol cried, fighting back a flood of tears. "— and drink all the god-damned whiskey you want!" She began to pour gin into a teacup.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake!" Laddie stood there for a few seconds, staring at Carol, then he walked out of the room.

After Laddie had gone, she filled a cup with gin for me. Although I made a hideous face, I swallowed the stuff in three gulps.

"Laddie doesn't mean to be nasty," Carol was saying. "It's his wife's fault. They don't love each other any more."

"How do you know?" I said.

"I just know."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," I said. "Two persons can

behave like mad dogs and still love each other. How long have you known Laddie?"

"It doesn't matter how long I've known him," she said.

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"But how long?" I said. "I met him five years ago and I've known his wife all my life, and I don't know."

"Well, I've known Laddie only a week. But you still wouldn't understand," she said.

"Why wouldn't I understand?"

"Just because," she said.

"Because of what?"

Although she had curled up kittenishly on the sofa, one burning cheek pressed against a blue cushion, her left fingers trembled, shaking the cup; and her right fingers began to twist and pull at her bathing-suit strap.

"Because," she said, gazing out the window, "I was in love once with a boy who was a lot like Laddie Wells!"

One May afternoon — the day when the story of Angelica's accident hit the papers — Carol Culvers was having coffee at Googie's with Dolores Ammon, a heavy-faced brunette who had been her best friend at Hollywood High. Dolores was telling Carol how her poor mother lay stricken with arthritis and how a hundred dollars would help her to get well. Dolores, who had a large dull repertoire of hard-luck stories, was beginning to bore Carol. The doll eyes began to roam the lopsided glass-and-brick eatery for an interest in which to escape. Suddenly, they fixed upon a picture in a newspaper a woman across from her was reading. There, in the woman's newspaper, Carol saw — or thought that she saw — a photo-

graph of Jack Lonsdale. A sharp pain shot through her chest, and her throat began to feel warm and thick.

"Dolores," Carol said, "would you do me a favor, honey?"

"You know I'd do anything, sweetie. *What?*"

"Go next door to Scwabs and buy six copies of the paper that woman is reading."

Carol took out a fifty-dollar bill from her purse. "You can keep the change, honey," she said.

Dolores thinks I'm a sucker, Carol thought. Ever since she had become Mrs. Clarence C. Culvers, her old friends thought of her as a sucker and a soft touch. Clarence, whom she considered the wisest person she knew, had warned her about her old friends after they were married. But she liked her old friends, and she felt comfortable with them; and she did not want them to feel that she had changed, though of course she had changed. This new attitude of her old friends angered her, and it also made her feel lonely. "You'd better hurry," Carol said, forcing a laugh, waving the fifty under Dolores' thick nose.

Dolores snatched the bill, and without any expression of surprise over such a request flew like a great crow out of Googie's and returned, carrying six copies of the newspaper. Dolores handed her the papers with a smile.

You don't know it yet, honey, Carol thought, but *you're* going to have to go to work.

"Well, honey," Carol said, picking up the papers, "it's been grand seeing you."

"You're not leaving, sweetie?"

"Yeah," Carol said, "I've an appointment."

"When'll I see you again, sweetie? You never call me any more."

"You'll have to come up and go swimming in the pool."

"*When?*"

"I'll call you," Carol said, vaguely. "So long."

"So long, sweetie," Dolores said.

Dolores never even thanked her for the fifty; and it certainly proved Clarence's point about her old friends.

Later that afternoon Carol parked at a drive-in specializing in nutburgers and ordered another cup of coffee. There, examining the photograph she saw that it was not at all Jack Lonsdale. It was the photograph of a young assistant producer, earning five hundred a week, whose wife had been in an automobile accident with another man. Nevertheless, Carol read about the accident with interest. She read about Laddie Wells having come at twenty-eight to Hollywood, about his being Mark Harris' assistant, and being called a Hollywood intellectual: all of which impressed her. What impressed her most of all was his having gone to Harvard. Jack Lonsdale had at one time thought of going to Harvard, which had prejudiced her forever in favor of President Roosevelt's college, in spite of Clarence's hatred of Roosevelt. And the young assistant producer looked enough like Jack Lonsdale to make her stomach feel like a vast empty hole. She sympathized with the assistant producer's humiliation; she told herself that if they met they would fall passionately in love.

After Carol went home, she locked herself in her bathroom, and sat in there gazing at the photograph. When she left the bathroom, she stuffed the newspapers under her mattress; then she buzzed for Butch Murphy. She told Miss Murphy that that afternoon she had gone to a grand western with her friend Dolores and that she had written down the producer's name. She spelled out the name for Butch Murphy, and told Butch

Murphy that she had heard the movie had been taken from a novel and to please order some copies of the book.

That evening the chauffeur drove the Culverses to Pasadena, where one of Mark Harris' pictures was showing. After the picture ended, Carol told Clarence that she had heard it was really the assistant producer who was largely responsible for the fine picture; and Clarence, who felt that his young wife possessed a kind of superhuman natural intelligence, promised that he would hire the assistant producer away from his studio. The next morning Flanagan contacted Laddie Wells's agent. The agent — Carol heard — had laughed in Flanagan's face. This was what serious Hollywood people thought about Clarence's movie plans.

The next week (Angelica's second week at the hospital) Carol visited stages at Worldwide Pictures, hoping to catch sight of Laddie Wells; she had no luck. Once she walked back and forth in front of his office so many times that a policeman came out and told her to go away. Toward the end of the week she burned the newspapers stuffed under her mattress in her bathtub, and she flushed the ashes down the toilet. Losing hope, and rationalizing that with Clarence she had everything that a girl could want, she tried to forget Laddie Wells's face.

A month went by. (Angelica had come home and I did not see the Wellses; and I was working on the Culverses' story for *Life*.) Culvers learned about Carol's "bad nights," and taking Butch Murphy's suggestion, hired the nurse. Before the nurse resorted to giving Carol shots to make her sleep, the nurse tried reading to her. One night the nurse picked up one of the five copies of the novel upon which Laddie Wells's movie was based; and because it was a short novel, decided that she would read it aloud that night to Mrs. Culvers. Although Carol was

drunk, she sat up in bed to listen, and she began to have the feeling again that had come to her, that afternoon, looking at the picture. "Stop," Carol said to the nurse. "What do you think about the book? Is it good?" The nurse said that, personally, she did not care for books where everybody was poor. Carol began to feel strong again, and she stood up and hobbled to the telephone. She telephoned Worldwide Pictures, saying that it was urgent for her to get in touch with Mr. Wells. The operator at Worldwide said that she was not allowed to give out telephone numbers of homes.

And it was the week after this that in her misery she tried to become "friendly" with the young Greek, and she telephoned me twice. Finally, Carol telephoned Laddie Wells at his office. She said who she was, and after a while the secretary said that Mr. Wells was on the line.

"Oh, hello," Carol said, giving a weak laugh.

"Ja?"

"I'm Carol Culvers," she said.

"I know who you are."

"Well, our mutual friend Charley Thayer told us you're such a fine producer and Charley's coming here today with a photographer to photograph us for *Life* and —"

"What am I supposed to do — pose with you?"

Carol knew that Laddie Wells was poking fun at her. Her throat got choked and dry, and she could not speak.

"Hello? Hello? Are you still there?" Laddie Wells said.

"I — I thought you might — might come here for a drink with Charley. I — I know you're awfully busy and —"

"I couldn't come *there*," Laddie Wells said, laughing.

"Why couldn't you come here?"

"I couldn't think in such a house. Is anyone ever able to think at your house?" Laddie Wells said.

"What d'y' mean?" Carol said.

"Skip it."

"Well, I'll — I'll meet you somewhere else. I saw your movie. I even read the book, and —"

"What about the Beverly Hills at six?" Laddie Wells said.

Carol's heart jumped; and she almost agreed to meet him there. "Oh, no, I couldn't," she said; for a lot of the people who came to their parties hung around the Beverly Hills Hotel. "Isn't there somewhere else we could meet?"

"Yes, I know of another place." Laddie Wells named a restaurant-bar on the corner of Santa Monica and Roxbury in downtown Beverly Hills; and it was there that they finally met.

Carol told me all this on Sunday afternoon. When she finished talking, the pink sky had faded to a gray, and most of the people had gone home. Later, she put on cloth play shoes and a robe some woman had left behind, and we took a walk around the grounds.

"If it hadn't been for you, Charley, he would never have talked to me —"

We had strolled to the Japanese tea house, and had sat down inside in Mexican wicker chairs. Carol was pouring gin into two paper cups; then suddenly she knelt on the floor beside me pressing my fingers to her lips. "I owe so much to you, Charley."

"Oh, for God's sake, Carol!" I jumped from the chair.

"You think I'm drunk again, don't you, Charley? Well, I'm not." She picked up the bottle and began to pour the gin into a puddle on the dry straw rug.

"Stop that," I said, taking the bottle from her.

"I love him," she said. "Don't you believe me, Charley?"

"I believe you," I said.

"You're my friend, aren't you, Charley?" She took my hand again, gripping my wrist, as a child hangs on to a swing. "My friend," she murmured, "my friend . . ."

"I'll be your friend," I said, freeing my arm.

"Always, Charley?"

I promised her always.

I had not the heart to say to her the speech that I had prepared in my mind. It was preposterous, her identifying The Ideal College Man with Laddie Wells. It was believing a Woolworth rhinestone to be a long lost diamond ring.

Anyway, it was already too late, for poor Carol had fallen in love again with all her heart. Knowing how it all turned out, I am glad that I added no more weight to my conscience, spoiling her picture of him.

SINCE THE ACCIDENT, IT HAD BECOME CUSTOM-ary for Laddie Wells to stop at the Thespians on his way home from the studio. This restaurant-bar had been started nine years before by a high-salaried director to lose him money. Now the director, broke and out of a job, tried to squeeze a living out of the place.

It was a two-story blue and white building on the Sunset Strip. It had three pine-paneled dining rooms upstairs, and there was a terrace where one could dine under the blue and white striped umbrellas. Downstairs, there was the kitchen, where in the old days the director had prepared exotic dishes for his friends; and there was a narrow, shadowy oak-paneled bar, lighted by blue globed hurricane lanterns.

The Thespians bar was a favorite meeting place of writers and brainy actors, of would-be writers and would-be actors, divorced men or pansyish bachelors, all of them rootless, articulate. The bar had been nicknamed Chez Lonely-Brains.

Laddie Wells liked to stop here for drinks. He liked talking to the men and drinking with them. The men spoke in sad-funny wisecracks; not a one of them swung any weight. You could speak your mind.

Laddie Wells, who had a curious hardness for a young man of artistic bent, was too shrewd to do much talking at the

studio. At the Thespians Laddie could say whatever came to his mind. He felt superior to most of them; and he would sit there, hunched over his drink, feeling at ease, talking, yet feeling apart. Laddie had always felt apart, no matter whom he was with, or where. When he was riding high, he called his apartness his "spiritual isolation"; in a low period, as the one into which he had sunk since the accident, he termed his apartness "gloom." Laddie knew that the Thespians bar was the worst place, yet was the only place, to have frequented after his marriage went bad.

"I am one of the gloomy ones," Laddie would say, cocking one eyebrow at whomever he happened to be drinking with. Laddie would roll his words theatrically, and the listener would chuckle. "You've no right to laugh, baby. You're gloomy *too*," Laddie would say. "You're not only *gloom-y*, you're stupid, and queer, and gloomy. You're three times worse off than I."

Other times, Laddie would invite them upstairs to have dinner with him. Flattering them, he would ask their opinions about such-and-such producer, about such-and-such director. What did they really think of *A Place in the Sun*? He would ask how they would have written such-and-such a scene.

But not even the Thespians crowd could put up with a drinking Laddie Wells for long. Once a writer Laddie had offended told him off: "You're a rotten banana, Wells, and you're trying to turn the whole boatload of us rotten. All bananas aren't like you."

Laddie Wells had thrown a drink in the writer's face. If someone had not warned the writer about the steel plate in Laddie's skull, the writer would have killed him.

An actor, who had driven him home when he was too drunk

to drive himself, said: "He's waited all his life to live a certain kind of life. Now that he's a big success, he doesn't know how." A writer who ran around with John Huston said: "He needs his wife, his kid, his television set. In a pattern he's all right; he's straining the reins, but he's happy. Outside of the pattern, he's a bum." The bartender at the Thespians said: "He's fifty-one per cent ass, and between you and me, I wish he'd keep his fifty-one per cent out of here."

I do not mean that they sat around night after night discussing Laddie Wells; they simply had their opinions. Laddie Wells was a man of taste on the way up, and they respected this; and when, after his wife's accident, he started going to the Thespians bar, making an ass of himself, he was doubly conspicuous. Laddie himself would have told you this.

At any rate, from the time of the accident, until the evening when he met Carol Culvers, Laddie Wells was wasting his nights at the bar and living with Angelica like a close-mouthed stranger who had only a room in the house.

On the evening that Laddie Wells was supposed to meet Carol Culvers, he arrived on time at the Whiffen'cock. He had had nothing to drink, and he felt fine. It had pleased him that the girl had wanted to meet him — the beautiful blonde who was considered such a joke in Hollywood; and he was glad that he was meeting her at Whiffen'cock and not at the Thespians. He had met a girl once before at the Whiffen'cock, during a week-long quarrel with Angelica, and he had liked the place.

The Whiffen'cock, with its paneling, and Toby jugs, and chintz, and open fireplace, was supposed to be an English tavern. The Whiffen'cock was patronized mostly by a

younger crowd, sons and daughters of directors and producers, who looked as though they had nothing whatever to do with the picture business. The girls with their lucite bags and gold bracelets and sandals reminded him of the girls at the Boston Ritz, or the Biltmore. The boys wore tweed sport coats and knit ties. He was glad, he told himself again, that he had not had Carol Culvers meet him at the Thespians. The young people spouted clichés here, but they looked fresh and bright. He recognized the son of Norma Shearer and the late Irving Thalberg.

Laddie seated himself at a corner table that held a brass lantern with a candle burning inside a red globe. The lantern gave off a beautiful ruby glow, and for a reason of which his conscious mind was unaware, he stared at the lantern intently. Then a waiter came and just as he told the waiter that he was expecting someone, he saw Carol Culvers enter the place and look around trying to find him.

She looked taller than he had pictured her and more plump. She wore a boyish white shirt, open at the throat, that pulled tight across her full young breasts; and her white skirt had a grease spot near the right hip. She had on woolly bobby socks and dirty cloth play shoes. Her platinum hair was tied with a baby-blue ribbon; and around her pink neck was tied a green silk scarf which reminded Laddie of a magician's handkerchief and did not go with the costume at all; nor did the bracelet watch of diamonds, nor the diamond star, pinned on the shirt collar, pulling it down.

Strangely enough, Carol Culvers quickly recognized him. As she sloughed across the room in the play shoes, she fixed her eyes on him and smiled, unaware of people's stares.

"Oh, hello," Carol Culvers said.

"Hello," Laddie said.

For five seconds they looked into each other's eyes, then the doll eyes swept over his tired face, as though they had known each other a long time and she was examining it to tell if he had changed.

Laddie invited her to sit down. She slid down the red leather banquette to a point near him. She was staring at his mouth.

"What would you like to drink?" Laddie said. "Or are you twenty-one?"

"I'd like a Tom Collins," Carol said. "I can't stand whiskey."

He gave the waiter their order: a Tom Collins for her, a whiskey and water for himself, and some fresh black olives.

"Am I not the one you expected to meet here?" Laddie said. She was staring at his flushed cheeks, then gazing into his cold, German eyes.

Her eyes lowered to his hand, lighting himself a cigarette. He had forgotten to offer her a cigarette, but she had not minded.

"Oh, you're the one," Carol said. "I didn't mean to stare."

"I'm hardly worth a stare any more."

"Well, you aren't very much like that picture of you that came out in the papers," she said.

"That was an old picture from their files," Laddie said. "That was how I looked five years ago, when I first came out here." Then his lips closed tight, and he gazed at the red lantern, as though he understood her disappointment.

"I didn't mean anything was wrong with you," she said, playing with the diamond star. "You — you look grand to *me*."

"I've acquired a liquor chin," he said, touching his chin. "Not a very terrible one, but a liquor chin, nevertheless."

"I suppose everyone gets one sooner or later," she said, picturing Jack Lonsdale's chin.

"I've lost a little hair," he said.

"Yes, that's the worst change, isn't it?"

The waiter came, bringing their drinks. Laddie took a long swallow of whiskey and water, while she watched.

"When — when did you start drinking like this?" she said, wondering if Jack Lonsdale was drinking.

"I took my first drink the day I left home. My mother doesn't know about my drinking," he said. "I don't drink as much as some. I could stop tomorrow. I never drank as much as I drink now. One good thing is that I don't drink when I'm working."

"Drinking's all right," Carol said. "It's fun, and it's stupid not to like what's fun."

"Smart people have to do things that hurt them sometimes. Smart people have to play it close to the line," Laddie said.

"You know everything's funny that you say, and yet it's not so funny, what you say. I mean you —"

"You mean I *what*?" he said.

"I mean you're trying to make sad things sound funny," she said. She gave a little laugh.

"Gloomy," he said, "is what you mean. Learn to use that word. You'll need it, and when you've grown older and when the old man still doesn't die."

"I didn't say you were gloomy," she said. She began to suck her drink through a transparent straw; her cheeks became rose with hurt and her head spun.

Laddie Wells took a long swallow; for a moment he did not say anything.

"All right, Miss Sunshine and Flowers, explain your cos-

tume. Did you think we were going on a bicycle ride through the streets of Beverly Hills? Or were we going to play a quick game of tennis? No, you don't have on your tennis shoes, do you?" He pretended to look under the table.

"I — I had to come as I was," she said, "so Clarence wouldn't know."

"Clever of you."

"Clarence's other secretary, Tommy Meek, and I were playing croquet, and I said I had to telephone my friend Dolores at five-thirty. So I ran into the house at five-thirty, and came back out and said that Dolores' mother had taken a turn for the worse, and Dolores wanted me there. So," Carol said, adjusting the silk handkerchief around her neck, "here I am."

"Dolores del Rio, I presume?"

"Heavens, no! Dolores Ammon, who's a face like a crow."

"An old friend with a tubercular mother, I suppose, who needs money?"

"Why, yes!" Carol cried, "only it's arthritis!"

"Ah, a cripple!"

"Uh-huh." She began to suck the straw.

"Suppose your husband finds out the mother didn't die?"

"She could've gotten well, couldn't she, for crissake?"

She sucked the last drops.

"You sound as if you need another," Laddie said.

Carol shook her head. "But Tom Collinses are grand, aren't they? Remind me of lemonades when I was ten. My daddy used to buy me lemonades in the park on Sunday afternoons. Daddy adored music, especially waltzes. If today was a Sunday afternoon, Daddy would be sitting on a bench in the park, thumping his shoe to the 'Blue Danube.' Daddy's been

dead for almost twelve years now. You'd have loved Daddy."

"I doubt that seriously," Laddie said.

Her cherry-colored lips moved pathetically. She was about to cry, and he felt ashamed of himself. He thought that she had acted very sweet to him. He did not know that she was already in love with him.

"I didn't mean it that way," he lied, his fingers touching her hand upon the seat. "I only meant boys aren't supposed to like girls' fathers, are they?"

She bit her lower lip. "It's because of your wife, isn't it?" She was looking into his eyes, and he could not lie to her.

"It's not entirely my wife's fault," he said. "There's no one reason why a man becomes gloomy."

"I think it's your wife's fault, but you don't have to say so if you don't want to." She still gazed into his eyes. No girl had looked into his eyes this way since the night he first kissed Angelica. Carol Culvers moved her hand away.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" He found her hand again on the seat near his thigh. When he took her hand, she started to breathe very fast. She wiggled her hand inside his, and he squeezed. But she did not reply to his invitation to have dinner.

"You mustn't mind what I say," he said. "I can't help it, and anyway, I don't mean anything bad I say to you. Why won't you have dinner with me? We could drive to Santa Monica. There's a little Italian place I like very much near the ocean."

"You're only trying to be nice," she said, her eyes fixed on the lantern.

"I'd go to a bar and drink," he said.

“Really?”

“Nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to drop in on, and I never go to a movie if I can help it.”

“All right,” she whispered. Her heart pounded loud as a clock as Laddie Wells called for the check. “You can telephone the old man from Santa Monica. You can tell him you’re staying for the wake.”

Carol threw back her head and laughed. “Oh, this is so funny. You don’t know how funny it is tonight.”

“Why’s that?”

He paid the check. As he helped her from the table, she knocked the lantern. It crashed to the floor, scattering ruby-colored glass. “Oh God!” Carol cried. She stooped to pick up the pieces.

“Don’t touch the broken glass!” he said.

Suddenly there appeared a formidable-looking man, sunburned a rich lavender-brown; he wore an elaborate gold wrist watch as large as a small clock, tan suede loafers, and a loud plaid sport coat that emphasized his dark features. He smiled at Laddie, a queer abstracted smile, as though in his time he had witnessed hundreds of little accidents. Laddie put his hand into his pocket and took out two crumpled one-dollar bills. “Is that enough?”

“You don’t have to pay for it,” the man said.

“But she—she broke it,” Laddie said. “Is two dollars enough?”

“That’s enough,” the man said, pocketing the money, still smiling at him.

“Did you think we’d try to beat it out of here without paying you for it?” Carol said, brushing past him.

"Oh, you can tell the ones who'll pay, miss," the man said.

"Then why did you come over to us?" Carol said from half-way across the room.

The man, standing near their table, watched them leave, his heavy creased lips frozen in a smile that was a thousand years old.

Outside, Carol said: "Honestly, that sonofabitch made me sore as hell."

Laddie took her hand. They moved through the powder-blue twilight toward his car, a four-door Chrysler of dark forest green.

"*You*," Carol said, looking at Laddie's face, "*you* look as if he gave you the willies. Did you think he was Clarence or something?"

"No," Laddie said.

"Then why did you look as if you'd got the willies?"

"I don't know," Laddie said.

"You acted like that guy was Clarence."

Laddie laughed.

"Or a ghost," she added. "Well, you did. You looked as if you'd been caught hunting ducks out of season, or something, and expected to be hauled off to the clink. Me, it only made me mad as hell."

"*Ja*," Laddie said. He stopped at Santa Monica Boulevard, for a funeral procession to pass. Behind the hearse they saw the olive-skinned faces of four children, staring out the windows of a limousine. Carol said that they were probably Catholics. It was not an important funeral; soon they were able to drive on.

"Are you hungry?" Laddie said, taking her hand.

"I'm starved. I don't know what I want to eat, though, do you?"

"We're going to a place that serves pizza," he said. The Chrysler speeded along a palm-lined boulevard through the heart of Beverly Hills.

"I used to go to a Hawaiian place," Carol said, "where lobster costs only a dollar eighty. A boy — a boy I liked was crazy about lobsters. It's called Luna-by-the-Sea, and a girl in a hula skirt serves you a full course meal without you ever having to get out of your car. It's a grand place, it really is."

"No," Laddie said, "I don't want to go to a drive-in."

"We could go inside then," she said, watching his expression. "It's made of bamboo and straw inside. It's real cute."

"All right," he said, "we'll go to your place."

As the car turned at Sunset Boulevard, heading toward the ocean, he said again how glad he was that she had telephoned him; and she laid her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes. She was thinking that the only thing in the world she wanted was to be with Laddie Wells, lying in a bed with him, or on a floor or on the sands; or drowning with him or jumping off a bridge with him, or running away with him to a leper colony; anywhere. She would not lose him this time; she did not care how it would end.

When they arrived at Santa Monica, the sun had sunk into the ocean, and the moon had not yet risen. As they drove along the ocean, she raised her head from his shoulder to look out. The deserted beaches looked forbiddingly still and sad to her. A couple of old beachcombers, bent and twisted as driftwood, were wading out after a lovely red and yellow ball,

forgotten by some child. A steel-haired woman, wearing a visor and clumpy oxfords, was taking a brisk walk with her cocker spaniel across the sands.

The little bamboo and straw restaurant, where Carol had dined with Jack Lonsdale five years before, had grown into a beehive blazing with chromium, plate glass, and a barn-fire of neon lights. They had to park almost seventy-five yards from the building. Fifteen minutes later a young girl, wearing a hula skirt of cellophane, came to the car and took their order. The lobsters which Carol had recommended were not very good, and Laddie got mayonnaise on his trousers. While they ate, Carol leaned forward, squinting at an older waitress as though she recognized her from five years ago. For a few minutes neither of them spoke.

Laddie was thinking that she had become bored with him; this irritated him. Eight, nine, ten years ago, during the war, he had been able to amuse her type, as well as the articulate ones. He had never been able to get along with people as well as Angelica. Angelica seemed to take life lightly and could speak the languages of several levels. Angelica could fool people into thinking that she was one of them. Laddie was not half as good at it as Angelica was, but he had got along all right. He had drunk with them, and grinned, and coasted along with little questions. Toward the end of an evening somebody, noticing his grave, boyish face off-guard, would slap his back — buck up, old man — and he would snap out of it. Laddie had never seemed one of the crowd, but he had got along.

The best people were gay, like Angelica, Angelica before the accident; and he envied them. With Angelica it was posing as a firefly. His serious friends had believed at first that he had

married a pretty, silly, expensive dancing firefly. But in the end she had fascinated them, too, most of them, and they had come to accept her and champion her. One of them behind his back had chased and caught his firefly, one summer night, when they were living in the walk-up on Eighty-Ninth Street. No, no, he mustn't remember that.

How he envied the gay ones! How he had envied and despised Angelica at parties for making him appear so gloomy and dull. The time he threw the martini glass across the room at her; the time he got drunk and vomited; the times he cursed her in front of everybody; the time at a party when he burnt her arm with a cigarette, and wrote an *A* with red lipstick on her back: all of this came from his despising her at parties. He knew very well when it was, and why it was, that he began despising Angelica. No, no, no, no, no. He would not think about this.

The girl, Carol Culvers, sitting beside him in his car, had set her plate upon the tray; she was watching an airplane winking lonely red and green lights in the darkening sky.

"Would you like to drive up the highway?" Laddie said.

Carol nodded.

"Aren't you going to telephone your husband?"

"No," she said, "I don't care."

Laddie honked and paid the girl in the cellophane skirt. He backed out the car, turned, and headed up the highway along the ocean.

"There's a very pretty beach near Malibu," Laddie said. "There's a monastery, and they ring the bells about this time every evening. We can buy some liquor, and sit down there for a while."

Carol said that she would like to go to his beach. He stopped

at a liquor store, half a mile up the highway from Luna-by-the-Sea, bought a pint of scotch, gin, four iced Coca-Colas, and a package of paper cups. For twenty minutes they rode in silence. Carol seemed to be listening to the waves. Then suddenly Carol turned on the radio. A woman singer was singing "The Touch of Your Hand."

Now you heard the bells from the monastery up on the hill: cling, gong, ding, ring, clong, gong, ding, ring, clong. As they approached the monastery overlooking the beach, they could not hear the rest of the song for the ringing of the bells. Carol turned off the radio. Laddie slowed and they parked by the side of the highway and got out of the Chrysler, carrying the bottles and cups.

The sky was black, now, and the warm sand through which they trudged reflected the paleness of a crescent moon. You could barely hear the ocean's roaring, because of the bells: cling, clong, gong, ding. Laddie stopped walking and sat down in the sand at a point near the water's edge. Carol began to strike matches, so that he could see to open the bottles. The ringing of the bells was deafening: ring, clong, dong, ding.

"Do you want coke with your gin?" Laddie shouted.

"Yeah," she shouted back.

Then suddenly the ringing stopped, and echoes seemed to die all around them.

"You don't have to strike matches. My eyes have grown used to it," he said. He handed her her cup in the dark.

As she took the cup, their hands touched. "Thank you," she said.

After Laddie fixed a whiskey and coke for himself, he took off his coat and, leaning on an elbow, lay back in the warm,

pale sand. He drank his whiskey slowly, looking out at the black waves.

He had come to this beach before, the last time, on a summer Sunday night nearly a year ago, August. Angelica had spent the week end in Santa Barbara with Jeanie Cartwright, a pretty Alabama girl, married to a dull, young Philadelphian, called Sonny. Sonny Cartwright had a sizable hunk of a baby-food fortune. The Cartwrights came every spring and summer to Santa Barbara, where they owned a large Spanish-style house with cool, white rooms. There they ran around with other rich, fast young couples who did not have to work. They went to parties, and they played tennis, and they stayed tight ten months of the year. Because Angelica had been a friend of Jeanie Cartwright at Miss French's, and because Angelica was the "life of the party" type, the Cartwrights invited them for week ends two or three times every year. This particular week end Laddie had at the last minute refused to go to Santa Barbara. He had insisted that Angelica go on without him; and Angelica had gone.

When Angelica had come back from Santa Barbara late on a Sunday evening, she had not had much to say, had been most suspiciously quiet. Angelica did not want him to think that she had enjoyed herself. But this had not fooled him.

"Would you like to go out for dinner?" he had said, circling the playroom, his hands in his pockets.

"Why yes!" Angelica had said, "I'd like to go out very much."

"We might drive out to Santa Monica to my pizza place."

"Suits me fine," Angelica had said, still hiding her good spirits.

They had driven to his pizza place, and sipping the Italian wine he had told Angelica stories that had made her laugh, and afterward Angelica had begun to tell him the silly things people had said that week end in Santa Barbara. After dinner, driving to this beach, he had let her talk on and on about the week end, giving her more and more rope; then, lying in the sand, after the bells had rung, with Angelica crouched beside him, he had said, "I'm sorry, now, that I didn't go."

"Oh, I am too, Laddie," Angelica had said, bending, lightly kissing his lips. "It was all perfectly wonderful. Nobody did anything wrong."

"Perhaps it's just as well I didn't go," he had said, keeping his pleasant toney voice. He had stood up, looked down his nose at her, and walked off through the sand to his car. He had got into the car, turned on the key, and driven off ignoring her cries: "Laddie! Laddie! wait, Laddie, wait!" He had said nothing of his suspicions about Sonny Cartwright and her. He had simply driven off and left her on this beach.

Angelica, as far as he knew, had trudged up the hill through vineyards and vegetable gardens and spent the night at the monastery. At any rate, in her gossip, this was the sort of ending Angelica would have given the incident, if the incident had happened to anybody else. Laddie smiled to himself in the dark.

"Would you like another drink?" he asked Carol Culvers, his fingers feeling in the sand for the gin.

"I wouldn't mind a little," Carol Culvers said.

When he found the bottle, he handed it to her. Suddenly he felt tired and sleepy. Although it hurt, he wanted to think and dream about the past. Carol Culvers watched him take off his shirt, and spread it on the sand, then fold his coat into

a pillow. "If you're tired, sleep a little while," Carol said. "I won't mind."

"I'm not tired," he said. He listened to the sound of the gin, pouring into the paper cup; he listened to the deep, dependable roaring of the waves. "I'm not very tired," he said, closing his eyes.

He was asleep on the beach; and, he thought, he must have been asleep for a long time. One knee was raised, one cheek against the sand, and sand had got on his lips and into his mouth. Underneath him the shirt had twisted. He moved his face, and spit out the sand. It was then that he felt her hand. She was asleep in the sand beside him, her perspiring hand clasping his own.

He turned on his side and as he put his arm around her waist, he knew that she had awakened. They did not speak. She squirmed nearer, and he raised her slightly so that his arm could go under and around her body. Then he held her, her breasts in the boyish shirt pressed against his bare chest. He kissed the exposed cheek — the other cheek lay against the sand — and with his free hand, he turned her face toward his and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"You wanted me to do this?" he said.

"Yes," she whispered, "I wanted you to."

"Why don't we take off our clothes?" he said.

He threw his trousers into the sand. Then he helped her to unfasten the skirt and pulled off the play shoes and the bobby socks. After they were undressed, they lay close against each other, their mouths tight. As her lips slowly opened, his arms tightened around her shoulders. He felt warm all over and light as a balloon, and his head felt drunk with the whiskey and

with love. There returned to his mind, the memories of the happy times with his wife; and he was able to whisper to her, "I love you, I love you," without feeling embarrassed by his own intensity. He kissed the girl's shoulder and her eyes and her lovely neck. For a long time, for a very long time, he had not felt so unworried, and untired, and unthinking. Not since the first time with Angelica had he felt such delight.

They had begun to sweat and the sweat had mixed with grains of sand and it scratched. "I love you, Carol. I love the way it hurts." The sweat from his face dripped down on her cheeks. Then suddenly he fell dead on her, burying his head in the nape of her neck. After a while he turned his head away from her, and his arms relaxed their hold.

"Now, you don't love me any more," she whispered.

"I said I loved you, didn't I?"

She drew Laddie Wells's hand to her face, pressing it against her cheek, then to her lips. When she had kissed his hand, he turned toward her again, and their lips brushed each other's faces. They moved apart, looking into each other's eyes.

"What were you thinking about when you turned away a minute ago?" she said.

"I was thinking how lovely it would be to feel like this always," he said.

"You're lying."

"*Ja*, I was lying," he sighed, his toes tangling with hers, "but only partly lying."

He had been thinking how his marriage had gone bad, and how he was irrevocably tied to the badness, and how he would go back to the badness, and she, to Culvers' house, after it was over.

"Don't think about it," she whispered. "Let's not think."

"How did you know what I was thinking?" he said.

"Oh, I knew what you were thinking." She breathed hard into his ear.

"All right," he said. "Let's not think."

He lay spent, more spent than he had ever felt before. He wondered if she had liked doing it with him. Angelica, after he had found Angelica out, and had told her that he had found her out, had screamed: "I love you, but I don't like doing it with you. Do you want me to lie? Do you want me to lie to you?"

He moved away from the girl in the sand.

"I love you," Carol Culvers said. "I will love you always." She moved close to him again, and kissed his lips tenderly; then he kissed her. When he kissed all over her eyes, he knew that her eyes were wet and salty from tears. He said nothing about her eyes.

"Why?" he whispered, "why will you love me always?"

She did not answer this.

They lay on the beach, until it was nearly two o'clock. They helped each other into their clothes, then drove back to Beverly Hills to their houses.

This was substantially the story of their meeting; the beginning of their affair. Laddie Wells himself told me most of this, after we spent a week end at Laguna. I have pieced together the rest from bits that Carol had let slip out that Sunday evening. At this time, however, I knew nothing about their night on the beach. I had not seen Laddie for five weeks and, as I said, when I ran into Laddie at Culvers' house, he would have nothing to do with me.

PART
THREE

LATE AFTERNOONS OF THAT SUMMER I USED to see Laddie's Chrysler parked in Culvers' drive. The job with Culvers' production company gave him a fine excuse; so Laddie and Carol must have arranged their meetings under old Culvers' very nose.

Culvers himself felt flattered that such an intelligent, learned young man seemed to enjoy his company. It was a pleasure to have found someone in California with whom he could discuss history and his hero, Napoleon. Why, Culvers was so delighted to have found such a person that it never entered his mind to suspect Laddie Wells with his wife. It turned out that the old boy did have his suspicions all right, for he knew his young wife's humors as an old seaman comes to know the winds. If Carol avoided his cold deep-sunk eyes but once, or forced but one little laugh, Culvers would have suspected something. He suspected; and one morning during the beginning of their affair Culvers instructed Butch Murphy to find out the name of the most reliable private detective in Beverly Hills. But neither Culvers' suspicions, nor the detective's were directed toward Laddie Wells — not until just before the end. Carol had seen to that.

I have no idea where their meetings took place; neither of them ever told me, and I saw them out together only once. I

ran across them one evening at the Fine Arts Theatre in Beverly Hills. Carol had probably told Laddie that Culvers despised foreign films; and I had spotted them there, holding hands, during *La Belle et la Bête*.

Their later meetings took place inside a turquoise-blue stucco cottage, that stood on the Ocean Front Road, halfway between Santa Monica and Malibu, the "death cottage" as the newspapers were to call it that fall. Laddie Wells rented this cottage after he moved out of the house in Beverly Hills. Ironically, it stood less than a quarter of a mile up the road from the Dolans' house, where George Martin lived.

I have wondered if it was Carol who picked out the cottage, for she and Jack Lonsdale had liked going to the beach. I'm certain that Carol did everything in her power to persuade him to leave his wife. Alone, Laddie would never have left Angelica. He could no more have left her than a wounded soldier could reach for a bayonet and start to cut away a gangrenous leg. At any rate, the first Saturday in August Laddie Wells moved out of the place in Beverly Hills into the "death cottage" . . .

I don't know what really happened; I don't know what it was that happened to persuade Laddie to take the step. It seemed a wonder that the marriage had lasted as long as it had. Laddie had had Angelica's number for a long time; and Angelica had long ago ceased to feel any physical desire for him. Angelica's desire was simply for friendship, strong friendship.

Angelica had come to lean upon her husband as a mentally superior companion, as a kind of parent of her own age, whom she could love and respect and heed and deceive. Like most well-to-do small-city Southern girls, Angelica had never be-

come weaned from her mother; she depended upon Laddie to fulfill a parent's role in Beverly Hills. Angelica did not have to think for herself. For five years she had had Laddie to back her up in her weak declaration of independence from Miro. When she awoke that Saturday morning and saw drawers pulled out of the bleached-oak chest that stood in her pink bedroom, her heart must have skipped a beat.

I heard that she followed him through the house, packed his clothes and liquor and books, like a child, and called out: "What am I going to do? What am I going to do without Laddie?" He never answered her; he simply pretended he wasn't there. After he had packed he walked into Little Laddie's room to say that he was moving to another house. Florence presented him with one of her dolls; she did not want her father to feel lonesome at his new house. He took the doll with him to the cottage on Ocean Front Road. The doll was lying on a stack of his old Harvard textbooks, stayed with him till the end.

After Laddie moved, Angelica must have felt like some one lost in a broad, flat field. Wandering around her house she must have longed for Miro; she must have felt deeply wounded and shaken in her despair, for she vomited and could not eat food the rest of that day. She felt too proud to telephoned her parents.

Saturday afternoon, lazing around my rooms, I dialed Angelica's number. I knew nothing about Laddie's having run out of the house that morning, and it was then around five o'clock. I did not expect Angelica to be at home.

"Hello, Charley," Angelica said. She sounded as though sooner or later, she had expected me to call her. As I :

knew nothing about Laddie's having left her that day; and I did not know that a Catholic priest had arrived at the house an hour or so before, and had gently taken control.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" I said, spinning the handles of the coffee-grinder lamp. "I'd thought I might drop over to see you."

Angelica did not reply at first; she wasn't certain about whether I had heard about Laddie's moving out. When she decided that I hadn't heard, she said, "I'm busy this afternoon, Charley."

"We haven't really had a chance to talk since the accident," I said.

"I know."

"What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing. Nothing that would interest you," she said, breathing impatiently.

"Well, I'll give you a ring sometime," I said, feeling hurt.

"All right."

"Angelica —"

"Yes?"

"Don't you know that it wouldn't have been right for me to have come there after the accident? You saw how Laddie acted at the hospital . . ."

"It doesn't matter now."

"Angelica! Angelica! I want to see you!"

"I'm — I'm busy this afternoon."

"Tomorrow?"

"I've company now, Charley," she said.

"Why? Why can't I see you?"

"I've got to go now," she said, hanging up.

"What's his name?" I yelled into the mouthpiece. "What's

the new one's name?" All this happened at around ten o'clock.

Tired as a poor hound, I spotted Angelica, walking her block in front of me past a row of darkened silver shops and leather shops. I had been wandering for several hours from Benedict Canyon into some real hills. The sun had gone down and on my way back, I had seen three couples arriving at the Greys for a dinner party, moving two and two like animals into the Ark to be saved. I had kept on hounding the streets. Vaguely, I was heading toward Warners' Beverly Hills Theatre when I spotted Angelica, walking alone ahead of her narrow shoulders slightly bent and hunched together, her arm carrying a small black purse, as though it were the weight of the world.

It was strange to see Angelica out alone on a Saturday evening: Angelica, who liked people and parties and dancing on busy week ends. Suspecting that she was on her way to meet the new man, I quickened my steps, moving into the shadow of the darkened shops.

She was passing the well-lighted frontage of the Scotsman Market, a pink and gray grocery, where movie people do most of their shopping; and I could see her more clearly. She was wearing black pumps, no stockings, and a dull tan dress, hanging too loosely because of her having lost weight. As I moved through the neon glow, the back of her pale neck looked as fragile as a bird's; almost a transparent neck, I thought. As she turned she twisted her ankle. She paused a second, glancing down at her ankle, then entered the grocery store. I still expected to see some man step out from behind the cans of soup, keeping a rendezvous. She started to push on

those baskets-on-wheels contraptions toward the lettuce heads.

I decided that I would go inside the store, push around one of those contraptions, pretending to shop for food. I would watch her from the corner of my eye; and she would suddenly look up and see me there. She would be trapped.

The plan worked beautifully. As I loaded my basket with cans of soup, I caught her astonished look without her realizing it. It was the look of some tender female animal, raising its head, perking its ears, at sight of the male. When I saw her approaching me, I pushed the basket slightly forward in the opposite direction, turning my back.

"Charley?" she called.

I turned around facing her, eyes meeting eyes. Her face needed powder and color; her lips with the lipstick worn off showed their natural pale pink. I wondered if she was ill.

"It's good to see you, Charley," she said, pushing the basket-on-wheels.

"Funny place to run into you," I said.

She gave a little laugh.

"Who'd have thought that on a Saturday night in Beverly Hills, we'd meet in a grocery store?"

Suddenly she came to a dead stop, and she gave another little laugh. Then I was feeling sorry for her all of a sudden, so I asked her how she was.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. Her eyes darted past me, sweeping the other aisles. She headed toward the coffee aisle; she picked up two tins of Maxwell House.

"What've you been doing with yourself?" I said.

"Nothing. I told you over the telephone — nothing." She placed the coffee tins in the basket. Then all at once she was

opening her purse, taking out a yellow comb, lipstick, powder, handing me a tiny mirror to hold for her. "I must look a sight," she said. "Helga was going to fix supper for the baby and me and we suddenly realized that there was nothing to eat in the house." She did not say where Laddie was and I did not inquire.

"I know people think I'm common, doing this," she laughed, running the yellow comb through her dark, mussed curls. She began to paint her lips, bright red.

"It doesn't matter what people think," I said.

"I feel better now." She took the mirror, dropping it into her purse. She would not look into my eyes.

"Angelica. Has something happened?" We had moved to salad oils, vinegars, pepper sauces, and catsups. She took a bottle of vinaigrette dressing, then faced me. Her eyes were sparkling, as though she were about to tell some joke.

"Laddie's moved out of the house, Charley. He's got a girl."

I did not say anything.

"You probably knew about it all along," she said.

"It's probably nothing serious," I said.

"We hadn't been getting along too well — ever since the accident. But last night Laddie deliberately picked a fuss. I said some things I shouldn't have said, then he said some things, then I said I was sorry. He marched out of the room, went into the guest room, where he's been sleeping since I came home from the hospital, and locked the door. When I awoke this morning, he was moving out."

"Oh, he'll come back," I said.

"I think so too," she said. We were moving toward the counter, where people stood in line to pay.

"He'll come back," I said a second time, standing in line behind her. I had to buy something, so I had bought a box of California dates.

"No happiness can ever come to a girl who breaks up a home," Angelica said suddenly. I thought how Angelica herself had carried on, how she had looked upon herself as sophisticated, and cheated right and left.

"What are you going to do?" I said.

"I'm going to wait for him to come back, I *want* him to come back, Charley."

The clerk was taking groceries from the basket contraption and making out her bill.

"Oh, he'll come back," I said a third time.

After Angelica paid her bill, a boy came and picked up her bag of groceries, and she led the way to her Ford convertible, parked in a lot down the street. As I walked beside her to the lot, she asked me if I had heard any news from home; no, I had heard nothing from Miro.

"If only he would come back . . ." she said, getting into the car. She opened her purse and handed the boy a quarter.

I told her to call me if I could do anything; then she drove off past the windows of expensive leather shops.

WHEN I WENT THERE ON A WEDNESDAY EVENING the next week, Little Florence had been put to bed; and Helga, who had let me in, had returned to the kitchen to dry the supper dishes. I found Angelica, wandering about the playroom in a loose pink kimono. Warm August winds, blowing in, caused her dark hair to blow about her face like a tangled net. Angelica kept pushing the hair back.

“How could he do such a thing to me, Charley, walking out like a nigger!”

Laddie had moved out five days ago, and she had not yet telephoned her parents to tell them what had happened. She had waited for him to come back to her. Now she felt helpless and angry, and sick, and hurt, as though a parent had gone away on a long trip and left her.

I walked over and sat down on the white sofa; the sofa had become soiled from cigarette ashes, yellowish from spilled drinks.

“There I was, nineteen, with everything in the world,” she was saying. “There I was at Miss French’s, going out with everybody at Yale, when I go to this cocktail party and fall for that line of his. I thought he was the only boy I’d ever gone with who had something to him.

“Mummy and Daddy said he wasn’t our kind of people. I

thought they meant he wasn't Catholic. I thought it was because Mummy and Daddy didn't understand about New York, and liking art, and everything.

"After I met his parents, I saw what they meant. I got so depressed I didn't want to see anyone for days. I told *him* that I had got a stomach-ache from eating Kadota figs at Schrafft's, but I think he knew.

"I've never told a soul what his parents are like. I told Mummy they were like the Joe Schlenkers. Well, they're not half as nice as the Joe Schlenkers, Charley. They're like people on South Second."

"Imagine me being married into people like on South Second, Charley — *me!*"

This went on for an hour and a half, her ravings against Laddie. By nine o'clock she sat on the sofa beside me, and had let me take her hand.

"Charley," she said softly, "will you do me a favor?"

"What's that?"

"You go to see him, Charley. You tell him that if he comes back, everything'll be different."

"Why I don't think he'd see me," I said. "I ran into him a week or so ago and he hardly spoke."

"Where was that?"

"At the Culverses'."

"What were you doing there?"

"You don't know what you want, do you?" I said.

She nibbled at her nails.

"If he'd only come here, Charley, I could talk to him. Won't you please go to him, Charley, and tell him to at least come here for a talk?"

"All right," I said, "I'll talk to him."

Then, like a child who has got what it wanted out of you, her head fell against my chest, and she snuggled into my arms, "Oh, Charley . . ." My mouth moved close to hers, but she pulled away.

"Do you think we ought to, Charley?"

"Yeah, I think we ought to."

I rose from the sofa, pulling her to me, kissing her. "Now, don't go away." I walked over and switched off the lamp. She stood there, gnawing the nail of her forefinger, watching me. I came back, and I took her in my arms, and kissed her. She pulled away again, moving toward the living room.

"Where're you going?"

"I'm going to tell Helga she can leave," she said.

While Angelica went off to dismiss the servant, I took off my clothes, throwing them helter-skelter about the darkened room; and I walked out through the sliding glass windows and sat down beside the tiny swimming pool, dangling my legs. The silver of a moon started to squirm as I kicked, like some silver-bellied snake in the water.

Minutes later I heard her bracelets, jingling from the playroom. She must have seen my clothes, for she walked on out to the pool, walked up behind me, and started to massage the back of my neck. "Helga's leaving now," she said.

She started to undress, tossing her things across a grimy glass-topped table. When she was naked, she ran to me, taking my hand, and she pulled me into the water as she jumped. She came to the surface before I did, and when I came up, spitting and flinging water, she had swum to the shallow end, and was knocking her temples to get the water from her ears. I swam up to her and said, "Hello."

She slipped down into the water, her long legs tangling for

an instant with mine; then she curled over in a surface dive with the graceful motion a porpoise has. I swam to her, and she did it again. The third time, I caught up with her. She twisted and rolled over and floated on her back, gazing up at the moon and the stars, her arms spread like wings. So, after I squirmed out of my shorts, I turned over too and floated on my back about three feet away from her, looking up at the blue-black sky.

A plane crossed, very high up, directly above us, its green and red light moving among the stars like marbles. I wondered if Angelica was looking at the plane. When I looked over at her, her eyes were fixed on a tall Hawaiian palm growing in her neighbor's back yard; a boy's paper kite was caught in the fronds of the palm. Then she knew that I was looking at her; and all at once, she turned in a direction toward me and made a surface dive that took her underneath my body. Halfway across the pool she came up, looking to see if I was following her. I swam after her, hard and straight; and when I reached her she lay there, rising and sinking in the water, waiting for me. I swam into a position over her, and her arms went around my neck and back, pulling me to her: her eyes were closed; her face pale as moonlight, her dark hair floating behind her head like a fan of seaweed. We rose and sank; part of the time her nose went under. My breath stopped and I could feel everything inside swelling to burst, as when you plunge deep under water, thinking you'll never come up again.

Then suddenly Angelica was choking and coughing and struggling to come out from under me. She broke away and swam to the edge of the pool and held on to the concrete side, gasping, as though she had just escaped from drowning. I swam to her and I put one arm around her shoulder. "Let's

get out," I whispered. I climbed up on the concrete, and I gave her my hand. When she was out of the water, she gave a small sigh of relief. I still held her hand.

"You almost strangled, didn't you?" I said. "I'm sorry . . ."

Her hold grew tighter on my fingers. I moved close to her, and I put my fingers around her throat, holding her throat as though it were the trunk of a young tree, while I kissed her. She squirmed until she had wrapped her arms and legs around me and we were all tangled up together like two boys wrestling — and all the time I was kissing her, and she was returning my kisses, with a furious swirl of elbows and twisting. Then, when we were ready to go the limit, she noticed a lamp burning in the playroom. She jumped away from me, her mouth opened just slightly, as though her heart had tightened. At first she must have thought that Laddie had come back. But then she heard Little Florence's cry, "Mummy! Mummy! What are you doing out there, Mummy?" and she could make out the form of Little Florence in white pajamas, staring at my clothes thrown around the playroom.

"Don't come outside, darling. It's too cool for you outside." She was getting into the clothes like lightning. "Mummy's been taking a swimming lesson from Daddy's friend." And when she was dressed, she walked into the playroom, patted her child's forehead, and led her out of the room back to bed.

I tiptoed inside, dressed as quickly as I could in the dark, and was making my way to the front door when Angelica appeared, her hair hanging in long wet ropes. She kept her eyes fixed on her sandals, as though she were too ashamed to face me.

"It's pretty late," I said.

As I got into my car, she stood in the doorway, wearing the pink kimono, watching me. Angelica could not stand being left alone.

Later that night she telephoned my rooms, reminding me of my promise to go to Laddie for her. "Tell him everything will be different," she said.

The next morning I telephoned Laddie Wells's office at Worldwide Pictures. Laddie's secretary said that he had stepped out for a few minutes. I left my name and the number at *Life* and waited for him to call. I waited all that day.

At around eleven o'clock that night the telephone rang beside my bed. "This is Laddie," he said in that husky Yorkville-German accent.

You could hear the waves breaking on the beach beneath the windows of his new house, and the portable radio giving out news of the new war. You could almost see Laddie, poised on the arm of a greasy overstuffed chair that had come with the house; his fine clothes still lying across the sofa; his books piled on the bare floor; his liquor bottles standing on the kitchen sink. Ordinarily Laddie was as neat as a prig, but he had not brought himself to putting his belongings in order in the cheap little house.

"Angelica wanted me to call you," I said. "She wants to talk things over. She's pretty bad off, Laddie."

"She'll get over it," Laddie said. "I knew how it would be for her the first week."

"Can't you at least give her the chance to talk things over?" I said.

"Talking things over won't settle anything," he said. "I'm not going back to her."

"Is that what you want me to tell her?"

"*Ja*, tell her that," he said. "Charley — "

"Yeah, Laddie?"

"Charley, would you like to have dinner with me some night?"

"Sure, Laddie."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, tomorrow."

"Come to the Thespians around seven," he said.

It was shortly after we said good night that I heard *the noises* for the first time: a rustling in the caladiums outside my window, a thump against wood. It can't be Laddie this time, I thought. My heart started to pound like a possum's. I switched out the lamp and lay as still as dead.

When, after a moment or so, I heard nothing, I threw off the sheet, and slowly raised myself, looking out into the night. The new moon was shining through clouds, that hung like tulle draperies over Culvers' house. A midnight swimming party was going on over there: a piano-accordion, whining "Baby, It's Cold Outside" into the heat of the August night; splashes, laughter, and screams. I found out later that Culvers' son, who until this time had refused to meet Carol, had visited over there for a few days.

A man, wearing a dark business suit and a fedora, was stealing down the Greys' gravel drive toward Cove Way.

The next evening, when we had dinner together, I did not tell Laddie about the noises. At this time I simply did not see any connection between Laddie and my Peeping Tom.

When Laddie arrived at seven-twenty, I was sitting hunched over a highball at the Thespians bar. Laddie walked up behind

me, placing one hand gently on my shoulder. "Charley," he said.

I turned around, facing him. He was wearing an expensive-looking hound's-tooth cloth suit and a black silk tie. The longish brown hair was slicked back to perfection; the boyish face, rosy. The gray eyes, which could look so cool, so old, now sparkled as though we were close friends, meeting here.

"You're looking pretty darned good," I said.

"*Ja, ja.*"

He wanted to buy me another highball. He raised his hand, lifting his chin imperiously. The bartender, who did not like him, came and took his order without a word.

I downed the remainder of the first drink and started to sip the one Laddie had bought. We sat for a while in the narrow paneled bar, fingering our glasses.

"How's — how's Angelica today?" Laddie said, turning, giving me a twisted smile, as though running down some friend of mine whom he disliked. Although I knew that he still cared for her, something told me, then, that he was not going back.

"I — don't know," I said, keeping a straight face. "I've only seen her twice — once in a grocery store, and night before last."

"And — and what went on night before last? Don't let — let me rattle you, Charley-boy." His jaws flinched and veins in his temples moved, as though telling himself that he had made his choice, and he must no longer care. You could tell, just the same, that he still felt jealous.

"She spent the whole time wailing about wanting you back," I said.

He said nothing to this. He signed the check, then he stood

beside me, placing his hand again on my shoulder. I must have reminded him of his Harvard friend, wearing a seersucker coat and the Pudding Club tie. He recognized the tie, and said: "I see you made Hasty Pudding." He used a tone which told that although he hadn't had what I had had, his success in Hollywood had compensated for that. I looked down at the tie: horizontal white stripes on black, like the body of a deadly spider. I didn't say one word.

"I've ordered us lobsters," he said.

We climbed a narrow stairway to the Thespians' dining rooms, New England rooms with cheery brass lanterns, knotty pine paneling, and blue and white checked tablecloths. Laddie nodded to a red-eyed screenwriter, who sat alone eating a great fruit salad. After we had sat down, Laddie said that the screenwriter, an ex-Communist, was waiting to be called to testify. The Thespians crowd had taken bets on whether the screenwriter would squeal. If he squealed, his ex-Communist friends in Hollywood would be washed up; if he didn't squeal, he would go to prison. Laddie had bet that the screenwriter would choose prison to save his friends.

"What would you do if you were in his shoes?" I said.

"I would do what M—— W—— is going to do, though I know good and well no living soul would do such a thing for me."

One week later Carol Culvers showed that she was prepared to give up everything for him. . . .

Laddie would not speak about Carol this evening. At the beginning of the meal, I said, "You know, old Culvers is one tough egg. I'm not going to feel good till my story's in a nice brown envelope on its way to New York." Laddie answered this with a "Ja"; then quickly changed the subject

back to Angelica, speaking of Angelica's "confused, childish mind."

"I'm never going back," he said, digging into a fine iced lobster. "I never want to see her again."

"Are you going to get a divorce?"

"How can I get a divorce? Angelica's Catholic."

It was then that Laddie told me the story of Angelica and the Catholic priest.

One evening in 1947, the Wellses went to a party at the Fleishhackers'. The Fleishhackers lived in an elaborate Georgian house, decorated with Degas', Toulouse-Lautrecs, and signed Chippendale chairs. Benny Fleishhacker, vice-president of Worldwide pictures, liked to be thought of as "funnier than Groucho Marx"; Mrs. Fleishhacker, a melancholy Austrian, liked to be thought of as sensitive. Mrs. Fleishhacker was worldly, to be sure, for she had married Fleishhacker and had created this house; but the other half of her nature sought the company of writers and composers and articulate hangers-on. For this reason, Laddie Wells and a lot of others not important enough, or socially inclined enough, to run around with top-drawer Hollywood, were invited to the Fleishhackers' house.

It was quite late. Many of the guests were tight, and some of them drunk. Laddie Wells stood on the fringe of the party, glassy-eyed, gloomy, almost drunk. He had felt on edge all evening. Although he had sensed, as soon as they entered the house, that he would never fit in with this crowd, he had tried hard to adapt himself. He had silently promised himself — and Angelica — not to talk about anything serious, not to get nasty, not to sound sarcastic, or dogmatic, or conceited — not to act German, as Angelica put it.

Three or four persons with whom he had started conversations had seemed pleasant enough. He had glanced over at Angelica out of the corners of his eyes to see if she looked pleased with him: Angelica didn't know he was alive. She was concentrating on a good-looking English actor, who had played on Darryl Zanuck's polo team. Her head was thrown back, her pearl earrings dangling, her painted lips opened wide, laughing at the English actor's joke. After two or three minutes the persons he had been speaking with had got that trapped look which social people get at cocktail parties, and he had let them go.

Now he stood alone, drinking, taking a new drink every time the butler passed a tray. The party in front of him began to sound like a lawn with robins and bluejays and thrushes. Suddenly — suddenly — he could not find Angelica. The actor, he thought; he could not find the actor either. He moved closer to the heart of the party; he squinted his eyes. No, they were not there.

He stumbled off on a tour through the Fleishhackers' house — room after decorated room — and did not find them; until at last he found himself on a terrace with a marble balustrade, facing a wild-garden. He heard sounds there. Holding his glass, he walked down a flagstone path. When he reached the wild-garden, he pushed aside clawing branches and flowering vines, stumbled, fell on his face. A frightened rabbit darted out across the lawns.

He picked himself up, and holding a handkerchief over his bleeding cheek, walked on. He walked under a marble pergola near a gaseous-blue swimming pool, where the Fleishhackers held Sunday luncheons; he walked through a formal garden with a sundial; past the mirroring plate-glass walls of the pool house — and could not find them.

He decided to go back to the party and wait for them.

He spotted them as soon as he entered, at the far end of the Fleishhackers' living room. They were practically alone there: Angelica, leaning against the white Georgian paneling; the actor, one large hand near her dark hair on the paneling, balancing himself before her. They were smiling at each other flirtatiously, speaking in low tones.

Laddie pushed his way through the crowd toward them; but before he reached where they stood, the actor disappeared. Laddie fixed his blurry gray eyes where the actor's hand had rested, near her hair, and moved closer. Angelica's eyes, watching him approach her, glowed like heated coins; her lips opened, slightly, as though she were about to scream. Before Laddie quite knew what he was doing, he walked up to her and hit her hard on the chin. She stifled a scream, fleeing into the crowd. Laddie stumbled off after her, pushing guests from his path. At last he cornered her before the marble mantel. He struck at her chin again, but missed. Somebody screamed. Then Angelica began to laugh, pretending that it was some game they were playing. She broke away from him and ran across the room — laughing. By now half of the party stood hypnotized, watching their game; some of the people even laughed. Suddenly she stopped running. She stood dead in her tracks in front of a rose damask sofa, looking to the right, then to the left, still forcing herself to laugh. He had cornered her.

A man in a dark suit, who had been watching, said something to her, and she ran to him. Before Laddie could catch her, the man had put his arms around her. Laddie struck at the man, but the man's strong right arm stopped his blow. When Laddie looked to see who the man was, he noticed the reversed collar. The man was a Catholic priest.

Someone behind Laddie began to shout, "Throw him out! Throw him out!" Then all at once he was stumbling, running, crawling, out of the Fleishhackers' house into the night, his face bruised, blood trickling from his nose and mouth.

This marked the beginning of Angelica's on-again-off-again relations with the Catholic Church. The priest, a visitor from Maryland, had started Angelica going to Mass every morning; and the priest had brought about a fine change in her, Laddie thought; but a week after the priest left Beverly Hills Angelica fell back into her old ways. Day by day she drifted, slopping around the house, playing with the baby, shopping at Saks, getting her hair done, asking Laddie what they were going to do that night.

She was a poor Catholic, as she was a poor wife, a poor mother, a poor everything. It was unlikely that she could ever bring herself to get a divorce, for she had never made up her own mind about anything in her life.

She did not like the prospect of not being able to marry again; she was afraid to break the laws of the Church; so, she wanted him to come back to her. It was easiest for things to go on as they were.

I never found out what had provoked his leaving. She had been too shocked by the scandalous publicity to carry on after the accident; and she had broken with George Martin, cold. Perhaps he had been planning to leave her for months.

Nor did I know how Angelica had found out about Carol Culvers, nor to what extent Carol Culvers had influenced him to move out. No one will ever know these things.

At any rate, Laddie was not going back to her. That evening, after I returned to my rooms, I telephoned Angelica and told her so.

ABOUT THIS TIME ANOTHER OF CAROL CULVERS' telegrams was delivered to me at *Life*. It said: "Would love you to be guest this week end. We are going to Laguna to stay at my mother's estate by the sea. Your friend, Carol Culvers."

Later that day, I telephoned Laddie at Worldwide and he spoke about Carol Culvers for the first time. It seemed that old Culvers had rid himself at last of Marie Vadnum. For months Culvers' men had hunted around for a house for her outside Los Angeles; now, Culvers had bought a house. Apparently the house was grand enough to lure Mrs. Vadnum away from Beverly Hills, and was impressive enough to satisfy Culvers, concocting a family background for his wife. Marie Vadnum had moved to this "estate" the week before.

"Is Culvers going?" I said.

"Now, Charley-boy, don't go worrying your pretty head about Carol and me. We've been managing for quite a few weeks now."

I wanted to tell him then about "the noises" last Saturday night; but he had already hung up.

Friday afternoon, when we were to leave Beverly Hills, dark storm clouds shifted across a dismal August sky like a herd of shadowy animals. Six automobiles stood lined up in

Culvers' drive. The first four, Cadillacs, yellow, gray, blue, and black, belonged to Culvers. They were to carry the Culverses; Butch Murphy; Carol's nurse; Carol's maid, two chauffeurs; a record player and records; eleven suitcases; a case of champagne, a case of scotch; a typewriter; a portable radio; a collapsible canvas cabaña for the beach; three briefcases; a jewel case; boxes of Kleenex and special toilet paper — and for some odd reason, a full length ermine coat in a plastic bag, which had been sent that afternoon on approval from Maximilian Furs in New York.

I was to ride with Laddie in his Chrysler, the fifth automobile. Laddie also carried a typewriter; for, ostensibly, he and Flanagan and Culvers were going to get into a huddle over the week end to work on *The Thousand-Dollar Day*, the picture he was working on for Culvers-Productions in his spare time.

The sixth automobile, a flashy claret-colored Jaguar, belonged to Michael Flanagan, the ex-trombone player, whom Culvers had placed at the head of his motion picture production company.

Waiting for the Culverses to appear, Michael Flanagan bent over his fender, wiping away the dust with a soft green cloth. He kept the green cloth for that purpose underneath the Jaguar's seat.

"Michael!" Laddie called. Laddie leaned against the fender of our Chrysler, his yellow-brown English loafers rubbing against each other, his hands in the pockets of his gray flannel trousers.

As he heard his name called, one of Flanagan's midnight blue suede shoes jerked forward, as though he were about to come running; and his head perked up. It was a head marked by contrasts. The fox-terrier eyes, the nose — the kind of

nose for telling which way the wind blew — were all nerves; the face itself, unchallenging, depthless, not bad to look at, was as smooth as new cloth on the bolt. Foxy but submissive, it was the ideal type face to show around a kingfish's house.

"Michael, come over here and meet Mr. Thayer," Laddie said.

Flanegan came over, and he shook hands with me, mumbling, "Please'-t'-meet-y'," under his breath. Flanegan seemed afraid of appearing friendly toward me.

"When are we going to get started?" Laddie said.

"They'll be out, they'll be out soon." Flanegan began jingling keys and coins in his pocket. "It's a fine house you'll be staying in."

"How many rooms?" Laddie said.

"About fifteen, I think, not counting the servants' rooms. I was the one that found the house for Mr. Culvers," Flanegan said.

Now Culvers came lumbering out of the house; and Carol came, bouncing along behind him, her chartreuse slacks, shining phosphorescent in the bleakness of the afternoon. She was tying a green scarf around her platinum hair. Her nurse followed her, carrying a box of powder, a bottle of red nail polish, and three packages of cigarettes.

"Hi, fellows!" Carol called. She came to me, asking me to please tie the scarf under her chin.

"I'm glad you're along, Mr. Thayer," Culvers said in an off-hand manner, stalking off in the direction of the first Cadillac. Flanegan trailed Culvers like a pet dog.

After I had fixed Carol's scarf, she moved nearer Laddie Wells.

"Hello," she said.

"You look very pretty," he said, their eyes flashing together. "Thanks," she said.

Carol moved away; started back as if she had forgotten something inside the house; turned; did a complete circle on the lawn, before she went to the first automobile where Culvers sat waiting for her.

Shortly afterward, Joseph, the two chauffeurs, the maid, and the nurse finished loading things into the automobiles; and we were ready. Laddie had already got into our car and had turned on the ignition, when I noticed Butch Murphy, dressed in a fancy straw hat and seersucker suit, walking toward our car, carrying a suitcase.

"Murphy's going with us," Laddie said. "Be careful what you say."

Butch Murphy opened the back-seat door and stepped in; a second after she had croaked "Hello" to me, the automobiles ahead of us started to move.

Moving down Beverly Boulevard, three little girls, having a tea party under a dwarf palm, turned their heads our way, pointing; and a young matron, hurrying to get inside her Cape Cod Colonial house before the storm broke, nearly tripped, dropping a bag of groceries, staring at us.

The procession turned right at Santa Monica and headed out that boulevard until we came to Sepulveda. There we turned and drove south down Highway 101, which leads to Long Beach, and Laguna, and San Diego, and to the bullfights in Tiajuana, Mexico. Halfway to Long Beach it started to rain, and we listened to a baseball game on the radio.

"It's rainin' cats and dogs, isn't it, Mr. Wells?" Marie Vadnum said, greeting us in the Spanish style entrance hall of her Laguna estate.

"*Ja, ja,*" Laddie said, "cats and dogs."

The estate consisted of a tile-roofed stucco house, joined to a three-car garage, all crammed on a small piece of ocean-front property. The house was no mansion by a long shot, nor the place any estate, but it was, I was told, the largest house in town, a distinction that pleased Carol's mother no end. The house had been the folly of an elderly movie tycoon, who in his dotage had become infatuated with a Laguna hotel clerk's daughter; and the hall of the house had a beamed Spanish ceiling, touched with gold.

Wearing a plum-colored turban and slacks, Marie Vadnum stood in this hall near a Grand Rapids mahogany console that held a pottery vase filled with paper lilies. She stood, flanked by two servants Culvers had hired for her, playing lady-of-the-house. "It'll be hunky-dory with you, won't it, Mr. Wells, if Mr. Thayer puts up in your room?"

Although she had addressed these words to Laddie, she had looked toward Culvers, who nodded, grunted, showing his approval of the arrangement then started to move toward the stairway. Culvers trudged up the stairs, using the wrought iron rail. The servants, Butch Murphy, and Flanagan followed him, carrying his bags.

Carol, holding the ermine coat in the plastic wrapper, waited in the hall with her mother. As Laddie and I climbed the stairs, she threw aside the wrapper, and tried on the magnificent coat over her slacks. "If I like it, I can keep it," Carol said, parading before Marie Vadnum's eyes.

Upstairs Laddie and I walked down a tile-floored corridor, passing a caravan of servants carrying bags. We came to the room assigned to us for the week end. The room had coral draperies and a fake oil painting of a flamingo in a Florida

lagoon. While I went to the john, Laddie, exhausted, fell across a bed.

When I came back, I saw that Culvers' servants had brought up our bags; they had set Laddie's typewriter on a bleached-oak table facing his bed. Laddie still lay there, his legs spread apart, his tired hands thrown behind his head, cooling beneath a pillow, his eyes staring through the typewriter at the drizzly evening sky. Laddie did not feel like talking; so I lay down on the other twin bed, closing my eyes for a cat-nap.

Minutes later, Joseph stuck his head into our silent room: dinner was being served downstairs.

Dinner was served — the first evening in Laguna — on a broad wet flagstone terrace running the length of the rear of the house. The rain had stopped. Beyond the soggy sands of the beach, a heavy fog hung over the Pacific, and a white summer moon shone through like a dim flashlight.

We sat in green metal chairs around a shabby glass-topped table covered with turquoise pottery china plates and mats of transparent plastic straw. Salt and pepper trickled out of pottery turtles' mouths. At the beginning of dinner Laddie spilled tomato soup; and the soup seeped through, making a pool underneath the mat, then crept up again through the plastic straws. I remember how his mat suddenly got the look of an open wound, complete with a fly that had lighted there.

Culvers sat at one end of the table with Carol on his right, with Laddie on his left, facing Carol. I sat next to Laddie, facing Flanagan, who alone among us had changed his clothes. Flanagan now wore a lime-green shirt and loud yellow shark-skin trousers. "You can depend on Mr. Culvers' taste to be right," Flanagan was saying, smacking his lips.

They were discussing *The Thousand-Dollar Day*; and Laddie was only half listening. Laddie gave his real interest to Carol, across from him, with bold glances, and double entendres which I have wondered if she fully understood. "I want the girl's unhappiness to reveal itself by the intensity of her love scene with Rob-Roy —" Laddie said, looking into Carol's eyes. He was working for Culvers only to be near Carol; and had little interest in the project.

Carol was acting silly. When Butch Murphy walked out and whispered to Culvers, Carol held her nose. "I smell a skunk! I smell a skunk!" Another time, she pinched Flanagan's leg under the table, causing him to spill mint sauce down his shirt. Flanagan, who concealed his low opinion of Carol with overpoliteness, almost spat in her face, before the smile came, turning it into a joke.

I started a conversation with Carol's mother, who sat, wearing her turban, at the other end of the table, facing Culvers; and not once during the dinner had Culvers glanced at her. "Do you like living in Laguna?" I said.

"I like it all right," she said. "But I don't have any friends down here, and everybody down here belongs to a crowd."

"With this big house, you'll soon have a crowd of your own," I said.

After dinner when Laddie went upstairs with Culvers and Flanagan to talk about the picture, Carol acted very nervous.

We sat in the living room, having after-dinner coffee: Carol and I on a mulberry ottoman, and Mrs. Vadnum in a wing chair, slightly to the right of a carved mantel seven feet tall. Carol rose three or four times and went to the windows. There was a windless calm over the Pacific, which must have heightened her uneasiness. After looking out, she would come back

to the sofa, each time shakily raising the demitasse to her lips, or lighting a cigarette, or blowing her nose on a Kleenex, or twisting the hunk of diamond on her third finger left hand that was Culvers' engagement ring. She was acting, I thought, as though she expected something to go wrong.

Thus, twenty minutes jerked along; then, Carol wanted to play a cutthroat Canasta in the card room.

We played three-handed Canasta for almost an hour. Carol played well. She seemed to have channeled all of her anxiety into winning this game; and when her mother picked up a juicy stack, which I had frozen, Carol slapped her mother's hand. No one actually won. We stopped playing shortly after Flanagan walked past the door on his way out of the house. Carol yawned, examined her diamond watch. "Well, kiddies, I'm going to turn in. Why don't you go out with Flanagan?" she said to me.

So I jumped up from the chair and hurried out to catch Flanagan. As I reached the drive, I heard the roar of Flanagan's Jaguar down the highway. Carol gave me the keys to the blue Cadillac, which was hers.

As I turned the blue Cadillac into the highway, I noticed a man, sitting in a darkened Plymouth, parked directly across from the house. When I passed him, his lights flashed on. He was following me. The blue Cadillac's chromium clock said five minutes of ten. This would have given Carol and Laddie three hours to do as they liked without the Culvers' detective hanging around, for I drank at the Captain's Cabin about that long.

Now I knew, of course, why she had wanted me here: to arouse old Culvers' suspicions. She had played her game well, for old Culvers as well as the rest of them seemed to think that

I was the one with whom she was carrying on the affair.

I sat on a rickety bamboo stool at the Captain's Cabin, sipping Tom Collines. Twenty minutes before I left, the man in the fedora walked in and stood at the end of the bar.

At around one o'clock I drove to Marie Vadnum's and I went to bed. From one-ten until four I must have slept, because between those hours I didn't remember anything happening. When Laddie walked in at around four o'clock, I awoke.

He moved into the room quietly, and for ten minutes or so, he sat on the side of his bed. I heard him stand up; I heard him take a few steps; and I could make out him picking up his typewriter, raising it above his head. Suddenly he bashed the typewriter on the floor with all his strength. Things cracked, and popped, and a tiny bell tinkled, and wheels rolled. To people sleeping, it must have sounded as though the world had come to an end.

"My God!" I cried. "What's the matter?"

"Ohhhhhh — haven't you found out that something's always the matter?" he said.

"People don't go around bashing their typewriters to pieces," I said, "because of it."

"Maybe people ought to," Laddie said.

He turned down the sheets, got undressed, and lay down. Then he lighted a cigarette for me and a cigarette for himself, and he walked over and sat down on the side of my bed.

"I think I ought to tell you," I said, "that a detective's been on my trail for a week now. He's followed me down here."

"What've you done?" Laddie laughed.

"It's Culvers' detective," I said.

"So the old boy's finally wised up?"

"Your girl friend has been pretty smart so far. Everybody suspects *me*."

Laddie laughed again.

"Don't you see that in a few days he'll start tailing *you*?"

"You mustn't worry so much, Charley-boy," he said.

He walked naked into the bathroom, brushed his teeth, went to the john, and got into bed. He did not explain bashing his typewriter, and I did not ask him.

When I awakened late on Saturday morning, Laddie's bed was empty. He had set the wrecked typewriter back on the table, covering it with a T-shirt. He had left a note for Joseph, asking him to throw the machine away.

I had breakfast on the terrace by myself. As I was eating a melon, Butch Murphy and Flanagan came strolling out, speaking in low tones.

"Bide your time, Michael," Butch Murphy was saying. "Don't forget that the *others* are biding time down in New Orleans."

They were discussing Carol's rudeness to both of them at dinner last night. Butch Murphy was telling Flanagan to take a lesson from the first Mrs. Culvers and Clarence Culvers, Jr. — one day the "empire" would fall into the hands of this mother and son.

As soon as they saw me, they stopped speaking. Flanagan strutted like a bantam cock across the terrace toward the beach. Butch Murphy walked over and sat down.

"If I was to ask you a question, would you truthfully answer it?" Butch Murphy said, leaning forward, folding her hands.

"That depends."

"Aren't you planning to write a book about Mr. and Mrs. Culvers?"

"I'm writing the story for *Life*. I'm not writing any book."

"I'll bet one day you write a book about them," Butch Murphy said, her bulldog mouth forming a sly, worldly smile. She glanced toward an emerald-colored canvas cabaña, which had been set up on Mrs. Vadnum's beach. You could not see the Culverses; but you could see Joseph, dignified as a Wall Street lawyer in striped trousers and black coat, moving in and out; and you could see the maid and the nurse, jumping around like sparrows; and you could see Flanagan, kneeling on one knee, facing the cabaña: you knew that the Culverses were there.

"Well, if I do, and I get hard up for facts, I'll know whom to come to," I said, grinning at her.

Chuckling in her deep gruff voice, Butch Murphy rose from the chair and wandered back into the house. I sat there, tapping a fork against my water goblet.

I had always wanted to write a novel. My instructor in English 4-A, who had sold stories to the *Post*, had said that a writer could cut his teeth writing on a novel; and once during a sweltering New York summer, I had begun a Fitzgeraldish book about my friend Bugsy Ames, a Virginian with wholesale grocery money, who had established a salon in his rooms in Eliot House. Bugsy Ames's rooms, decorated with Beardsley drawings, Persian rugs, maps of France, had been the gathering place of people like Eddie Lubormorski, whose father had a Polish title; and David Lewis who had visited Somerset Maugham; and of snobs and wits from places like St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Grosse Point. They were an off-color, slightly notorious group, who drank Russian tea during the Harvard-Yale game. My roommate, Ed Sturgis, a big wheel in the Hasty Pudding, nowadays dabbling in television, de-

plored my seeing this crowd. "Why do you want to get yourself talked about, Charley?" But I went on seeing them, just the same. And I had just discovered Huxley and Proust, and I hung on their every word. I would have written that novel, or at least a part of it, if I hadn't gone off to Long Island to stay with the Sturgises. The Sturgises lived in a huge stone pile of a house, larger than the Miro Parish courthouse. It faced a lovely blue bay on the Sound where J. P. Morgan used to anchor his yacht.

There were always these two sides of my nature, like two wheels, heading left, heading right: the Bugsy Ames side, and the Ed Sturgis side. Then there was the problem of Miro — the fear I had of having to go back to live in Miro, which was a kind of third wheel, spinning in reverse.

I held a secret dream that one day I would do something big, and start all those wheels to spinning in the same direction. I used to daydream about writing novels.

At Harvard I had put off writing, like putting off going to the dentist. I was always running around doing Lampoon business, or playing tennis, or lying on the banks of the Charles with Bugsy Ames. Then, I had gone to work for *Life*; and after a year in New York *Life* had transferred me to the office in Beverly Hills.

As I sat there in a pain of worrying about myself, Butch Murphy sat in the living room, telephoning long distance to a catering firm in Beverly Hills. She was placing an order for a thousand roast chickens on September the third. There was to be held on that day, Carol's twenty-fourth birthday, a costume party.

The rain had cleared the sky to a robin's-egg blue, and there was an August wind blowing that would have been fine for sailing. After breakfast I took a walk down the beach.

A fat woman with a sweet baby face lay like a pink and white hippopotamus, getting the sun; and a sailor was chasing a redhead, who kept pulling up the bra of her strapless bathing suit; and four children wearing crêpe paper hats were conducting a double Tom Thumb wedding. I sat down near three young women hidden behind a fat green beach umbrella. Though you could not see their faces, you could see their slim legs, stretched out, shiny with tanning oil. They were actresses, I found out, from the La Jolla Playhouse, and they had come to Laguna for the day; and for almost an hour they discussed whether a girl named Joan was going to marry a young man named Al, or whether she was going to hold out for a man with money. When I heard their portable radio announce one o'clock, I jogged back to Marie Vadnum's house.

"Mr. Thayer," Culvers said, "when do you think the story will come out in *Life*?"

"I don't know — when," I said. "I haven't even sent it in yet."

"Can't you give me some idea?"

"Well, Mr. Culvers," I said, "Leamus wants to get some glamour shots of Mrs. Culvers. Then he wants to photograph your next party — the costume party. As soon as he's done this, we can shoot the story on to New York."

"Then possibly in two weeks they'll have the story in New York; is that correct?"

"That's correct," I said.

Culvers dug into a pink lump of shrimp salad, avoiding my eyes.

Marie Vadnum had driven to La Jolla to meet Gladys Hendrix and the Titsons; and Flanagan had gone to the races at Del Mar. There were only the four of us at lunch on Sat-

urday: Culvers, Carol, Laddie, and I. Carol sat opposite Laddie, poking her finger into her water glass, eating little, mumbling about a stained-glass window in Long Beach.

It seemed that an old acquaintance of Culvers, in New Orleans, a Baptist minister, had been made recently the pastor of a new church in Long Beach. Culvers had been persuaded to donate a window in memory of his mother. We were going to drive to Long Beach Sunday for the dedication of the window and for a picnic lunch at the parsonage grounds. Now, the day before, Carol slumped in her chair, like Raggedy Ann with a broken heart.

Laddie seldom gazed up from his plate; and after lunch was over and the Culverses had gone to their rooms to take naps, Laddie moped around as though he had done something horrible. Later that afternoon we stripped and took sunbaths on the private deck outside our room. It was then when Laddie told me about meeting Carol Culvers and about the night they had spent on the beach.

At around seven o'clock the second evening in Laguna, while I was taking a shower, Laddie was summoned to the telephone. He came back as I was stepping from the shower and as I was drying myself, he stood for a moment in the doorway.

"That was my agent," he said. "My agent ran into Angelica and her parents at the Beverly Hills Hotel."

Then he lay down on my bed, and he pulled his silk dressing gown around his body, as though to keep warm, and closed his eyes. He was exhausted. I did not awaken him until eight o'clock.

While Laddie was dressing, Joseph came, saying that Mr. Culvers was anxious to do some work. Laddie, Flanagan, and Butch Murphy would have their dinner off trays in Culvers'

room. After Joseph left, Laddie said: "Right now the old man's all hepped up. In a week or so he'll be hepped up about something else and he'll dump the picture in the lap of a goon like Flanagan. Makes me feel I ought to get all the money I can out of him and clear out. That's a bad way to feel."

"Yeah," I said, "it's a bad way to feel."

"He's only playing around," Laddie said. "If the picture turns out bad, it doesn't really matter to him. He says he doesn't need to make money with his pictures. He wants art. Flanagan's fooled him into thinking he knows all about art. It's too bad, because the old man wants to do something really fine for Carol."

"Yeah, it's too bad," I said.

"He's got a lot of money and he believes he's an authority on everything under the sun. Money's a kind of stick he holds over your head."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to do my job and clear out of the picture. It's bad to feel this way about a person," Laddie said.

At dinner there were Gladys Hendrix, the Titsons, Marie Vadnum, Carol, and I. Carol got a little tight on the red wine, and everyone fawned over her, and after dinner she had a record player brought out, and she and the Titsons formed a line and kicked like chorus girls. At around ten o'clock Culvers sent Joseph to ask her to come upstairs.

When Marie Vadnum and her friends went off to the Captain's Cabin, I worked on the cross-word puzzle in Laddie's *New York Times*. By eleven-thirty I lay in bed mulling over what Gladys Hendrix had whispered to me, while Carol high-kicked: "Take my advice. Don't fool around with her!" the

echoes of her whispering ringing like echoes of pistol shots in the room.

I fell asleep at around one and kicked and tossed through the night.

Sunday morning a bright hot August sun had risen in a sky as soft and blue as a baby's blanket. A bell was ringing at a Laguna church. People swarmed like ants over the sugary beaches. Far out you could see sailboats gliding down from Balboa. Inside the house there was still a coffee smell. The Sunday papers lay strewn over the terrace where we had had breakfast late.

Laddie Wells and I had packed already. We planned to leave the Culverses after the picnic at the parsonage in Long Beach and to drive on back to Beverly Hills. Now we stood in Marie Vadnum's living room, wearing seersucker suits, waiting for the procession to get started. Laddie had rubbed talcum on his sunburned face, and he kept taking out a handkerchief from his hip pocket, wiping his cheeks.

"I don't like to smell too sweet," he said. "My father used to dress up and powder like some damned New York fairy."

"Is your father still living?"

"*Ja*, still living."

"Your mother?"

"*Ja*, my mother too."

"I thought probably they were. It's just that I've never heard you speak of them."

"What's there to say? I'm an only child, and the three of us came over in 'thirty-eight. My grandfather on my father's side was a Jew."

"I didn't mean to sound prying."

"All of us in California have parents back somewhere," Laddie said.

Suddenly the room became infested with servants, and parasites; then Culvers himself paused in the doorway, peering at us out of old-fashioned dark glasses with perfectly round lenses.

"The ceremony has already started," Culvers said. "We're going to arrive very late."

Now Carol walked in, dressed all in black like a widow, and wearing almost every diamond she possessed — diamond clips, diamond bracelets, diamond rings, even a diamond brooch, fixed on the brim of her black silk beanie. She wore black, because Culvers wanted her to look dignified in the church.

"I'm a little scared," Carol laughed.

"There's no reason to feel scared," Laddie said. Laddie was staring into the doll eyes, then at the shining platinum hair. It was as though he did not notice the preposterous black costume, or the diamonds she wore.

Carol laughed rather nervously, as though she were only pretending to feel afraid, and wasn't. Then Culvers called from the hall, "We're ready to leave, Carol," and the three of us walked to the automobiles lined up before Marie Vadnum's house.

Four automobiles formed the procession to Long Beach. A chauffeur and Butch Murphy rode in the first automobile with Culvers, who wanted to dictate letters. Carol, the nurse, and another chauffeur were to ride in the second one; then at the last minute Carol insisted that Laddie and I ride with her. Culvers' face in the first car window showed a look of such agony and hate, hearing this, that Laddie asked Carol to sit on

the rear seat with the nurse. In the third car sat Flanagan and Marie Vadnum, trying to hide her peeve over Culvers' not having invited along Gladys Hendrix and the Titsons. Fourth came Joseph, driving Laddie's car.

We started out pleasantly enough. I told a joke about Sam Goldwyn; then Laddie told one; then Carol told the one about the Jewish rabbi and St. Peter. Then we stopped telling jokes for a while and we gazed out at people sprawled on the beaches, at steaming trailer camps, at sailors hitch-hiking; and before we quite realized it, we had ridden for twenty minutes without anybody speaking a word.

All at once, as real noises penetrate sleep, you heard the scuffling in the back seat. When I turned around I saw the nurse trying to take away a bottle of gin from Carol's hands, neither of them uttering a sound. As soon as the nurse saw me watching, she straightened primly, folding her hands: to save Carol any embarrassment, I suppose. Carol took advantage of the truce; she placed the bottle in the corner of the seat, out of the nurse's reach. She grinned at me as innocently as a child of ten, caught doing something bad, her platinum curls mussed, covering one eye, perspiration seeping through her powdered forehead, the beanie with the diamond brooch dangling like a crown which meant nothing to her. I said nothing, of course. Meanwhile Laddie sat frowning, as though some struggle of his own was going on in his mind. Minutes passed.

"Take your filthy hands off me, goddammit!" Carol screamed. Both of us turned around.

Carol, forced like some animal into the corner of the seat, was using one hand to hold the bottle, the other to claw at the nurse.

"Miss Carol oughtn't to drink anything on a hot day like today," the nurse said.

"You filthy witch!"

"I don't know who could have given her the bottle," the nurse said. "I searched carefully through her purse before we went downstairs."

"Don't ever look in my purse again, God damn you!"

It went on several minutes longer with Laddie trying to calm Carol, and I, turned almost complete around, trying to take away the bottle. Through all of this the chauffeur, a forty-year-old fellow with rimless glasses, drove on as though this was nothing strange to him.

"God damn bastards! God damn bastards! All o' you God damn bastards!"

"Miss Carol! You're not yourself, saying those things! You're not yourself!"

Carol drew back her hand and slapped the nurse's face. While the nurse sat there, whimpering, "She's not herself, she's not herself when she gets that stuff inside her," whimpering, babbling like a woman struck by her own child, Carol crouched in the corner of the seat, drinking from the bottle of gin.

"Give the bottle to me," Laddie said, reaching, his fingers brushing her legs.

Carol hissed at him like a wildcat, but she lowered the bottle from her lips. "There, there!" she cried, tossing the bottle out the window. "That's what I think of you!" She sulked nastily for a moment or so, and we straightened in our seats, facing the road to Long Beach. We had not sat straight for five minutes before Carol began to beat the chauffeur's head. "God damn you, you're taking all day. You-you want me to

miss-miss everything? It's for Clarence's mother, God damn you!"

Laddie knocked away Carol's hands: "Are you trying to wreck us, you little fool?" Laddie straightened again; and both of us watched her in the mirror. Carol was glaring at the nurse, then she pinched the nurse's arm. When the nurse slapped her hands, Carol drooped her shoulders and started to cry pitifully: "I wanna die . . . I wanna die . . . I wanna go to sleep . . . I wanna die like you, Daddy . . . I wanna die like you, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, help me . . . help me . . ."

"Miss Carol's not herself," the nurse said calmly.

"I wanna die, Daddy . . . I don' wanna live any more, Daddy . . . I don' wanna live any more . . ."

"Oh, Lord! Can't you make her shut up?" Laddie cried. Laddie's arms and then his legs began to tremble, as though his body were going to fall into pieces.

In the car mirror I watched Carol raise her frazzled head, and with damp red eyes, look at the back of Laddie's head. She moved her hand to his shoulder; she touched his neck, tenderly with her palm. Then she drooped again, sobbing, babbling, forming no words, like some hopeless idiot child who understands nothing of the world. "I wanna die now . . . I wanna die now . . . I don't wanna live any more, Daddy . . . no more . . ."

"She's not herself," the nurse said. "Somebody must have slipped her the bottle."

The chauffeur, following Culvers', the number one automobile, drove down a treeless street lined with Quonset huts, which had geraniums in the windows. At the end of this street stood a building, resembling the Alamo, and people were departing from this building in their Sunday clothes,

moving past a neon sign in front that said the such-and-such Baptist Church of Long Beach, filing around toward the parsonage grounds next door. Culvers' Cadillac stopped in front of the church, and our Cadillac pulled up behind his. Culvers sat inside the car, looking out at the crowd, who stared at him.

Laddie and I got out to help the chauffeur with Carol, who was now sickeningly drunk from the straight gin and heat. Laddie took one of her arms and the chauffeur the other arm, and they supported Carol, while the nurse brushed Carol's hair, and put on lipstick. A hot dry wind was blowing, and the crowd had stopped moving to watch. Culvers' large old face, seeing this, became contorted as though he felt a pain at his heart. Culvers climbed out of the car, and he lumbered toward us, perspiration dripping down his chin like saliva.

"How — how — who — who — how did she get hold of any?" Culvers' words came out as though he were about to cry.

"She just pulled out this bottle from her purse and started, Mr. Culvers. I searched the purse well, about ten minutes before we left the house," the nurse said. "The gentlemen here did everything they could to help."

Now the pastor of the Baptist Church, Culvers' old friend, approached us, a squat pink-faced man of sixty, who had curly white hair. Culvers stepped forward, and the pastor, who had given Culvers a beaming smile, suddenly got grave. You could not hear what Culvers said to the pastor, but the pastor took out a handkerchief and dabbed his lips.

The pastor walked toward the crowd, telling them that they should go to the parsonage grounds. Most of them moved a few feet, then slowed to stare again. Meanwhile, Culvers

came; and Laddie, the chauffeur, and I helped Carol to climb four concrete steps leading to the church. Butch Murphy, Flanagan, and Joseph followed us, looking as though they had expected this to happen. Marie Vadnum came last, as though she did not wish Culvers to know she was there.

The sight of the church's strong wooden doors sobered Carol somewhat, and as we entered Carol turned her head toward the pastor and smiled sweetly; then her knees gave way and the chauffeur and I, supporting her under the armpits, had to drag her in. Except for two elderly women, the church had emptied. The women stood near the pulpit, staring up at the new stained-glass window. When they saw us dragging Carol down the aisle, they shook their heads and walked out.

Halfway down the aisle Carol was sick, and we dragged her to a seat, while the nurse took out a face towel from the make-up kit and cleaned up. "I wanna go home," Carol moaned. The pastor coughed.

"There's your window, Clarence," the pastor said suddenly, pointing to the crucifixion scene in stained glass.

"My mother would have liked that," Culvers said, glancing from the stained-glass crucifixion to poor Carol.

Hearing Culvers mention his mother, Carol tried to stand up. She collapsed into the seat, hanging her head.

"Poor Mrs. Culvers," the pastor said, "let's get her into my study."

So we dragged her across the church through a small wooden door into the pastor's study, and we laid her on a green studio couch, where the pastor took his naps. While the pastor spoke to Clarence, the pastor's wife appeared, a crippled woman, wearing a mauve rayon dress. As soon as we had

arranged Carol on the couch, the pastor's wife hobbled over with a glass of orange-ade.

"I wanna die, I wanna die," Carol moaned.

"The congregation is waiting to eat," the pastor said, pacing the floor, dabbing with the handkerchief at his lips.

Culvers walked to the window and looked out at the five hundred hungry people.

The nurse held the glass of orange-ade, trying to coax Carol to drink; the pastor's wife sat, trying to hold Carol's hand.

"Leave me alone. Let me die, for crissake," Carol turned her cheek against the coolness of a pillow. The nurse started to remove the bracelets, rings, and clips, placing them on a table beneath a water color of Jesus.

"She'll never get through the picnic," Laddie said to Culvers. "Why don't you take Carol home?"

Culvers did not answer this; Culvers eyed the pastor's wife, who now stared at the diamonds.

"Why don't you take Carol home?" Laddie cried. "Why don't you take her home?"

"Yes — yes, we'll take her home," Culvers said.

While Culvers apologized to his old friend the pastor, Laddie picked up Carol from the bed and carried her out of the church in his arms.

That's all I remember about the trip to Long Beach, except for the business of the diamonds. The nurse, who had collected the diamonds, suddenly cried out, when we were outside the church. She had left behind one of the diamond bracelets. I said that I would fetch it. When I returned to the pastor's study, the pastor's crippled wife sat fondling the thing, as though to possess it would bring her her greatest joy.

“Pardon me,” I said. “The nurse forgot one.”

“Such a gorgeous thing,” the woman said, hobbling toward me. “Well, here it is. Take it to the poor girl.”

Driving up Highway 101 to Beverly Hills, there were only the two of us. Friday night, Laddie said, the night when he bashed the typewriter to the floor, he had backed out of a plan they had had of running away to Mexico.

PART
FOUR

WE CAME BACK FROM THE LAGUNA WEEK END on a mid-August Sunday night. Monday morning Angelica's father, Mr. Porter O'Brien, telephoned me at *Life*.

"We're out here for a coupla days, son, and we didn't want to get away without seeing you," Porter O'Brien said.

What he meant was that he didn't want to run into my parents back at the Miro Country Club without having bothered to get in touch with me. They weren't friends, actually. But Miro was still a small city, and nice people were supposed to think the world of each other. The Porter O'Briens, who were new nice people, were sticklers for doing the right thing.

"How about having dinner with the ladies and me tonight, son?"

"Why that sounds mighty fine, Mr. O'Brien," I said, using my good-old-Charley tone.

He said that we were going to have a nice quiet dinner at the hotel, just us "home folks."

Monday evening, driving to the Beverly Hills Hotel, I pictured us there. Porter O'Brien, the stocky ex-mechanic, would be adjusting rimless glasses over his squinting pig eyes, saying: "Go on, folks, order anything you like — steaks, cav-vy-yar, champagne." And Mrs. O'Brien, Florence, a pretty Miro society matron who hadn't been a society matron as long as

others, would be sitting there a little too ladylike in her green rayon suit and flowered hat, removing white gloves, praying that Porter wouldn't brag too much about his business, or flash his bankroll, or speak too indiscreetly about Angelica's marital troubles in front of the G. W. Thayers' son. Angelica would sit there, dressed in pink, a little subdued, confident that I wouldn't tell anything she didn't wish her parents to know.

Dinner began as I had imagined it: steaks, a bottle of vintage champagne, and a wavy-haired violinist who, having caught a glimpse of Porter's hundred-dollar bills, now paraded around us, playing "Some Enchanted Evening."

Angelica sat next to me, fidgeting with her gold bracelets, running her fingers through her new cropped hairdo — I had told her that she looked like Elizabeth Taylor with short hair, and this had flattered her. Once, while Porter O'Brien told about the reactivation of McWilliams Field, Angelica had looked into my eyes, and underneath the table I had pressed my leg against hers. Toward the middle of dinner Angelica's spirits picked up. It was as though she felt secure and safe with her parents there and could afford to act her old self. When a good-looking blonde walked past, and Porter O'Brien stared, Angelica laughed: "Now don't let that song go to your head, Daddy. You're going to spend your enchanted evening right here with us."

"Angelica! Aren't you ashamed!"

"It's all right, Mother," Porter O'Brien said, patting his wife's hand, "We want our Little Girl to have fun tonight. Our Little Girl's had a tough time out here all by herself. But we'll fix everything up for her. Her daddy'll see to *that*."

Mrs. O'Brien's green eyes flashed, trying to stop her husband, but neither her eyes nor her manicured fingers, placed on her husband's rough hairy hand, did any good. Looking

at me, he told how he had warned Angelica that Laddie Wells was not the one for her to marry, how he had said all along that Laddie wasn't the kind of husband they wanted for their Little Girl. Laddie Wells was not their sort of person. Laddie Wells was not the kind of young man content to settle down, raise a family, and win the community's respect. Laddie Wells wasn't like the fine young men back home who stayed in Miro, where they belonged, and lived normal Christian lives. No, Laddie Wells was a young man Porter O'Brien could never understand, and he had warned his Little Girl not to marry him. Now, Laddie Wells was unfaithful to his Little Girl; and he wasn't going to see his Little Girl treated this way.

It was all that I could do to keep from spilling the beans about the Little Girl herself. As for the Little Girl, color rose in her face until her face glowed as pink as the crisp pink taffeta underskirt under the organdy; and she used every trick in the book — flicking her gold eyes, pressing my leg, giving desperate little coughs — pleading with me not to tell anything. Mrs. O'Brien, playing lady, dabbing her thin lips with a crumpled white handkerchief, simply allowed her husband to have his say. There was nothing she could do when her husband wanted to voice his opinions; and, anyway, her husband had made a lot of money and knew best. As Porter O'Brien ended his tirade, he looked me coolly in the eye, as though I, too, were a rogue for having broken away from Miro. He said: "Don't you think for one minute that I'm going to let any highfalutin young fop get the best of *us*. No, sirree, sonny-boy, *I'll* fix him."

"What are you going to do?" I said.

"Don't you ever underestimate us back in Miro," he said, squinting his pig eyes, tightening his colorless thin lips.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Rob Roy Hutchins, my lawyer back home, has contacts all over this country. Rob Roy's put me in touch with one of the biggest lawyers in Beverly Hills. We're going to give Laddie one more chance. If he won't come back to our Little Girl, we're going to file for a separation and property settlement that'll squeeze the blood out of him. We're going to leave him just enough money to buy cigarettes and gas. We can't allow our Little Girl to divorce. Our Little Girl would never go against the laws of the Church. But we're going to file for a legal separation — I've already spoken with a priest out here. We're going to put the squeeze on Mr. Laddie Wells."

"How do you know you can?" I said.

"Talked to the lawyer this afternoon. The lawyer said what we could get — all I mentioned and maybe more. No, sir, nobody's going to treat my Little Girl this way and get away with it."

"Whose word are you taking that he's done anything?" My ears burned, my cheeks glowed like paper lanterns.

"Why, I'm taking my Little Girl's word! He left her, didn't he? He left her for some cheap actress, didn't he? I'm taking my Little Girl's word!"

"*Your Little Girl's?*"

"Please, Charley; please, Porter; people are hearing every word you say," Mrs. O'Brien said, leaning forward.

"My Little Girl wouldn't tell us anything over the telephone, when we called her long distance. But her folks knew that something was the matter — they knew. We've suspected something's been wrong ever since the accident, ever since those rotten Hollywood papers tried to make something of her going out to dinner with Mr. Martin. I ought to have filed

suit against every one of those lying papers. That's what I ought've done.

"Well, we've known something's been wrong, so I suggested to Mother, here, that we just jump on a plane and fly out here and see for ourselves. After we got here we wormed everything out of her. Believe you me, sonny, Laddie Wells's not going to make a success in life with this on his conscience."

"I don't see how he's going to be able to make anything, after what you're going to do," I said.

"Hoo-hooo-hoooo," laughed Porter O'Brien, "I'd like to catch the look of his face the day after the papers are served. He acted mighty high and mighty down in Miro. Now it's our turn to laugh. What do you think about that, sonny-boy?"

"I think you're a sonofabitch," I said, calmly.

"What — what — you what?"

"Porter! Porter! Please, Porter!" Mrs. O'Brien said, pulling at her husband's blue-green sleeve.

"I said you're a sonofabitch."

"Come outside and say that, sonny!" Rising, Porter O'Brien glared with angry contempt, as though he were some goutish, outraged cop.

"I'll go outside with you," I said, rising also, "and I'll finish telling you all about yourself."

"Charley! Charley! Stop it! Stop it!" Angelica cried, pulling my coat sleeve.

"Well, come on. I'll tell you what I think of you. I'll tell you what a lot of people back in your blessed little Miro think of you. Come on outside. I'll tell you all about your Little Girl too."

"Stop it!" Angelica cried, grabbing my arm.

"Well, are you coming?"

I knocked away Angelica's hand, and I stalked off from the table. From the lobby I could see them still sitting at the table. Porter O'Brien, waiting for the check, sat fuming and snorting, his pig eyes squinted into slits. Mrs. O'Brien, already dreading gossip about the scene back home, had placed her fingers on his forearm, calming him. "He's young, Porter. It's only that he's young." Presently both of them raised water goblets to their lips and sipped. Angelica, sniffing into a salmon-pink napkin, blew her nose. They had gone into the act, Nothing Has Really Happened to Us.

It was on Wednesday morning that Porter O'Brien telephoned Laddie Wells at the studio to arrange a meeting to "talk things over." Angelica, who hated never being able to marry again, had told her father that she loved Laddie Wells and wanted him back. Laddie met with Porter O'Brien and the lawyer at around eight o'clock Wednesday at the Beverly Hills Hotel. He arrived at the cocktail lounge and he spotted Porter O'Brien sitting at a table with the lawyer. He walked over to the table.

"Why, hello there, son," Porter O'Brien said, rising, slapping Laddie's shoulder.

Laddie sat down with them.

"You look all worn out," Porter O'Brien said.

Laddie said nothing to this.

"Well, I was never a man to beat around the bush. What I want to say is this: My Little Girl loves you and doesn't want a separation. My Little Girl wants you back, son. She wants you to leave California, and live in Miro.

"Now you won't have to worry about a job, son. I'm getting old. I'm going to have to train some smart young fellow

to take over. It'll be Angelica's business, when I'm gone."

"Angelica — Angelica wants to go back to Miro?"

"She does. Miro's her home. Miro's where she belongs."

"Perhaps you're right."

"My Little Girl's grown up," Porter O'Brien said, rattling ice cubes in his glass. "She's come to realize that Hollywood's no kind of place to live a decent, normal life. She wants to come home and live among the right kind of people."

Laddie chuckled.

"What's funny about that?"

"Did she think for one minute I'd live in Miro?" Laddie said.

"Nine tenths of the young men in America would jump at what I'm offering you. Know how long it's taken to build up my business? Thirty-two years, man, thirty-two years. Know what I did when I first came to Miro? A machinist. What do you think of that? A machinist. Know what my business is capitalized at today? Over a million dollars. What do you want, man? What is it you want out of life?"

"I'm not going into what I want, Mr. O'Brien. But I'll tell you what would happen to me down in your business. I'd sit behind a desk and grow fatter and fatter, and another part of me would grow smaller and smaller and smaller. Do you know the way a candle flame grows weaker and weaker and finally goes out? Would you want to lower a jar over my candle flame, Mr. O'Brien?"

"No, no, no. What are you talking about, man?" Porter O'Brien's fist came down on the table top, causing the glasses to shake.

"My candle flame, Mr. O'Brien. How I don't wish the flame to go out."

"I never did understand you," Porter O'Brien said, his pig

eyes glaring. "I knew from the day I first laid eyes on you that you weren't the young man for my Little Girl."

"What didn't you understand, Mr. O'Brien?"

"I don't want to hear your damned fool ideas."

"You don't understand why your Little Girl married me, is that it, Mr. O'Brien? Well, for one thing, she wanted more than what you and your money and your Miro had to give. I doubt if she realized it at the time, I doubt if she realizes it now, but she did, Mr. O'Brien. She used to talk about wanting a wonderful crazy life, and knowing wonderful people, and doing wonderful things. You never knew your daughter at all."

"My Little Girl was just a kid when she married you, and that was just kid talk. Most kids have pipe dreams like that."

"She had a wonderful, crazy streak that you wouldn't have liked."

"She's grown up now. She wants to settle down to a decent normal life, like her mother has with me."

"Do you know why I married her, Mr. O'Brien? I married her because she was a firefly. She was flitting around at a cocktail party in a pink dress, saying the silliest things you ever heard. She said that she'd marry me if I stood on my head. She had me standing on my head at this cocktail party in New York, Mr. O'Brien. I'd never met such a girl, and I was crazy about her. Beware of fireflies, Mr. O'Brien. Beware of fireflies."

"Don't talk that damned poppycock to me." Porter O'Brien wiped his forehead with a soiled white handkerchief. "My Little Girl's unhappy and wants to come home."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Mr. O'Brien? You'd like her to be like everyone else. You'd like her the sort of person

you could put your finger on, a person in a neat little groove.”

“I’ve offered you everything in my power to give, man.”

“You’ve offered me money, Mr. O’Brien, money and a slow, dull death.”

“I won’t sit here and listen to your damned fool poppy-cock.”

Suddenly the lawyer coughed loud. The lawyer had sat there, like some powerful mute force of society, backing up Porter O’Brien’s words. Now the lawyer opened a briefcase and handed Laddie a summons. “We’re asking for fifty per cent of your earnings, Mr. Wells. Under the circumstances, I think that the court will agree.”

Laddie stood up and he looked straight into Porter O’Brien’s pig eyes. He picked up the summons, and walked out of the bar.

On Friday evening at a quarter of six o’clock I told a kindly-faced old man, sitting behind a screen of glass, that I wished to see Mr. Laddie Wells. The old man promptly telephoned Laddie’s office to find out if he knew such a person as I. Shortly after this, the old man wrote my name and the hour on a slip of blue paper and handed me the slip. An electrically operated glass door opened in the wall.

Inside the studio people were moving across a grassy courtyard crisscrossed with sidewalks, going home: a pale, bald man, wearing a sport shirt, who carried a blue-bound script and *The New Yorker*; a peroxidized girl in slacks; a secretary, carrying *The Ladies Home Journal*; a dwarflike man, reading a racing form.

You heard the tack-tack-tick of typewriters, still; and you heard a grand piano somewhere, giving out the “Moonlight

Sonata" in blues; and you heard the roar of a great truck backing up. I followed a sidewalk, leading under an iron trellis, that was covered with odorless yellow California roses. I ran into a policeman, to whom I showed the blue slip of paper; I moved on.

Laddie's office was in the "front office" building, a three story Spanish style structure, the color of pink lemonade. This was the nerve center of Worldwide Pictures. On the stair landing there was a window that had Moses Lehman's portrait, worked out in stained glass: old Moses, the deposed founder of Worldwide, who at eighty-four lived on in a Norman castle on Doheny with trained nurses to tend his artificial bowels.

Laddie's office on the second floor of this building was one of four smaller offices, flanking the office of Mark Harris. You heard that Mark Harris' had a kitchenette, a steam bath in the bathroom, and a game room with a real roulette wheel, where Mark Harris tried to win money from himself. I never got inside, so I couldn't swear to this. At any rate, Mark Harris was one of those fabled old-time producers, still going strong after twenty-four years in the business, the real McCoy.

Scott Fitzgerald had written that you can either take Hollywood for granted or dismiss it with the contempt you reserve for that which you don't understand. I don't pretend to understand Hollywood. But it's not a Detroit where they manufacture motion pictures instead of automobiles. And it's not the phoniest place in the world, as the highbrows prefer to think. And it's not a hive of sin and vice, any more than New Orleans, or San Francisco, or New York. On the other hand, it's no typical American city, where people like the boy and girl next door eat apple pie and make their livings as movie stars. The industry publicists hatched up this one, a couple

of years ago, when two prominent actors were being tried for rape.

I don't understand Hollywood; and the best chance I ever had to try to understand it was to have got to know Mark Harris, who was a great man there. Unfortunately I never did; although I suppose I could have got to know him through Laddie, who had come to Hollywood five years before as his assistant, and had become his man Friday, his protégé, a sort of professional son.

They had met in England during the war. Colonel Mark Harris was in charge of an army motion picture unit operating near London. Laddie Wells, a private, wounded in the skull in the battle of Rapido River, was a convalescent in a great country house in Salisbury. Laddie Wells's nurse had been once married to a British director and had known Mark Harris before the war. After the nurse introduced them, Mark Harris managed to have Laddie Wells transferred to his unit. Laddie Wells had had no previous experience in pictures. He had had two years as a scholarship student at Harvard, where he had majored in English, and he had quit Harvard before he was drafted and had worked as a stage hand for two Broadway shows. After the war, a couple of months after he married Angelica, Laddie Wells got in touch with Mark Harris, who gave him the job in Hollywood.

To get to Laddie Wells's office you had to pass through Miss Shrewsbury's, his secretary's. Miss Shrewsbury, a fortyish old maid, wore glasses with bright green horn rims. She was accustomed to men who kidded her along, and she had had a hard time getting to know Laddie. When she finally attributed his aloofness to being German and his stylish clothes to coming from New York, she liked him fine. She had come to believe

that he was destined for great things at the studio. I did not have to spend much time with Miss Shrewsbury. Laddie had said that I was to come on in.

His office was a room twelve by fourteen feet, furnished with a standard brown metal desk, two worn leather chairs, an old leather sofa, and three olive-drab filing cabinets. There were photographs of Angelica and Little Florence in leather frames.

"Hello there," Laddie said, rising from behind the desk. He had his coat off, and the coat hung on a rack that stood in the corner to the right of a large engagement calendar on the wall. He was wearing one of his monogrammed shirts, which had damp half moons under the arms.

"Was in your neighborhood," I said. "Thought I'd drop by."

"Ja." He took out the comb from his trouser pocket and ran it through his hair.

The phone rang. Laddie stalled a writer, who wanted to have a conference with Mark Harris after they saw the rushes. No sooner had he hung up than it rang again. Now the head of the publicity department wanted to know if he thought *Life* would be interested in *The Treasure*, Mark Harris' new picture. "Ja, ja. As a matter of fact, a man from *Life's* in my office this minute," Laddie said, winking. He hung up.

"Working late tonight," Laddie told me. "Mark's got to look at the rushes in a few minutes. It's been like this all day."

The phone rang. This time a small-time agent wanted Laddie to put in a good word about a redheaded actor who could sing, ride, and shoot like Autry, swim like Weismuller — this kid's a strawberry Valentino. "Ja, ja," Laddie said; then he hung up.

"Next year I won't have to answer all these calls. Next year I'll be a producer myself," Laddie said.

A door opened to the right of Laddie's desk. A muscular old man, wearing a tan felt hat with the brim rolled up, walked into the office, chewing gum. The old man's face looked brown and lined like alligator hide.

"You ready?" the old man said, speaking around his wad of gum.

"I'm ready," Laddie said, reaching for his coat. After he had put on the coat, he introduced me to Mark Harris, who had made *Love and War*, and *The Charge to Glory*, and *Blue Street*.

"Friend?" Mark Harris said, nodding toward me.

"Ja, a friend," Laddie said. They moved toward the doorway. "I'll be in the projection room half an hour. Will you wait?"

"I'll wait," I said.

Laddie paused ten seconds to speak a few words to Miss Shrewsbury, then followed in Mark Harris' footsteps down the corridor. Miss Shrewsbury, listening to the thump-tap thump-tap of their shoes on tiles, looked through the opened door at me and smiled. He was a young man on the way up.

They stayed in the projection room for forty-five minutes. When Laddie came back, I heard an account of the meeting with Porter O'Brien. I remember he was standing at the window, looking out over those great barnlike sound stages, facing Lehman Street. The sky had turned the color of muddied spring water, and a full moon was shining like a silver dollar. Far off a shooting star was going to fall in the San Fernando Valley among those ranch-style houses of the station-wagon set. When he finished talking, he swallowed a couple of times, as though his throat felt swollen and dry.

He turned toward me and he said: "By the way your detective's been hanging around my place at the beach. Last night there were two of them hanging around."

"Two of them?"

"The man in the fedora, your detective, was there till about twelve, then about one another came, a man with coal-black hair, wearing a T-shirt."

"Have you seen Carol?"

"No."

"You ought to stay clear of her till things quiet down."

"Ja," Laddie said.

I invited Laddie to have dinner with me, but he said that he didn't feel like having dinner with anybody. He had spent the last three evenings holed up in his place at the beach. He read magazines, he drank beers, he listened to the news, or, perhaps, he just lay thinking on his bed.

The Porter O'Briens flew back to Miro on Saturday, Angelica stayed on alone in Beverly Hills.

ONE NIGHT ABOUT THIS TIME CULVERS HAD gone to bed at eleven; and Carol, who had been having bad nights, had been given a shot by the nurse to make her sleep. Around one o'clock this night the shot's effect wore off. Carol insisted on going downstairs to the office. Wearing skimpy blue silk pajamas and sloppy fur mules, she hobbled through the darkened house, followed by the nurse, who kept begging her to come back to bed.

It was a typical "bad night." Tommy Meek, the night secretary, had prepared a plate of little ham sandwiches in the kitchen; and Carol, having sent the nurse off on an unnecessary errand, had sneaked out a bottle of gin from Butch Murphy's desk drawer, like a child snitching a piece of chocolate candy. Carol proceeded to get drunk on straight gin. Half an hour later she had started to babble about her husband's money and power and brilliant mind, her head wobbling like a doll's with a broken neck.

"I wanna talk to Gladys," Carol said, suddenly. "Get Mrs. Hendrix on the telephone for me."

"It's very late, Mrs. Culvers," Tommy Meek said.

"Do what I say, damn you!"

While Tommy Meek dialed Gladys Hendrix's number, Carol remembered that Gladys Hendrix was spending the

week in Laguna with her mother. "Oh, Gladys's not in town, for crissake," Carol said.

Now Tommy Meek, a slight, weak-faced blond young man with an habitual expression of pain, worshiped Carol, and defended her behavior to the other employees. Both Tommy and the nurse suspected her unhappiness, married to the "old" man; and so, on bad nights they ignored her rudeness to them.

"Wouldn't you like a little coffee?" Tommy Meek said.

"It'll keep her awake," the nurse said, quickly.

"See, Tommy, I can't ever 'ave anything I want," Carol said.

And thus they sat, passing the hours of the early morning, when at around a quarter of three the telephone rang.

Now Carol had been cautioned by Culvers that a lady in her position ought never to answer her own telephone. Any number of cranks, crackpots, and undesirables might be calling the house; and besides, it simply wasn't the thing to do.

When Carol was drunk, she answered it always; and one of the problems of a "bad night" was keeping her away from the phone. This night when Vera Leonard, a small-time movie columnist, telephoned Culvers' house, Carol snatched the receiver, eager to talk.

"Is Mrs. Culvers there by any chance," Vera Leonard said.

"Why yes," Carol said, "I think she's here."

"Then I would like to speak to her, if you please."

"This — this — this is her," Carol said, one hand moving to primp her platinum curls.

"Oh, Mrs. *Culvers* — "

"Yeah?"

"This is Vera Leonard, the columnist."

"How are you today?" Carol said.

"I'm very well, thank you. And you?"

“Grand. Just grand, Miss Leonard. Are — are you comin’ to the party?”

“Well, no. As yet I haven’t been invited. You see — ”

“You’re invited, Miss Leonard. I’m goin’ t’ kill that bitch of a secretary for not inviting you. Who does that bitch think she is?”

“Why thank you, Mrs. Culvers,” Vera Leonard said.

“Think nothing of it, honey. And bring your husband too.”

“I don’t have a husband.”

“Then bring your boy-friend, sweetie. I’m sure a pretty columnist like you has a boy-friend.”

Vera Leonard laughed, then she got down to business.

“Mrs. Culvers, whether you know it or not, you’ve become big news out here. Everybody’s heard about your parties, and everybody wants to know about you. You’ve become one of the most talked about party givers on the coast, right up there where Atwater Kent used to be, and Marion Davies.”

“Oh, that’s very sweet of you, honey,” Carol said, starting to giggle, her head toppling against the back of the chair.

“Did you used to dream of becoming a great hostess, Mrs. Culvers?”

“What’s that? Oh, yes, yes, yes,” Carol mumbled, “— dreamed night and day.”

“Did you give parties when you were a little girl?”

“I had a birthday party when I was five. Children came and rode a Shetland pony and had ice cream and cake. But it was all my daddy’s doings.”

“What did your father do, Mrs. Culvers?”

“Electrician. That’s how he died — he got fried up on a pole. And then Sweetheart — that’s my mother — got married again and we moved away to Chicago.”

"Now that's very interesting, Mrs. Culvers," Vera Leonard said. "You know my column runs in forty-two papers."

"Why — why that's just grand, honey," Carol mumbled, closing her tired blue eyes against the glare of the office's fluorescent light.

"Tell me, Mrs. Culvers, where did you meet your husband?"

"Guess," Carol said.

"Why, I have no idea," Vera Leonard said.

"Guess. Where would you guess I met him?"

"I couldn't guess in a thousand years."

Carol started to giggle again. "Well, I'll tell you. I was buyin' an ice-cream cone in a drugstore, and this nasty old man walks up and wants to give me a piece of candy. The old man turns out to be Clarence Culvers, the millionaire."

"Really?"

"Cross my heart," Carol said, but crossing her fingers for Tommy Meek and the nurse.

"Then you knew Mr. Culvers for some time before you were married?"

"I knew him long enough — the old goat."

"How old were you when you met Mr. Culvers?"

"Fifteen, sixteen, thirteen, twelve. Christ, I dunno how old I was. It was a long time ago."

"*Thirteen!*"

"I was old enough, if that's what you're getting at," Carol said. "What's wrong with thirteen? Girl in South America had a baby when she was five, didn't she, for crissake?"

Suddenly Tommy Meek walked over and bent over her trying to take away the receiver. Carol slapped his hand.

"What — what else do you wanna know?" Carol said, her head swinging in a circle.

"Oh, that's quite enough, Mrs. Culvers. I — I hope I didn't wake you up."

"Why no indeed, honey. As a matter of fact, we were just sitting down to supper." Then Carol's head drooped, and she dropped the receiver, and her body sprawled in the chair.

"Mrs. Culvers! Mrs. Culvers!" the dangling receiver cried.

"Who was that?" Tommy Meek asked, placing the receiver on the hook.

"Some half-ass reporter," Carol mumbled.

"Reporter?"

"No, no, no, darlin'. That was just my friend Dolores, actin' silly," Carol said, rising, then falling back in the chair. "I feel like dancin', honey. Help me up, honey. I wanna dance."

"It's late, lamb," the nurse said, moving toward Carol. "Let's go upstairs and get some sleep, so we'll look pretty tomorrow."

"I wanna dance with Tommy."

"It's past two o'clock in the morning," the nurse said.

"Wanna dance! Wanna dance!"

"We're all worn out, lamb," the nurse said slyly, leading Carol toward the door.

"Wanna dance, wanna dance . . ."

"Come, lamb."

"Wanna dance . . ."

Her voice in the hall sounded fainter and fainter, like a person's voice drifting out to sea; Tommy Meek knew that the "bad night" had ended.

Upstairs in her bedroom Carol was given another shot. Carol fell into a dead sleep, lasting until two o'clock the next afternoon, when the newsboys of Beverly Hills first began to sell the afternoon edition of the *Herald News*. Minutes later

a dozen telephones in the house started to ring; reporters flocked to the house to get comments and statements; and servants scurried into pantries and empty rooms to avoid old Culvers' rage. When Culvers first read the story, he looked as though a boulder had fallen upon his back.

I did not blame old Culvers. Vera Leonard's interview filled three long columns on the feature page; and it made poor Carol a laughingstock on the eve of their costume party. I heard that Carol had gone to pieces, and that the fabulous party had been called off. Half of what I had heard was actually true.

The afternoon that the story broke, Carol's room was kept darkened. Carol lay in bed, damp with perspiration and tears, staring at the nurse. The nurse sat nearby, filing her nails in the glow that penetrated the blue venetian blinds. Carol refused to eat anything, and refused to get out of bed, and just lay there, never wanting to face the world again. . . .

No one knows what Culvers said to her. Late that afternoon Culvers lumbered into her bedroom, sat down on the side of the bed, and ordered the nurse to leave. Perhaps Culvers said to Carol what he often said to his men: that you could judge a man by how he acted when he was down. Or perhaps he simply spoke to her as though she were some child. The nurse, wandering in the upstairs hall, only heard: "Nothing they say or do can ever hurt us, do you understand?"

At any rate, when the nurse returned to the room, Carol had got out of bed. Carol sat before her long-mirrored dressing table humming "Deep Purple," brushing her hair.

I learned all this much later from Butch Murphy, who, in turn, had wormed it out of the nurse. Butch Murphy, a jealous woman, now realized that Carol hated her. Sensing that a de-

cline of her power had set in, Butch Murphy tried to poison the minds of the other servants, and of anyone else who would listen, against Carol. I do not mean that that big bull of a woman sat at her desk blurting out things; she did not. She went about her vengeful business stealthily, sniffing, backtracking, circling, feeling you out, like some large cunning animal stalking prey.

For instance, I telephoned Culvers' house shortly after the Vera Leonard interview appeared, to complain that Culvers had broken his promise to me. Culvers had promised that they would not give out stories or interviews to other publications until after the story came out in *Life*. Butch Murphy said: "Now don't be too hard on Mr. Culvers. It's not *his* fault."

"Then whose fault is it?" I said.

She would not answer this. I pictured her smiling surreptitiously into the receiver.

"Well, can you arrange for me to see Mr. Culvers? I would like to see Mr. Culvers," I said.

"Sure, I can fix it up," Butch Murphy said. "Why don't you come here this afternoon?"

"Could Mr. Culvers see me at three o'clock?"

"Three o'clock would be fine," she said.

I never did manage to see Culvers that afternoon. I waited almost three hours in the office with Butch Murphy. Later, I learned that the Culverses would see no member of the press before the night of the costume party. Butch Murphy had tricked me into coming there.

Butch Murphy's relationship with Carol Culvers began years ago, the day after Culvers met the girl. Butch Murphy sat typing letters on a card table set up in Culvers' suite at the

Bel-Air hotel, when at around three o'clock a woman, who gave her name as "Carol Clayton's mother," telephoned there.

"What is it you want with Mr. Culvers?"

"Who're you?" the mother said.

"I'm his secretary."

"Oh," the woman sighed. "Just tell Mr. Culvers that the roses he sent my baby are so beautiful that I wanted to call and thank him."

"All right, I'll tell him."

"When will Mr. Culvers be in?"

"I'm not accustomed to asking Mr. Culvers his habits," Butch Murphy said coldly.

"Well, thank Mr. Culvers for me," the woman said, "and please tell him that Carol Clayton's mother said that he's welcome to drop by, any time he's in our neighborhood."

Butch Murphy gave Culvers the woman's message. Culvers visited Marie Vadnum, the mother, that same afternoon. During the next two weeks Culvers visited the mother frequently. Culvers ordered two dozen white roses to be delivered to the girl's apartment each day, and he sent the mother boxes of candy and baskets of fruit. When one evening the mother came out to dine with Culvers at his hotel, they sat at a corner table in the dining room, speaking in low tones, touching their food hardly at all. When Butch Murphy approached, they stopped speaking; and they did not speak until after she had gone. They reminded Butch Murphy of two persons working out a tricky business deal.

One afternoon Culvers asked Butch Murphy to accompany him to a jeweler's in Beverly Hills. "I want you to help me pick out a present for a young lady," Culvers said, upon arriving there. Without asking questions Butch Murphy started

to browse around the store. Finally, she asked Culvers to take a look at a certain large star sapphire ring. "Do you really like it?" Culvers said. Butch Murphy said that it was the handsomest ring she had ever seen. Culvers took the ring from its turquoise satin box and he ordered Butch Murphy to hold out a finger. When he had slipped the ring on her finger, he said, "It's for you, Miss Murphy. I'm going to need your help in a few weeks. I want you to know how much I'm depending on you."

"Why Mr. Culvers!" Butch Murphy cried, "I couldn't accept this!"

"Of course, you can accept it. I'm going to count on you," Culvers said. "I'm going to need your help."

Later that afternoon Culvers' limousine drove to a street of pastel apartment houses off the Sunset Strip, and it stopped before one of these houses, an apple-green colonial-style building that had violet plantation shutters. Culvers walked inside, pressed a buzzer, and was admitted to one of the apartments. Culvers had gone to see the mother of the girl.

The sun went down and the palm trees became graceful silhouettes against a pearl-gray sky; and at the top of the street a sign advertising Nutburgers lighted up, orange, and fuchsia, and red. Still Culvers did not come out. Butch Murphy, however, was unaware of the passing of time. She sat on the rear seat of the limousine, feeling her star sapphire, pressing it against her cheek, taking it off, trying it on other fingers. She still could not believe the ring was hers. Suddenly another automobile pulled up behind the limousine and stopped. Butch Murphy looked out from the rear. She could make out the figure of a young man behind the wheel of a convertible, and beside him a girl with platinum hair — a movie

star, Butch Murphy thought; and so she watched the couple with interest and listened. The young man's hands still clutched the wheel, as though he were waiting for the girl to get out.

"Are we going out tonight?" the girl said.

"If you still want to go out," the young man answered.

"You know I want to be with you."

"Please, let's not quarrel then."

The girl turned in the seat of the convertible, facing the young man.

"If you leave me, I'm going to kill myself," she said.

"Don't talk silly."

"Why won't you tell me, darling?"

"For the hundredth time let's not talk about it any more."

"Somebody's told you something, haven't they?"

"I didn't say that."

"Somebody's told you something. What lies did they tell you, my darling? What did they say?"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

"Somebody's told you something and you're going away."

The platinum-haired girl started to cry. She leaned her head against the back of the seat, and as she cried her breasts heaved as though she were about to die. The young man started the motor of the car.

"If you're going to act this way, I'd rather not go out. I want to remember you like you were the night at the dance," he said, looking into her eyes.

The girl wiped her eyes with her fingers; then she opened the car door.

"I'm not going to talk about it any more," she said, stepping out of the car. "But if you leave, I don't want to live any more. I know somebody's told you something."

"I'll pick you up at seven-thirty," the young man said. The convertible backed up, then drove off down the darkened palm-lined street. The girl, standing on the curb, watched until the car was out of sight, then she moved slowly toward her apartment house, her shoulders drooping as though nothing else in the world could interest her. Halfway to the door, she paused, looking up at dimly lighted windows toward the right. There was a faint evening breeze and the white rayon curtains blew into the room like nets for catching butterflies.

This was the first time that Butch Murphy eavesdropped on one of Carol's conversations; it was not to be the last time. After the young man went away, Culvers bought Carol Clayton's contract from her studio, and made plans to set up a production company with Carol as his star.

As I said, that November Culvers sent Carol off to Mexico City with Marie Vadnum and Butch Murphy. Culvers depended on Butch Murphy to be his eyes and ears down there.

I have never heard what went on down in Mexico. It must have been pretty awful with Culvers' watchdog living and sleeping in an adjoining hotel room, reporting over the telephone everything that Carol did and said. I do not believe that Carol could have killed herself if she had wanted to.

I sat in the office at Culvers' house nearly three hours that afternoon, while Butch Murphy talked. Every twenty minutes or so Butch Murphy would buzz upstairs to deceive me into thinking that she was trying to arrange a meeting with Culvers. And workmen would walk in, carrying forms to be signed. One of the workmen said that they would have to tear down a section of the brick wall along Cove Way in order to move the merry-go-round onto the lawns. Butch Murphy told them to go ahead; the wall could be built back again after the party.

A champagne salesman, who bore remarkable resemblance to the late Kaiser, passed with great dignity through the office into the house.

"In the old days, he was a prince," Butch Murphy said, twisting Culvers' star sapphire on her fat knotty third finger. "The prince was a real big-shot in that country where Joseph's from. Now the prince lives in two rooms over a barbecue joint on La Cienega. Joseph gets very nervous whenever the man comes here to sell us champagne. Calls him Your Royal Highness."

"Let me have a look at the ring," I said.

As Butch Murphy extended her hand, Carol's nurse, going off duty, walked into the office, wearing a white straw hat with cloth daisies. The nurse said, "Hello," then she set down a small black suitcase and straightened her skirt.

"Well, honey," the nurse said, addressing Butch Murphy, "we got her through the last fitting, and then I gave her another shot. You won't hear a peep out of her until midnight."

Butch Murphy chuckled.

The nurse picked up the suitcase. "Well, I'll be seeing you tomorrow, honey."

"All right, Miss Thornhill. Have a good time at your sister's," Butch Murphy said.

After the nurse had gone, Butch Murphy took off the ring and handed it to me.

"Don't think I haven't earned that ring, Mr. Thayer," she said.

I handed the star sapphire back to her with a complimentary grunt.

"Don't think Mr. Culvers gave it to me for nothing."

"I'm sure you've earned it," I said wearily, rising to leave. Suddenly, my head felt heavy as stone. I didn't want to hear any more.

"Don't you want me to buzz Mr. Culvers one more time?" Butch Murphy said, walking to the door with me.

I walked out of the house, I got into my Chevrolet, and I slammed the car door.

"I'm leaving," I said. "I've heard enough."

There was one other story about Carol Culvers that got around before the party. Several days after my afternoon with Butch Murphy, Culvers' men began to arrive for the meetings. The date set for the meetings had been changed, so that the men could stay over for the party. One evening during the meetings, Carol came downstairs, wearing a mink coat over her panties and bra, and ran out of the house to her car. For several hours she drove through the empty streets of Beverly Hills; then, while driving around, she had to go to the bathroom, and so she stopped the car, got out, and went to the bathroom on a well-known comedian's side lawn. . . .

same crowd, disguised as Fathers of the Republic, danced with beautiful blankfaced pioneer women as peroxidized Confederate spies. And in the floodlighted marble swimming pool hundreds of gardenias floated, red, white, and blue, giving off a rich funeral-like perfume. The two-armed Venus de Milo, draped in white sateen, crowned with rhinestones, had been transformed into the Statue of Liberty. And the tennis courts, decorated with crêpe-paper sagebrush, were prairies; the Japanese tea house, a Wild West saloon.

Only the house itself, this Beverly Hills Mount Vernon, had been left unchanged. Inside, standing on black and white marble squares, the Culverses were receiving as George and Martha Washington. Leamus was getting some extraordinary shots: Martha Washington, sneezing, turning a doll-like face, trying to find a dry spot in a wad of Kleenex; George Washington, beating his chest like the gorilla in the Central Park Zoo; George Washington's cabinet, huddled together, discussing the shake-up in Sweetheart Toilet Tissue; Benjamin Franklin, completely looped, stumbling, then sprawling at Washington's feet, and Washington calling a Negro to haul him away.

It was shortly after this that Culvers was called away to the telephone. "A man named Joe," Butch Murphy had said. Dressed as Molly Pitcher, she had stalked up to Culvers in the receiving line, and her words had brought a frown to the heavy old face, as though something important had gone wrong.

At eleven-fifteen, when Culvers returned, Carol said that this was her birthday party and she wanted to have fun; so the two of us ran off to the party tent. Dancing, Carol's elaborate white wig, more like Marie Antoinette's than Washington's wife's, got knocked lopsided, and one of her trembling hands

raised to straighten it. She had had nothing to drink, and she felt sick with shyness. "I can't — can't tell — tell who any — anybody is, can — can you, Charley?"

"I know a few of them," I said.

The Greek who sunbathed danced by — one of the Lincolns; and nearby sat the Balkan spy, a Harvey Girl in blue and white gingham, forcing black coffee down Lafayette, a well-known dance director, already quite drunk. "It's the Early American drag party of the year!" Lafayette cried, waving a lace handkerchief in our direction.

"Is the wig straight?" Carol asked.

"It's fine," I said, smiling at her.

Then for no apparent reason her mouth twisted in a forced little laugh as though she realized suddenly that she should appear to be enjoying herself.

It was shortly after this that she spotted Laddie Wells, standing in a corner of the tent, watching the party — a lonely figure. He wore his Army khakis, and he had on his overseas cap, cocked to the right on his head. His pink cheeks were flushed deep rose with the excitement of the party, his cool, solemn gray eyes roaming the scene like the lenses of some powerful camera. And for a moment Carol could not take her eyes off him, and she held her breath, and her lips parted. It was as though the earth stood still.

The orchestra played Carol's favorite, "Baby, It's Cold Outside." Carol began to draw quick violent little breaths. "Let's kick!" Carol cried. "Let's be chorus girls, huh?" She started to kick under the sky-blue silk and lace. "Come on, Charley, come on."

"I don't feel like a chorus girl tonight."

"Yes, you do. Come on and kick."

And so we put our arms around each other's waists and we did high kicks. People cleared space for us and stared, and pointed, and laughed: "She used to dance at the Diamond Horseshoe," a woman said.

Later the orchestra played "Bali-Hai" and Carol danced close to me, her cheek burning against mine, her hands quivering, as though her whole body shook. She had not seen Laddie Wells since the Laguna week end. Now as he stood looking at us, she closed her eyes, pressing her body against mine. We danced in slow motion in a tiny circle on the floor.

She was trying to make him jealous. Laddie understood this and smiled — a slight, knowing twist of closed pinkish lips. The smile faded, he shifted his legs, a hand went to the Purple Heart he wore, as though he were feeling a mole.

I was surprised that he had come to this party. Since the evening I went to the studio, we had spoken twice over the telephone. The first time, when I had called to borrow the costume, he had told about Mark Harris having got him a lawyer — Mark Harris' own lawyer. This lawyer was urging him to file for a divorce against Angelica, if necessary, a divorce charging adultery. This seemed the only way of calling Porter O'Brien's cards.

Laddie had not said what he was going to do. His voice had played tricks in his throat, after telling me this, coming out in deep thick croaks, and coming out as though he sat on some other continent. Laddie would have called it spiritual nausea. There is stuff that you can put into liquor which makes the person vomit and puke and never want to taste liquor again. Now it was as though fate had slipped some of this stuff into Laddie's mind.

The second time we spoke he had sounded better. He had

had a talk with Mark Harris, who had advised him to keep away from the "girl." When I asked if he still had Peeping Tom's, he had mumbled something about a pistol on his chiffonier, a .45 that he had bought during the war.

This evening, earlier, Laddie had gone to the Thespians, where he had had a few drinks at the bar. He had spilled part of a drink on his tie, and had gone to the men's room to wash out the liquor spots with cold water. He had returned to the bar and had moved to the last stool, where he wouldn't have to talk to anyone. At about seven-thirty he had walked out of the bar, one hand fumbling in his coat pocket, as though he were hunting for a cigarette. He had stepped into his Chrysler and headed out Sunset Boulevard. He drove to Santa Monica to the beach house he had rented on Ocean Front Road. At around eight o'clock he turned the key in the front-door lock. The cheap little house looked dark as an attic, bare as a chicken coop — bare of ash trays and knickknacks, bare of rugs and occasional tables, bare of any signs of life except for Laddie's own few personal belongings — his Eastern clothes, his books, his boyhood violin; the cheap furniture; a yellowed calendar with a picture of 1949's Miss Rheingold hanging on a kitchen wall. He felt his way into the living room to a lamp, a hideous puce-colored plaster-of-Paris pine cone that stood on a liquor-stained card table, lighting a wine-colored studio couch. He flopped down on the couch, lit a cigarette, stumped out the cigarette in a thick drugstore cup, still sticky from his morning coffee; he stood up and stalked restlessly around the room like some penned-up high-strung foal. He turned on the radio, and a swing band blared out like a thousand trumpets, announcing the end of the world. He turned off the radio. Now you could hear the regular muted roar of the waves, beating against the

beaches like the tides of time. Laddie stood in the center of the room, gazing out at the waves; and the picture window's black plate glass gave back a reflection of himself, standing lone and miserable in the room.

Probably it was at this time that he sat down in the living room, took out his fountain pen, and wrote the suicide note on a sheet of Bond typewriter paper. He must have wandered into the bedroom, and must have thrown himself across its Hollywood bed; because a deep fresh cigarette burn was detected on the imitation red leather headboard near the pillow. Perhaps he fell asleep for a few minutes, his arms stretched across the bed, two fingers clutching a lighted cigarette. And perhaps, feeling better after his brief sleep, he jumped from the bed, dashed into the bathroom, sprinkled cold water on his face. It was probably after this that he decided to go to the Culverses' party. He walked back into the bedroom; he took off his gabardine suit, emptied the contents from his pockets onto the bed. Then, with his German thoroughness, he hung up the suit in the closet, flung his shorts, socks, and shirt across the seat of a chromium-legged chair — they found the clothes crumpled there — the pale monogrammed L. W. above the pocket, still damply cool from perspiration. Stripped, he walked into the bathroom and he showered, and shaved — the wet white towel and hairs in the razor furnished proof of this. From a battered black suitcase, that he had used at Harvard, he took out his Army uniform and dressed, Purple Heart and all. Standing before the chiffonier mirror, he brushed his hair vigorously. A snowfall of dandruff fell around the .45 leaving an outline of the gun.

Now, costumed as the soldier of World War II, Laddie Wells stood near a table of tipsy Pilgrims in a corner of the tent — an observer. . . .

As the orchestra played the last bars of "Bali-Hai," a purple-faced General Grant — a retired successful corset manufacturer from Newark — pushed me aside. "It's my turn, Reb, haw-haw-haw!" General Grant hollered, leading Carol into an awkward, old-fashioned one-step. Poor Carol, already half out of her mind with Laddie's being there, tripped on her lacy skirts and almost fell flat.

"Are you comin' back, Charley?" Carol called, as I shoved my way through the crowd. "Come back, Charley, come back!"

I could not answer her cry; the orchestra suddenly went into a Charleston — it was the year of the Charleston revival — and the crowd went wild. I got knocked sprawling into the bony lap of a teen-aged Lillian Russell, who looked as lean and long-legged as a colt, sitting at her table. "Oh, goodness!" young Miss Russell cried, adjusting her falsies. I scrambled quickly to my feet, removed my gold-braided Stetson, made a sweeping low bow, and moved on.

I took two glasses of champagne from a silver tray, passed around by a Negro waiter dolled up in white satin knee breeches; and just as I started plowing my way across the crowded floor toward Laddie Wells, the champagne glasses high above my head, women began to shriek and scream. An elderly man, costumed as the Republican elephant, rose from his chair in fright, pressing a gray cloth paw to his heart. Bennie Fleishhacker took a long cigar from his mouth, and looking toward the side of the white tent, narrowed his eyes. Mrs. Kafritz Marx, Moses Lehman's daughter, collapsed in a faint as the last of the figures in long flowing gray-white robes and hoods crawled in underneath the side of the tent, carrying ropes and clubs and guns in their hands. Six of them now stood in a line inside the tent, glaring at the crowd like monster

turkey buzzards through their eye-cutouts, their weapons barely moving, their sinister hoods turning right and left, as though they were about to choose a victim.

"Who're they supposed to be?" an ash-blond Pilgrim maid cried, clutching an Indian brave.

"They're the Klan, Arlene, the Ku Klux Klan."

Now the orchestra stopped playing; for an instant the crowd was stunned into silence. You could hear the guitarist, chanting his sad cowboy ballads down at the tennis courts, and you could hear the childlike pipe music of the merry-go-round, and a balloon popping sounded like a far-off cannon. A young woman laughed, shrilly and nervously. A ripple of laughter rose around her, and swelled into a great wave of laughter as the crowd caught on to the Cartwrights' joke. The orchestra leader raised his baton, people danced again.

Two of the Klan joined the dancers on the floor. The other four stood around congratulating themselves on their joke's success. A crowd, staring, whispering, snickering, pointing, gathered before them. Laddie Wells moved from the corner of the tent, one hand in a pocket of his uniform, his gray eyes squinting. He approached the onlookers and he stopped slightly away from them, his chin tilting out, as though trying to get a better look. I pushed across the floor, still carrying the glasses of champagne.

There was a cowboy lurking along the white side of the tent to the right of the four Klansmen. Now the Klansmen had tossed aside their ropes, toy guns, and clubs, and they were laughing. One of them, the tall one, bent forward, laughing hysterically, his hands clutching his thighs.

The cowboy: I don't know why I noticed this man. Perhaps it was his loneliness, contrasting with the Klansmen's

laughter; perhaps it was the mean look on his hard, dark, serious face, deeply wrinkled at thirty-five, as though nature had taken a steak knife and had cruelly sliced his low forehead and around his sad black eyes and around his small hard mouth. The cowboy had a tough lean hipless frame, and underneath a red checked shirt his shoulders hunched like an old man's. His yellow leather chaps had slipped down almost to his groin.

Suddenly the cowboy jerked up his chaps, threw aside two pearl-handled Hopalong Cassidy cap pistols, and drew his smallish hands into fists. He went for the tall large one, Sonny Cartwright. He shot his fist straight into Sonny Cartwright's stomach, knocked the wind out of him. Sonny fell.

The cowboy kicked him in the face, kicked again, kicked a third time, a fourth, a fifth. Sonny Cartwright's large smooth hands tore at his hood. Because of the hood, he could not see to defend himself.

"Help! Why doesn't somebody help him?" a young woman screamed inside her hood. This was probably Jeanie Cartwright. The other two Klansmen had backed to the side of the tent.

The cowboy kicked twice more, before Sonny Cartwright tore away the gray-white hood. The paunchy florid cheeks looked like hamburger meat. Blood streamed from the ski-jump nose; blood oozed from the corners of the mouth; blood colored the cold wide stupid eyes. Blood covered the hands. Blood, blood — the babyfood hair was covered with blood.

Sonny got to his feet, drew the great bloodied hands into fists, and moved toward the cowboy, mumbling, "How'd *you* get out of the gutter . . . ? How'd you get out of the gutter . . . ?" Sonny swung once with his right and knocked the

cowboy stumbling into the crowd. By now the crowd had tripled in size and people were running to the tent from the merry-go-round and from inside the house and from the tennis courts. "How'd you ever get out of the gutter . . . ?" The cowboy did not run. The cowboy took a few steps backward, his nose dripping a trail of dark blood; then, when he seemed to have got his balance, he met Sonny's advance. The cowboy shot his fist into Sonny's pulpy red cheeks. Sonny's right smashed into the dark hardened little face, and knocked the cowboy out cold. The cowboy lay crumpled on the floor. As the crowd started to disband there was a babble of voices, a great rush of feet. A woman screamed.

It all happened so quickly. While Sonny Cartwright stumbled back, wiping blood on the skirts of the Klansman's robe, one of the crowd, a tipsy Indian chief, rushed forward and started to tear at the hood of one of the others, who stood hovering like three ghostly monster birds along the side of the tent. The Indian chief ripped off the hood, revealing the face of Angelica Wells. Angelica's scarlet-painted lips were parted as though she did not know whether to cry out or to laugh, her eyes wide, pitifully, childishly wide and white; her pale skin above the corpse-gray robe, pink as a baby's; her dark hair frowzy; her chest going up and down with short, fast, desperate breaths. Laddie pushed through the crowd. When the Indian chief reeled back at the sight of Laddie's uniform, Laddie grabbed Angelica's hand and they started running along the side of the tent. When they came to an opening to the left of the orchestra, they flew out into the night.

"They oughta be thrown in jail!" the Indian chief shouted.

"Just a joke!" Sonny Cartwright shouted back at him.

"Haven't you ever played a joke? Haven't you ever played a joke before?"

The Indian chief walked away quietly. The orchestra struck up "California, Here I Come"; and people shouted "Yea Cal-i-forn-ya"; and after two policemen arrived on the scene and had a calm, pleasant talk with Sonny Cartwright, the rest of the crowd drifted off to dance, to ride the merry-go-round, to get high on the Culverses' champagne. Four other policemen came, carrying a stretcher, and bore away the body of the mean-faced cowboy.

All this took place shortly after midnight. It was around twelve-thirty when, strolling outside for air, I heard Carol Culvers raving on the slope of the hill between the tent and the merry-go-round, the nurse holding one of her arms, Butch Murphy the other arm, and poor Carol in the Martha Washington costume, twisting, struggling, kicking at them. Somebody had given her something to drink, and she had seen, or had heard about, Laddie Wells leaving the party with his wife.

Carol's face was dead-white and desperate and shiny with her tears. The dark red lipstick had smeared at the corners, as though her mouth bled. The eye shadow had trickled muddily down her cheeks; and her wig had toppled off, showing her platinum hair pinned close to her skull.

"Make them let me go, Charley! Make them let me go!"

I told them to take their hands off her. Butch Murphy glared at me: "What a pity Miss Carol had to go and act like this tonight." Her large bosoms heaved inside the Molly Pitcher costume. She took a deep breath, and she turned and walked away from us, heading toward the house.

The nurse, Miss Thornhill, stooped to pick up the wig.

"I — I don't want to wear that old thing," Carol said softly.

The nurse retrieved the wig, just the same, and stood, brushing grass blades and grit from its white curls.

“Do — do you have a comb and brush?”

“Want me to brush out your hair, Miss Carol?”

“Uh-huh.”

The nurse laid the wig on the grass, next to a small plastic bag that held Carol’s brush, comb, cigarettes, lighter, lipstick, Kleenexes, and powder. During a party the nurse carried this plastic bag, following Carol around. The nurse took out a milk-white plastic brush and a milk-white plastic comb and handed these to me. She started to take out silver bobby pins from Carol’s hair. After the nurse had done this, I handed her the brush and the comb, and she gave the platinum hair forty strokes, standing right there on the dark grassy slope of the hill between the white tent and the merry-go-round in the heaviest traffic of the party. A tipsy Buffalo Bill paused, tried on Carol’s wig, took it off, and moved on.

“My name is inky-doo . . .” Carol mumbled, scratching her forearm.

“I believe Miss Carol’s feeling better,” the nurse said. “Aren’t we feeling better, dear?”

“Uh-huh.”

When the nurse had finished brushing Carol’s hair, she fluffed the curls with the comb, and after she put back the comb and brush into the plastic bag, she gave the curls a few last fluffs with her fingers. “Now we’re pretty as a picture, aren’t we, dear?”

“Why don’t you take that silly old wig into the house?” Carol said.

The nurse glanced at me, saying nothing. The nurse had been given orders not to lose sight of Carol for one second.

"Why don't we go inside, dear," the nurse said, smiling at Carol, "and we'll have some nice little sandwiches."

Carol shook her head. "I'm feelin' grand. I'll stay here."

"I'll stay with her," I said. "We'll wait for you right here."

"Le's go dance, huh, Charley?"

"We'll be in the tent," I said, as Carol took my hand, leading the way up the hill.

"Are you sure we're all right, dear?" the nurse called. The nurse stood there for a few seconds, watching us enter the tent; then the nurse walked away, carrying the wig and the plastic bag.

The crowd inside the tent seemed to have forgotten the fight; one of the Klan rumbaed with a pretty Pilgrim maid. "Le's have some champagne . . . huh, Charley?" Carol said.

"I don't see a waiter," I said, glancing around us.

She knew I didn't want her to have champagne. "I'm all right, Charley, honest," she said, "— honest."

So I pushed my way to a Negro serving champagne to the Republican elephant's table. When I returned with two glasses, Carol had gone.

I flew out of the tent. Miss Thornhill, the nurse, was trotting across the lawns toward the drive. Running, I called to her: "Miss Thornhill; Miss Thornhill!" She turned — I knew that she heard me — but she would not stop. I caught up with her near a group of policemen standing around smoking in the drive. She clutched my arm with both hands, as though to keep from falling.

"Mr. Thayer," she exclaimed, "Mr. Thayer!"

"I left her for just three minutes," I said. "She —"

"Oh, Mr. Thayer, you've got to stop her — you've got to stop her —"

"Where's she gone?"

" — no telling what she'll do to herself like she is. I saw her getting into the blue Cadillac — I called to her — I knew I oughtn't 'ave left her — I knew it was foolin' on her part — Oh, Lord, Mr. Thayer — "

"Fooling what?"

"Foolin' me she was all right — you've got to stop her — for Lord's sake, Mr. Thayer — "

I grabbed Miss Thornhill hard, with a hand on each shoulder, and I shook her. "Stop your damned for-Lord's-sake-ing me. Where's she gone?" I said.

"I don't know — I don't know — oh, you've got to stop — "

"*Where's she gone, Miss Thornhill?*"

"I don't know — to him, I suppose — to him — "

"*To who?*"

"To Mr. Wells — she's crazy about him — somebody's got her believing Mr. Wells's going back to his wife!"

It did not surprise me that the nurse knew; the nurse, who held poor Carol in her arms at night, who read to her and sang to her — yes, the nurse knew Carol loved him.

"She didn't see the fight?"

"She didn't see anything," the nurse said. "I lost sight of Miss Carol for ten or fifteen minutes. I went inside to the ladies' room, and I thought she was riding the merry-go-round. The next thing I knew, Butch Murphy came marching up to me, crossing the lawn, saying Miss Carol had got hold of some liquor and I'd better come quick. When I got to her, she was stumbling crazy-like across the lawn. We tried to get her into the house. . . ."

It was one o'clock when Carol Culvers got into the blue

Cadillac, parked at the rear of the house, and started out for Santa Monica. Culvers had been strolling around alone down by the tennis courts. Joseph had been changing his damp white shirt. The policemen in the drive had paid no attention to the car driving out. Nobody saw her leave, and nobody knew but the nurse and I. As I started running down the drive, the nurse hurried to notify Culvers.

Back at my rooms I lost ten minutes, hunting for the car keys. They had slipped out of the trousers I had worn that day, and fallen behind a chintz cushion. I lost another ten minutes making a call to Laddie's house in Beverly Hills. Angelica answered. No, Laddie wasn't there. He had driven her home, hardly speaking a word. He had said, "Now get out and go to bed." He wouldn't come inside to talk with her or anything. She wanted to know what she was going to do.

Had Laddie said where he was going? No, he had just said quite rudely, "Now get out and go to bed," as though the entire fault of the Klan joke lay with her, as though in a way they really were the Klan. She couldn't understand Laddie, she said; and what was she going to do?

I called Laddie's number in Santa Monica, but there was no answer. I lost another ten minutes in the traffic jam on Cove Way — cars still moved like a procession of ants toward Culvers' gates. When I started out Sunset Boulevard, it was two o'clock and it was a twenty minutes' drive to Laddie's house on Ocean Front Road.

The "Suicide," as the newspapers called it, took place at around half past one, shortly after Carol Culvers in her Martha Washington getup arrived at the house.

George Martin, who had been Angelica's lover, was the only witness to what happened. During the three weeks previ-

ous to this he had prowled around the cheap little house at night, peeping in through windows at Laddie Wells. He had done this out of a curiosity about Angelica's husband, although Angelica had terminated their affair three months before. And he had hung around the house because three weeks ago, taking a midnight stroll, he had seen a beautiful platinum blonde — Carol Culvers — enter Laddie Wells's house. He had sneaked to the bedroom window, and he had watched two forms in the darkness, making love. Yes, George Martin was a Peeping Tom; there were a good many other awful things about him, but the peeping was the only thing that ever paid off. . . .

This night, September third, George Martin, who lived only a half mile down Ocean Front Road, had followed a college girl whose convertible had had a flat near the Dolans'. He was trailing her, walking toward an Esso station, when he noticed the blue Cadillac parked in front of Laddie Wells's house — the Cadillac of the platinum blonde. He gave up following the college girl; and he stole to Laddie Wells's bedroom window to watch.

Inside the tiny pine-walled bedroom one electric globe in a wall fixture near the doorway glowed orange. Everything looked shadowy, and still, and serious, to George Martin, as in a whorehouse — or a church. Laddie Wells in his uniform sat on the edge of a Hollywood bed, his head slightly bowed, his hands crumpling a sheet of white paper into a ball. The platinum blonde, in her hoop skirt, stood near the foot of the bed, listening as Laddie Wells spoke: "Know what this paper was?"

Carol Culvers shook her head. Color had risen in her pink-white cheeks and something about the way her head moved hinted that her eyes were teary, her throat too dry to speak.

Laddie Wells juggled the wad of paper, as though it were a tennis ball. "This was a suicide letter," he said. "Four hours ago I was going to give up the ship. You don't believe me?" He tossed the wad of paper to her. She did not catch it, and she stooped, and picked it from the floor, and uncrumpled it to read what was written. Still sitting on the side of the bed, his fingers squeezing creases in the sleazy red bedspread, Laddie Wells went on speaking to her as she read the letter: "Friend of my father's in Berlin — well-known composer over there — Jewish — heard Hitler's police walking up the stairs of his house — was sitting on the toilet in his bathroom — glass of water in one hand — fistful of sleeping tablets in the other — and couldn't do it. We got word later that they were using him for kidney experiments. *Ja* — he just couldn't do it. Well, I went as far as composing a letter. . . ."

Hearing this, George Martin was shocked; at thirty Laddie Wells had a house in Beverly Hills, wore classy clothes, had a swell job in pictures, got his name mentioned in the columns. It was inconceivable to George Martin that such a well-off young man had thought of suicide. Through the dirty windowpane, he stared at Laddie Wells hard.

Perhaps, George Martin thought, something was the matter with his Thing. A commander he had known, who had acted as a sort of father-confessor aboard his ship, settler of everybody else's problems, had swallowed a bottle of rat poison. The gossip aboard the ship had had it that something had been wrong with his Thing. The commander and Laddie Wells, George Martin thought, remembering what Angelica had said about her husband, were two of a kind: talkers, figurers, pretty damned certain about what everything in life was worth. Something's wrong with his Thing, George

Martin told himself; it is as simple as one, two, three.

The well-off young man, who earlier had held thoughts of suicide, looked straight above George Martin's black hair into the night sky, his old-man's eyes hard as lead slugs, sad as a hound's. The commander had had old-man's eyes at times, as though he had lived too much alone. Now Laddie Wells's eyes stared out at the moon, fat, round, juicy as a cheesecake in the sky. Then Laddie Wells's eyes returned to earth again, to the boxlike bedroom, roaming over a child's doll that sat atop a stack of books beside the bed; pausing at a violin case on a card table; pausing at a beat-up old black suitcase, pasted with faded red Harvard stickers, that lay opened on the floor before him; his eyes finally getting around to the beautiful blonde, whose platinum hair glittered brighter than any hair George Martin had ever seen.

“. . . the important thing about life is sticking it out,” Laddie Wells was saying. “That’s what I want on my tombstone: Laddie Wells—He Stuck It Out. And some day, Carol, that’s what people will say about you. The greatest thing about Carol Culvers, they’ll say, was that she stuck it out with the old man — she stuck it out.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Carol let the wrinkled paper float like an autumn leaf to the floor. “I don’t care about sticking anything out — all I care about is you — I want to be with you — I wanna do everything with you — I’ll take dope with you — steal with you — I wanna run away with you — I don’t care what happens long as I’m with you — ”

“You’re talking like some histrionic shopgirl,” Laddie frowned, his mouth set, as though he wished to be rid of such a person.

"I don't wanna go on livin', Laddie, I love you so much — if I can't live with you —"

"I can't run away," Laddie Wells said. "I couldn't run away the last time. You don't understand." His eyes moved back to the violin case across the room.

"I don't care if we don't have any money, Laddie —"

"It isn't not having money," Laddie Wells said, "it's the running away. You don't understand." His fingers began to twist his gold wedding band. Carol Culvers' moist blue eyes fixed themselves on his ring.

"You're going back to her, aren't you!"

Laddie Wells rose from the bed and started to walk around the small shadowy bedroom, his hands in his pockets, his eyes gazing down at his brown shoes.

"You love her! You love her! You're going back to her!"

Laddie Wells still said nothing. He moved into the glow of the orange globe. At this moment his boyish face looked old and tired. There were no lines, there was no paunchiness. The face looked old as all boy-faced men come to look old; masklike, but the skin stretched like rotten elastic around the eyes; choirboy-ish cheeks, but the forehead lined like a street urchin's; fresh young lips, as though just having licked a strawberry sucker, but two hard creases at the mouth's corners, like a whore's. "I don't know what's going to happen — I'll make out — I'm lucky —" Laddie Wells was saying.

"You're goin' back to her!" Carol's eyes swept frantically in a semicircle before her, like two flashlights, searching for an object in the dark. Her eyes stopped at the chiffonier. She spotted the .45.

Thirty seconds later she rushed to a corner of the bedroom, waving the pistol's muzzle near her skull.

Laddie Wells darted across to her. He managed to get a hold on the pistol; but her fingers were strong. Her index finger was but a tenth of an inch from the tiny steel trigger. Slowly, Laddie Wells forced down the pistol in an arc from her skull to her breasts. "Let go, you silly —"

"I wanna die, I wanna die," she moaned.

Laddie Wells twisted her wrist. The muzzle which had pointed toward her now pointed toward his stomach. George Martin at the window saw three little spurts of yellow fire, littler than a firecracker's, flame from the muzzle of the gun.

As Laddie Wells fell, the pistol dropped from her fingers; and her lips parted, as though she wanted to cry out and couldn't. For half a moment she stood swaying over his body; her right hand, which had held the gun, burrowing into the blue silk of the hoop skirt; her left hand pressed over an ear, as though trying to shut out the echoes.

The staccato reports came back three times from the Pacific, muted and dragged out, as though they had traveled round the world. George Martin had seen an Indian movie the night before: the Indians had lost the battle and you heard echoes of three last shots from somewhere off in the hills. It was like the Indians, he thought.

Laddie Wells lay on his back, his arms stretched out behind his head, one knee slightly raised, one cheek to the floor. At first he looked like a man who had just passed out. Then George Martin saw the three spots of blood on his khaki trousers, little spots at first, no bigger than ringworms, then larger and larger spots until the entire area of khaki below the belt to the thighs was soaked red.

George Martin watched Carol Culvers flee from the bedroom. Seconds later Culvers' black Cadillac pulled up before the house.

At two-thirty in the morning, driving down Ocean Front Road, still some distance away, I saw the searchlights atop police cars, the dozen or so automobiles, and the crowd gathered in front of Laddie's rented beach house, and I slowed down. Some of the people were in pajamas and dressing gowns, and two were in 1920's costumes, on their way home from the Culverses' party.

"Man shot himself," a man called to a slowing taxicab. "His girl was in the bedroom with him."

Although dozens upon dozens of tales piled up, this explanation of what happened September third came to be accepted by a majority. One week later the Santa Monica district attorney had dropped his investigation of the case.

LADDIE WELLS DIDN'T DIE THERE IN THE cheap little beach house at the foot of a Hollywood bed. He lingered on for quite a while, for four days, to be exact, and died in a white ether-smelling hospital room graced with a crucifix. For four days an army of reporters there sweated it out.

Life planned to throw in the Culvers story with the story of "the suicide." What was to have been a "*Life Goes to a Party*" would become "Suicide in Beverly Hills — Young Producer Interrupts Millionaire's Ambitions with Suicide," a juicy, five-page spread. The spread was scheduled as the big news story of an issue appearing in seven days, if he died. The office was predicting the story would bring me a raise.

The press waited; Culvers waited. The merry-go-round had been hauled away; but the marquee still stood, five hundred dew-drenched flags fluttering from its sides, giving it the appearance of some tomb-shaped feathered creature from Mars. And a hundred dozen dead gardenias filled the swimming pool. Days later Culvers' place still looked like the morning after. Lest cleaner-uppers should turn out to be clever newspapermen, he had ordered that nothing was to be done.

Two private policemen stood guard at Culvers' drive, and

they had orders that no one was to enter, not even delivery boys. Two policemen tramped over broken glass and garbage, patrolling the grounds. Two policemen sat under the columned portico in front.

The newspapers printed that Carol Culvers had gone to pieces. I heard that Miss Thornhill, the nurse, sat beside the bed in the twilight of closed venetian blinds, and that Flanagan, the ex-trombone player, sat in the upstairs hall guarding her bedroom door. Culvers kept someone with Carol night and day. The telephone was removed from her room, and her razor, and her pearl-handled fruit knife, and her diamond clips and brooches, and straight pins and safety pins. Most of the time Carol lay stretched out in a drugged rose haze.

Downstairs the phones rang every two minutes. Reporters and columnists wanted statements, and anonymous persons shouted, "Murderer, murderer," then hung up. Old Culvers stalked through the hushed glittery rooms, waiting for Laddie Wells to die. When he died, they would close up the place and go away for awhile.

It was on the third day that I drove out to the hospital in Santa Monica. By this time the O'Briens had flown out from Miro; and Laddie's parents had arrived from New York. A Sister, hurrying across the foyer, told me that Laddie was recovering from the operation nicely. But when I walked into the waiting room and looked at the faces there, I knew that he was finished.

His parents, the Wellbachs, who owned some small dry-goods store in Yorkville, sat primly in stiff maple chairs, their colorless lips fixed in grim straight lines. His mother had iron-gray hair, parted in the center and brought around into a plaited bun. She wore no make-up, and she had on an old

black felt hat and heavy black shoes. His father, who had the foreign blood, was smaller than the mother, and wore pince-nez and a tight-fitting prissy little black suit. The father had owned a small bookstore back in Germany; it was the mother who managed the dry-goods store in Yorkville. Their son had met important people during the war, and after the war he had changed his name and had gone far. Once in a while their son had telephoned them from California, and he had bragged about his pink house, his important job, his fine life out there.

The O'Briens sat on the opposite side of the waiting room on a green chintz sofa. Mrs. O'Brien stared at Mrs. Wellbach's shoes; Porter O'Brien sat, looking at a pot of sanseveria on the window sill, picking his nose. Angelica, sitting between them, was swallowing, as though she had a dry throat. When I walked in, Angelica stirred; the O'Briens hardly looked up. Mrs. O'Brien placed a white-gloved hand on Angelica's knee. Angelica sat back, and started to nibble at her nails. Mrs. O'Brien stopped this.

I had told the Sister to tell Laddie that I was here. Shortly after I had sat down in the waiting room, the Sister came, saying that he wished to see me.

When I saw Laddie, he looked pretty bad. The skin sagged under his chin, and flesh had fallen away from his young-old face, giving him Mr. Wellbach's sparrow look. The flush had faded from his cheeks, as though all along it had been nothing but rouge and paint. His old-penny eyes, staring up at the crucifix of Angelica's church, looked as old as Rome.

As I moved into the room, his eyes rolled toward me slowly, and his grayish lips twisted in a kind of smile. It was the same peculiar kind of smile that he had given me five years before at the O'Briens' cocktail party in Miro; the smile that said, We

know, but they don't *know*, do they, Charley-boy? The smile that told of a secret understanding, like a sign passed between two members of a club. I returned his smile, and I walked over close to the white bed and patted his feverish hand. When he spoke, his words came out just above a whisper: "We finally got together, didn't we, Charley-boy?"

"You bet we did," I said, forcing a smile. I took his burning hand in my own and held it.

"Friends — they're the most important thing, aren't they, Charley-boy?"

"Sure, they are, Laddie," I said. I didn't know whether I believed this or not, but I said it; and my throat started to get choked and dry, and my eyes began to feel moist and warm and my heart, well, I would have taken it out of my body at that moment and handed it to him.

The muscles of his mouth gave, and his jaw dropped. His face looked old and long and sad and tired, as though he had given up. Then his eyes looked directly into mine, and he spoke again: "You don't believe what I said about friends."

"Sure I believe it, Laddie. Sure I believe."

"Friends — you don't believe about friends, now, but you will, Charley-boy."

"I believe," I said, laughing a little, using my free hand to wipe a tear. From his window you could see the Goodyear blimp, blindingly silver, creeping toward us above the blue-green-blue of the Pacific. It was creeping toward us, as surely as death comes, across a September sun yellow as daffodils. Now he moved his hand in mine.

"Carol — she's a good scout, Charley-boy. She's fond of you."

"I'm fond of her, Laddie. I really am fond of her," I said.

It was then that the nurse walked over to the bed, warning me with a frown, that I had better leave. I laid Laddie's hand alongside his slender body under the sheet and stepped back from the bed.

"So long, Charley-boy," he whispered. "I must have a bit of rest now."

"So long, Laddie," I said, raising my hand in confusion as though I were about to wave.

"I'll be seeing you," he whispered. He made an attempt to give his old smile, but he was too far gone.

He died the next morning at eleven-fifteen. He was not Catholic, and Florence O'Brien did not wish him to rest in a Protestant cemetery, nor in something like Forest Lawn; so it was decided that after a dignified Lutheran service, he should be cremated immediately. The service was conducted at a crematorium in Hollywood that same day. Considering that it was held on such short notice, there was a damned fine turnout. Every bigwig of Worldwide Pictures came, and half a dozen Worldwide stars; Mark Harris saw to that.

After the service Florence O'Brien, anxious that her daughter should do the correct thing, had Angelica divide Laddie's possessions before his parents flew back East. His parents drew his violin, his Harvard suitcase, containing the bloodied Army uniform and the Purple Heart; Mark Harris drew the pick of Laddie's books; Miss Shrewsbury, his secretary, drew a portable radio; and I got the pick of his clothes.

By six o'clock I was back at my rooms with an armful of custom-made shirts, a couple of expensive English suits, and a double-vented brown tweed sports coat. At exactly six forty-

five, when the sky had turned gray-lavender and gold, four dark Cadillacs stole down Culvers' drive to Cove Way. The last Cadillac paused just outside the premises, and Joseph wearing a black bowler, stepped out, closed the iron gates of Culvers' Mount Vernon, and locked them with a thick steel chain. The dark Cadillacs moved on into the dusk.

SO THE SUMMER IN BEVERLY HILLS CAME TO ITS end, drying up like a great swollen California fruit, and everything was as it had been before.

A week later on a cool September morning my telephone rang, while I stood shaving. Lathered like a mad dog at the mouth, I hurried into the bedroom.

“Charley?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve only a few minutes,” Angelica said. “I’m calling to say goodbye.”

For a minute or so Angelica rattled on about having considered going to France with the Sonny Cartwrights, who had rented a place at Neuilly. Finally she took a deep breath, as though she were about to make some confession to me. “I’m going home, Charley. I want to go home. It — it’s the thing for me to do.”

When I said nothing to this, her voice grew in volume and force. She told me that she was sick and tired of California. She was sick to death of “worthwhile people” and “creating” and “art.” It was all a lot of poppycock, and where did it get you in the end? She almost spat the words, as though she were finally voicing her suspicions and secret beliefs.

I was thinking that she had not ever really believed in any-

thing outside of Miro. She believed in her father, who had a million dollars and a nice safe rut.

“Charley, are you there, Charley?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m here.”

She interrupted herself to give instructions to movers, arriving to remove the last of the furniture from Laddie’s house. I heard the jingle of a gold charm bracelet as she raised her wrist to point. I pictured her dressed in some flimsy pink traveling suit, her pumps kicking a pile of excelsior.

“Charley?”

“Yeah?”

“I — I didn’t mean what I said a moment ago.”

“What was that?”

“You know, Charley, about it being poppycock.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” I said. “I’m no artist sonofabitch.”

“Yes, you are, Charley. You go in for poppycock. You know what I mean.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. I wanted to give her a hard time.

“It doesn’t matter, Charley. It doesn’t matter,” her voice cracked. “Oh, Charley, I’m so damned sick and tired of it all. Everything’s turned out so awful for me since — since the day I left home. Why did everything turn out so awful, Charley?”

“I don’t know why anything turns out awful,” I said. “I’m no answers-boy. I don’t know any answers.”

“I don’t want to go home, Charley, but what else can I do? What must I do, Charley? What must I do?” Her voice had got back its old Jack-in-the-box helplessness; and I was getting a lump in my throat. For just a minute I wondered if I was not in love with her.

“Oh, Charley — Charley, darling, maybe I ought to have

fallen in love with you. You understand me, Charley, and we've known each other all our lives and — Oh, Charley, if you loved me — ”

“Don't start your If-you-love-me crap,” I cried suddenly. “The last time you pulled that on me, I broke my leg. I don't want to break anything else.”

She breathed furiously into the mouthpiece. Finally she spoke: “I think you're all crazy, Charley. You'll go on and on, hunting, and looking, and criticizing, and choosing, making a mess of your lives with poppycock. What do you think life is, an Easter Egg Hunt?”

I parted my lips to form words, but no words came. Saddened, half angry, and half in love with her I hung up. This was Angelica's goodbye.

Later Monday, I had a sweet roll and coffee at the Della Robia. The boy behind the counter still spoke of Laddie's suicide. The boy had it from a reliable source that old Culvers had hired thugs to beat up Laddie Wells while the party took place in Beverly Hills; and Laddie's showing up at the party had foiled this plot.

I thought back to the night of the party, when Culvers had been called away to the telephone. Then the thugs, ignorant of the steel plate in his skull, would have finished him off; there was a chance old Culvers would have hanged.

But it didn't matter now. The luck had been on Culvers' side and on Angelica's all along.

I am writing this, now, a full two years after I quit the job at *Life*. I am living in a two-room apartment above a grocery store in Santa Monica Canyon, near Sebastian Saunders' house. I no longer spend much time in Beverly Hills.

Laddie Wells is two years and two months dead; and it is as though he had died in order that Angelica should have a happy time the remainder of her days. Having returned to a normal pattern of life, she is as strong and as self-complacent a woman as her mother; in fact, in a sense she is thought even stronger. Laddie had taught her something about books and music and painting, and she has set herself up as the authority on culture in Miro. Whenever discussion of a novel, for instance, crops up during Canasta games and coke hours, Angelica has the last word. As June Kellogg will tell you — I cannot for the life of me recall June's married name — Angelica places a strong period at the end of every sentence.

Angelica no longer feels compelled to wear only pink. I have heard that there is no more pink in her house there than in June's or Sarabelle White's. Angelica's new house is ranch-style modern. Angelica travels to Neiman-Marcus twice a year for her clothes. She belongs to a Canasta club and a bridge club; and she belongs to the Junior League and to the Miro Garden Club. She is on the entertainment committee of the Miro Country Club, is secretary of the Catholic Ladies Altar Guild, and is president of the Miro Association of Dentists' Wives.

Thus, Angelica lives today happy in Miro with Little Florence Wells, little Ruff, her one-year-old son, and her second husband, Dr. T. J. "Ruff" McKedrick, a good Joe if there ever was one. The whole of Miro agrees that married to this young dentist, Angelica is far better off.

This is probably true, for essentially, Angelica is a normal type, who must run with the herd. Society, I suppose, works for the preservation of her type, who have a large majority, and the passionate, the unusual, the proud, the romantic must

perish like so many black sheep in a river current if society is to go on.

Laddie Wells is dead; Angelica is having her good time with "Ruff" McKedrick; the Culverses are back in their preposterous Beverly Hills Mount Vernon. They had fled, after Laddie's death, down to La Jolla, and had been living on half of a hotel floor, when the *Life* story came out. Old Culvers had hit the ceiling, swearing to have my blood; but the story had managed to get across the personality of the beautiful and unhappy young woman who was his prisoner. A couple of months later the *Hollywood Reporter* had come out with the announcement of Culvers' production deal with Worldwide. Carol was on the way to becoming a star.

Culvers hired a psychiatrist to stop her from drinking and two extra nurses, who kept an eye on her night and day. The next year she was drinking just a little, and there were a few "bad nights" when she sat in the office, the platinum head wobbling this way and that, as though she only wished that she were dead. They were saying that she was a star in the old-time tradition. She owned a full length white mink coat, and she appeared at parties wearing a hundred thousand dollars worth of jewels, accompanied by a guard. In her evening bag there would rest a large silver-gilt perfume bottle, filled with gin. . . .

After the death of Laddie Wells, I did not wish to stay on in Beverly Hills. I have seen the lights of New York again, and I have rushed along the crisscross of paths in Harvard Yard. I have hurried through the spanking-new cities of Texas, and I have roamed at forty miles an hour through Mexico.

I have seen New Orleans again and have spent several nights

there, making the rounds of Riley White's favorite bars. He stayed drunk the three days of my visit there, and I gathered that he is drunk most of the time. He is a pathetic, interesting little fellow; he had sold himself to Culvers for security, and now Culvers had given him his useless self back. He still draws his enormous salary twice a month but has not the power of a hare. Riley White had enjoyed "the empire," such as it is, and it was sad to hear him speak of it. He spoke of his old success with Sweetheart Toilet Paper as though this had been Austerlitz.

While I was in New Orleans, we telephoned Butch Murphy, who had been fired. She was still intensely loyal to Culvers and spoke very short with me.

The evening before I left Beverly Hills a late fall sunset smoldered behind Culvers' house, as though there had been a great fire in the city. I had sold the car; my bags were packed. I went over there, wearing Laddie Wells's English tweed sport coat, to look at the place once more. The week before, the chain had been removed from the great iron gates, the grounds, cleared of paper and broken glass. Any day now the Culverses would come back. This evening the house looked spooky, and dead, and dark.

Crickets were chirping around me, and not too far away I heard a mockingbird, imitating the nightingale. I stood by the swimming pool, listening to the water trickling down the marble steps. Rome fell because the Goths smashed the aqueducts. I imagine that Roman water, dripping on the green wall of the Campagna, sounded the same way.

I left the pool and strolled toward the Japanese tea house, walking slowly across the blue lawns, savoring everything,

taking everything in. I sat down on the slope of the hill.

Now the lights of Los Angeles were coming on. It looked as though all the Christmas trees in the world twinkled out there. I thought of how I used to stand on Main Street back home, squinting my eyes, making believe they were these lights. I thought of how boys stood on Main Streets in every city and town in America, squinting their eyes. A lump formed in my throat.

I sat there on Culvers' wet grass, thinking all this. I did not hear the Cadillacs crawling up the drive. I stood up. Two searchlights swept the sky, advertising the largest drive-in in the world. I did not hear her footsteps in the Japanese tea house behind me, only her scream.

When I turned around, I saw Carol, standing there in white slacks. A violet scarf she had worn around her head, driving up from La Jolla, floated to the floor. She was staring at Laddie Wells's coat, her lips parted wide.

"I thought — I thought you were —"

I moved forward, and I took her hand. "I know," I whispered.

I held her hand for a moment, then I went off down the hill, past the floodlighted orange trees.

continued from front flap

of the hills and the sweep of the Pacific.

Speed Lamkin, the author of *Tiger In The Garden*, is well qualified to write about Hollywood for he has lived for several years in the kind of community of which he writes. With great authenticity of detail he has been able to convey the true character of America's Eldorado. And the fact that few people find any of the Easter eggs makes the hunt no less desperate or exciting.

Speed Lamkin's first novel, *Tiger in the Garden*, was published in 1950. The *New York Herald Tribune* said of it:

“‘Tiger in the Garden’ is a vigorous and substantial piece of work. It has freshness and an unusual range in subject and perception. . . .”

After publication of his book, Mr. Lamkin, a native of Monroe, Louisiana, went to live in Beverly Hills, California—the setting of his second novel, *The Easter Egg Hunt*. He worked for a short time at Warner Brothers Studios and did some writing for the Hearst newspapers. His short stories have appeared in *Mademoiselle* and *Colliers*. His first published one, “Comes A Day,” won an O. Henry award, appeared in *The Best American Short Stories of 1950*, and has been sold to the movies.

Jacket by Vivian Berman

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