Brand from the burning

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BRAND FROM THE BURNING

by

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Marsh Winchester was eight when her father died and she came to live with the Barnetts at Pleasant Meadows. She was afterwards always a little confused about that period in her life. So many things had happened before she could say "Jack Robinson." Father had been sick and had gone to a strange place called the "hospital." Marsh had stayed on at the apartment with Mrs. Richardson who was a father's-helper. The long, lonely days piled up on each other as like ashoe buttons. Then suddenly a change, a stir and excitement, Father had gone away forever and the apartment was filled with people all talking at once.

Mrs. Freer from the next apartment was there and Dr. James who taught history with Father and a man named President Offitt who belong at the college, too.

"But there must be someone we can call on," said Mrs. Freer. "Surely Professor Winchester had relatives. Did he ever mention them to you, Mrs. Richardson?"

"Well," said Mrs. Richardson, "There was some cousin of his he used to talk about. On a farm. But I don't remember where, except that it was in the eastern states some place. Do you remember, Marsh?"

Marsh sat on a stool in a corner and looked from one to the other. "It's Cousin Edith," she said, "And her name's Barnett, her other name."

"Where does she live, child?"

"I don't remember. But it's in Father's red book on his desk."

President Offitt had found Father's red book and sent a wire. He came back that afternoon. "I've had an answer from Mrs. Barnett. She's coming."
She'll get in Tuesday at eleven." It was as tho he added mentally, "Well, that's settled. It's up to her now. I'm sure these things are very disturbing."

He went out. Mrs. Richardson went back to the kitchen to get supper and Marsh stood at the window with her nose pressed against the glass and thought about Cousin Edith.

It was late April. The trees at the edge of the sidewalk were feathered green, thin curly feathers that did not hide the branches. Across the street a row of brick houses stood up like red-coated British soldiers on parade. Marsh thought: "Cousin Edith, Cousin Edith, Pleasant Meadows, Brand, John." She strung the names together like bright beads. She knew them all so well. Father had told her about them trillions of times. "Tell me a story, Father."

"All right, Miss Lady, and what story?"

"About when you were a little boy at Pleasant Meadows."

"But you know that story backwards and forwards."

"Tell it again."

Again and again. She never grew tired of it. "Once upon a long time there was a little boy named Chase Winchester who lived with his mother and father in a big city."

"Like I live with you, Father?"

"Just like that."

Chase Winchester was Father. When he was little he had worn a tight-fitting brown jacket and a round straw hat with a blue ribbon. He had gone each summer to stay with Cousin Edith at Pleasant Meadows while his father and mother travelled abroad. Cousin Edith was older than Father, quite a big girl. There had been Cousin Fred also, father's age. But he had fallen from the windmill when he was eight and had been killed. After that there was only Cousin Edith for Father to play with. Marsh knew all the things they did by heart. Blackberrying on Moss Hill, wading in Stony Creek
where the water curled like brown satin about their bare legs. She knew the names of the two Shetland ponies, Punch and Judy, and the dog Bardolph who was half collie and half terrier and had a long nose, pink at the tip. Oh, there was no end to the things she knew. It had made Father laugh sometimes. "I believe you could find your way about the place with your eyes shut."

She had shut her eyes experimentally and she saw it as clear as day. "I guess maybe I could," she said gravely.

You went through a white gate in a white paling fence into the driveway that led to the house. Down a green funnel of trees, beech and willow and maple, you could see the house. It was square with a red tin roof that sloped down to the veranda. The walls were of plaster white-washed each spring, and there were two chimneys standing like pricked ears one on either side. High up on one, carved deep in the brick, was the date 1802. The house had been born then, father said, and great-great grandfather Tyler had carved the numbers there himself over a hundred years ago. A long way back of the house behind another white fence was the barn, and behind the barn, down a little lane between blackberry bushes and great fans of elephant's ear, the chestnut grove. The chestnut grove was the end of Pleasant Meadows in that direction: a stone wall separated it from Mr. Davis' place, Oak Hall. But there were other directions, two sides, one stretching away into wheat fields and the other into meadows close-cropped by the cows and horses. Across the first meadow ran Stony Creek, and beyond that was the Old Woods. Father said goblins lived there among the roots of the oak trees, and little green elves no bigger than grasshoppers. If you went through the Old Woods and came out in the open again you could see Moss Hill like a giant's teacup turned upside-down sloping into the sky.

Father had visited at Pleasant Meadows when he was a little boy. Then he had grown up and gone far away. But Cousin Edith had never left. She had married Cousin Louis and stayed on. And after awhile John and Brand
had come along and Cousin Louis had died but she was still there.

Father could not tell her much about that. He had never seen John nor Brand and Cousin Louis only once. "That was the autumn they were married," he said, "I stopped off on my way back to college. Louis Barnett was a queer chap." When he spoke of Cousin Louis he seemed to forget Marsh and talked from the outside in as tho he were trying to explain things that he himself did not quite understand. "A queer chap, brilliant in an unbalanced sort of way, and lazy and selfish. I suppose Edith saw something in him that the rest of us couldn't discover. Some women do. It accounts for--" He broke off and looked down at Marsh sitting erect and expectant on his knee. "Well, we won't go into that, Pussy," he said, "or we'd get lost in the woods."

Father was always saying queer things that Marsh could not understand. "Lost in the woods." After that when she thought of Cousin Louis she saw him wandering among the great trees of the old woods, beautiful and proud and a little terrifying. A prince under an enchantment cutting his way thru briars and brambles to a magic castle. And altho she did not know it, it was of Cousin Louis that she thought most often. Cousin Edith and Pleasant Meadows were as familiar as the things about her, as real as her own hand. But a thin impenetrable veil of enchantment separated her from the world of Cousin Louis. The mystery of it drew her back again and again with a strange compelling power from which she could never quite escape.

Father had said once, "Some summer when I finish my history and can loaf we'll go back to Pleasant Meadows and get reacquainted." There had always been that entrancing summer to look forward to. And now Cousin Edith was coming. Cousin Edith was coming and perhaps-- But suddenly she did not want to go to Pleasant Meadows without Father. There was nothing in the world she wanted with Father gone. She shut her eyes tight to squeeze back the tears and pressed her forehead hard against the window. If Mrs. Richard son came in and found her crying she would smother her with her arms and her voice. "There, there, darling." And "My poor child."
She could not bear that. Mrs. Richardson had not loved Father really, not the way she did.

II.

When Marsh looked at Cousin Edith sitting across from her on the green plush seat she felt scared and excited and just a little happy all at once. "I'm going to Pleasant Meadows," she said inside herself, "I'm going to Pleasant Meadows to live with John and Brand and be Cousin Edith's little girl." But she could not be Cousin Edith's little girl because she was Father's girl. She was father's girl forever and ever. The memory of father tugged at her heart, a tiny persistent pain. "I belonged to father," she thought, "I did really, but it's just pretending with Cousin Edith." She shut her eyes for a minute and pretended hard Cousin Edith was her mother and John and Brand were her brothers. They had all been borned together. But it was only make-believe. No matter how hard she tried it wasn't true. "I wish," she said aloud, "I wish father was here."

Cousin Edith turned away from the window to look at her, a look like a soft warm cover tucked about Marsh's shoulders to keep her snug. "I think maybe he is," she said, "only we can't see him."

"I'd like it better if we could see him." She wanted something solid and tangible to hold to. This father who was there and yet not there was a puzzle that she could not straighten out. But Cousin Edith was real. She leaned over and scooped Marsh into her arms, drawing her down beside her. "Now," she said, "I'm going to tell you about all the nice things you can do at Pleasant Meadows."

The country flew past the window hurrying away to somewhere. The telegraph poles hopped by before you could count them. Cousin Edith's voice went on and on painting little pictures in the air. "There's a swing and there's a woods and there's a dog named Bardolph the Fourth."
There was a Bardolph when father was a little boy."

"Bardolph the First. This is his great-great-great grandson."

"Oh." She did not understand great-greats so she said "oh" and let it go at that.

"And behind the house and down a lane is first--"

"A barn," said Marsh, "and back of the barn is the chestnut grove, only not so awfully near back. You have to climb a fence to get there and there's blackberry bushes and--"

"Why," said Cousin Edith, "You know as much about it as I do."

"You see," said Marsh gravely, "Father told me."

"Of course," Cousin Edith hurried on as tho there was no time to stop with father, "Well then I'll tell you about John and Brand, shall I?"

"Oh, yes," John-and-Brand. You said the names together like that. You might say Brand and you might say John, but it wasn't finished. They went hand in hand always.

"John," said Cousin Edith, "is eleven and Brand is ten."

"I'm eight."

"Yes, they're bigger than you. That's nice, isn't it? Two big brothers."

"I wish one was a little baby."

Cousin Edith laughed. "I'm afraid," she said, "I can't arrange that. But Brand's a little baby underneath quite a good deal of the time."

That was puzzling. As puzzling as Father's being there when you could not see him. Brand was ten but underneath he was a little baby. She sighed softly trying to understand.

"Brand is--" Cousin Edith broke off suddenly, "No," she said, "I'm not going to tell you any more. I'm going to let you wait and see for yourself. That will be more fun."

"A s'prise," said Marsh. She like s'prises but sometimes it was hard to wait. She wished the train would hurry. She snuggled against
Cousin Edith's side and watched the telegraph poles skip past the window. One-two-three-four-five. They went too fast to count them. She tried another game. The big poles were John and the littler poles were Brand. John-Brand-Brand-John-John.

Suddenly a new thought frightened her. Suppose they didn't like her. Suppose they should say, "You go on away from here. We don't want you. We don't want any silly girls around." She saw herself, a tiny pathetic figure, walking away down the road with no place to go and the boys shouting after her. She was sorry for that tiny figure and began to cry softly, licking the tears away with the tip of her tongue. The wheels clicked off the words that were running thru her head, "I want my father. I want-- I want--"

III

"And now," said Cousin Edith, "here we are."

Marsh shut her eyes tight for a moment. Suppose it shouldn't be the same. Suppose there had been a dreadful mistake. She opened her eyes a crack and peeked, and it was the same, the white paling fence, the long drive, and at the end of the drive the red roof and white walls of the house. "Oh," she said faintly. There was such a rush of thankfulness that she did not have breath enough for more.

"I wonder where the boys are?" said Cousin Edith. She leaned away from the side of the car anxiously. "I thot they'd be waiting."

There was a whoop and a scramble. A tall boy sprang out from behind a tree and leaped on to the running board. The suddenness of it made Marsh's heart jump to her throat and then flop back again.

"John!" Cousin Edith's arms were about him, "You imp, to scare us like that. I might have known. Where's Brand? Isn't he--?"

"I did scare you, didn't I? Brand's got a headache, he's inside."
Harsh was lost in the confusion. Forgotten. She might not have been there for all they noticed.

But suddenly John remembered. "Hello Harsh," He held on to the door of the car carelessly with one hand. The wind whipped his hair across his face but he did not mind, only blew it out of his eyes and laughed. It was very light hair and in the splotches of sunshine under the trees it burned unexpectedly to gold.

"My dear child!" cried Cousin Edith, "I forgot completely. This is John, Marsh. The biggest one."

John put out his hand and squeezed Marsh's. "It'll be great having you here," he said. "I wanted to come meet you but old Frank wouldn't let me have the mare."

"I'm very glad of that," said Cousin Edith, "I'd rather pay for the car than have you drive Belle."

"Oh, Mother, she's safe as anything." He switched to Marsh. "She's our new mare and she's a beauty. I'll show you how I can drive someday. I'll take you--" The car jerked to a stop before the porch and he did not finish.

Cousin Edith stopped to pay the driver and Marsh stood on the steps staring about and wondering just what she was to do next. Then Cousin Edith was beside her. "Will you stay with John just a minute while I take a peep at Brand?" Her eyes were brown velvet, soft and loving, "just a little minute," she said.

Marsh nodded. She did not mind staying with John. John was nice; she liked him. But when Cousin Edith disappeared through the door she gave a great gulp of homesickness. Suddenly there were no fields nor driveways nor tall trees stretching up to the sky, only a wet gray blur before her eyes. She stood quite still on the porch steps and stared straight before her into the grayness, until without warning it spilled over and ran.
down her cheeks.

"Oh," said John, "don't cry, please." His voice was a little, hoarse croak of sympathy. "Look," he said, "I'll do tricks for you." He ran away from her a few paces, turned himself upside-down and began to walk grotesquely on his hands. It was an enchanting performance. Marsh forgot to cry watching him. He was on his feet again, very red of face, his hair falling into his eyes. "Watch this one." This one was a spinning cart wheel over and over. Marsh's tears dried leaving dirty smears along her cheeks. She giggled. "I couldn't ever, ever do that."

He welled with pride. "I'll teach you. It isn't half as hard as you'd think."

He came and sat down on the steps puffing and wiping his face. Marsh stood on one foot a minute then dropped beside him. She felt quite happy and peaceful once more. John looked at her, pretending not to notice the tear streaks. "I'm awful glad you came," he said.

"So'm I." She was glad, really. If she couldn't be with Father she'd rather be here than any place in the whole world.

"I'll teach you to ride old Charlie. He's as gentle as anything. And you and Brand and me--"

She remembered Brand suddenly. He was sick, a sickness called headache. It made him seem important and mysterious, not at all like John, who turned somersaults and had a twinkling, friendly grin. "Does Brand have very many headaches?" she said politely.

"Pretty many."

"Do you too?"

"No, I never do. I'm stronger'n Brand."

"Oh."

"Brand used to be sick an awful lot when he was little. Once he almost died. Now he isn't sick so much, just headache."
"I never had a headache."

"Me neither, but I guess they're pretty bad. I guess they hurt something awful."

"I think I'll like you best maybe." Marsh straightened the collar of her blue Peter Thompson suit.

"No you won't, you'll like Brand. He's smarter than me a whole lot. He's like Father. Father was pretty smart, he wrote things."

"My Father wrote things too. He wrote hist'ries." When she spoke of Father the lump bulked up in her throat again but she gulped it down. "He wrote a history about New Mexico and Texas."

"I'm going to Texas when I grow up," John straightened, "I'm going to be a cowboy and ride the range and rope steers and everything!"

It was unbelievably exciting. When she was big she would go to visit John in Texas, and perhaps if she behaved beautifully he might marry her. He would like her better than anyone else in the whole world and they would be together always. Of course, she could not count on it definitely, but there was no harm in pretending. She saw John and herself riding off side by side across the prairie to live happily ever after on horseback.

Cousin Edith came to the door calling them back from Texas. She had taken off her hat and her brown hair was soft and mussed about her face.

"Brand's feeling much better. He wants to see you."

"You come too," said Marsh. She looked at John pleadingly. Once more she was a little scared.

"John's going to carry up our bags for us, then he'll come."

They went into the hall together and up the wide stairway. It was all just as Father had described it hundreds of times. The square landing halfway to the top with a tall clock in one corner and a window that looked out across the meadows to Moss Hill. The faint musty smell of old carrets about everything. A dim portrait of great-grandfather Tyler in a black coat and white face, eyes that followed after you down...
"This is Brand's room," said Cousin Edith, "Run in and get acquainted. I'll be back before long." She pushed Marsh gently through the door. The blinds were down but enough light seeped through to give everything a faint greenish pallor. Marsh's eyes widened to the dimness. Her heart thumped against the stiff linen of her dress. "I wish John had come," she thought miserably. She wanted to turn and run out into the bright hall again, but her legs wouldn't move, stiff icicles frozen to the floor. There wasn't a sound. There wasn't a sound at all except her own quick scared breathing.

Then a rustle and a creak, the bed across the room jiggled slightly and a little boy sat up on it, pushed a wet cloth back from his eyes and stared at her. "I can't see," he said fretfully, "Pull up the curtain so I can see you."

Her fingers fumbled clumsily with the cord and the blind shot up, letting in a blaze of sunlight. She could see the little boy now, the little boy who was Brand. He propped himself with his hands pressed into the bed clothes behind him and inspected her. His eyes were half closed, cold gray, curved shining snarly. He was not in the least like John, smaller, thinner, a narrow pointed face, a willful mouth with a full soft underlip. His hair was darker than John's, short and fine, curling crisply into a sudden cowlick over his right eye. He was not so beautiful as John and yet, in a funny way, more beautiful. A strangeness about him that caught at Marsh's throat and sent little shivers racing up and down her spine. She stared at him fascinated.

"Look," he said suddenly, "I bet I can make the swfullest face you ever did see." It was done in an instant, the pulling of his eyes down and his mouth up, the quick red flash of his tongue.

She shuddered and drew in her breath appropriately impressed.

"Now you make one."

She tried to imitate his and failed dismally.
"Make one of your own," he said

"I don't know any."

"Oh well, I'll teach you sometime. I know lots of good ones. I could 'most scare myself with them they're so awful."

She had come over to the bed now and was standing beside him. "I can recite 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat' all the way through," she said earnestly, "and I know a rhyme about the kings of England."

"Pooh, that's nothing, anybody could learn those if they wanted to."

It was obviously a very feeble accomplishment hardly worth mentioning. But there were other things that she could do. "I can play three pieces on the piano; one called 'On Green Branches Swinging' and another—"

"I can play millions of pieces. I make 'em up my own self, and some of 'em like Bach I learn. Only my pieces are better than his."

"I took music lessons a whole year," she said with dignity, "And my teacher told Father—"

But it was impossible to get the better of him.

"I took 'em five years. I just stopped a little while ago. I could be taking yet only I know more than Miss Knopf a whole lot, and anyway I hate practicing. I'll play for you sometimes," he added graciously, "I'll play the 'Dance of the Leaves in the Old Woods' and another one I made up, but I won't play Bach." He waggled his head, "Miss Knopf told Mother I was smarter'n anybody she'd ever taught," he boasted.

He was a horrid conceited boy and Marsh did not like him very much. But when she thought of him sick with a headache and brave about it then she was sorry and wanted to be nice. "Your mother is my Cousin Edith," she said, "I guess prob'ly she's the best mother there ever was."

Brand's shoulders lifted and he thrust out his chin aggressively. "I guess there's no prob'ly about it. I guess she is all right. And look here—" His fingers plucked at the bed-clothes, "She's my mother, see? If you live with us you've got to remember that. Being a cousin isn't near as
important as being me, so you can't expect Mother to pay much attention to you." He was very lordly about it, very sure, but his underlip pulsed, a faint uneven tremor. "You can't expect her to love you as much as me," he said, "If you dare try I'll scare you to death with faces."

"I won't," she said faintly. It was not so much the threat of faces that troubled her as the realization that after all she did not belong, a little girl looking over a fence into someone else's garden and pretending it was hers.

"Well, see that you don't," said Brand. He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes. And with his eyes closed he was suddenly different. More like an ordinary little boy, more like John.

"Does your head ache again?" she asked.

"Yes, it does."

"Does it ache bad?"

"Awful bad." His lips scarcely moved when he spoke. He suffered bravely, silently.

"Perhaps," she said, "I better call Cousin Edith."

"Oh, you can stay if you like."

When he said that she knew that he wanted her and the tightness in her throat melted. She sat down on the edge of the bed and put her hand on his forehead. She had hated him for a moment but now she loved him. She felt necessary and important stroking his forehead lightly with her finger tips. "Brand's a little baby quite a good deal of the time," Cousin Edith had said. Had she meant because of the headache? She must have meant that. He was grown-up and bossy without it. Her fingers continued their gentle stroking. When she was big she would marry John and go away to Texas. But she would take care of Brand when he was sick. She hoped with a faint feeling of guilt that he would be sick a good deal. She liked taking care of him.
By the time Marsh had been at Pleasant Meadows a month she had learned a great many things. Her mind was a rag bag stuffed full of odds and ends. Sometimes she tried to straighten it out, to sew the scraps together until they formed a pattern, but there were too many, fragments of this and that, all in a scramble.

Cousin Frank Tyler who farmed Pleasant Meadows until John and Brand were old enough. Grandfather Tyler had left Pleasant Meadows to John and Brand. When John was twenty-one they could do what they wanted with it, but until then Cousin Frank was in charge. He was big and dark with long arms and a queer, plodding walk. He smiled at Marsh slowly and called her "Chase's little girl." He pulled her between his knees and stared hard. "She looks like Chase, don't she?"

"Her coloring, yes. The dark hair. But her eyes are like her mother's. Such enormous eyes. Helen was lovely, too beautiful to live almost. Perhaps that's why—" Cousin Edith suddenly shooed Marsh out of doors. "Run and find the boys, dear."

She went out of the room slowly looking back over her shoulder. 'Helen' was Mother who had died when Marsh was born. She wanted to hear more, but Cousin Edith said, "Scurry along."

Brand played for her. Some of his tunes were like thin tight cords about her heart drawing it from her body; others put bubbles in her feet and she danced. There was one funny one called 'Tadpole into a Frog.' It wriggled and there was the sound of water in it and finally a slow swelling when the tadpole changed. It ended with Brand's hands skipping over the keys in jumps and then a sound almost like a splash. That was the frog hopping into the water. That was the climax.

John like to make whistles. He cut long green shoots from the willow trees and hollowed them. He made a whistle for Marsh and carved her ini-
tials on one end, etc. She carried it about with her in her pocket and blew on it sometimes, a thin piping note. But after awhile the sap dried and it would not play any more. So she put it away in her bureau drawer along with her three best handkerchiefs and a flat package of rose-geranium scent that had lost its sweetness.

She had explored Pleasant Meadows from end to end. John showed her everything, the Old Woods, the barn the creek that was still too cold for bathing. Sometimes Brand came alone, trailing behind and swishing a stick through the grass. One day in May they took their lunch out to the orchard and lay under the trees with white petals fluttering softly about them. The air was honey-sweet with apple blossoms. Both the boys wore corduroy knickers and their white shirts were unbuttoned at the throat, John's throat as brown as toast, Brand's milk white with a hollow like a thumb mark at the base. Marsh lay on her stomach and looked away through a forest of tall grasses where ants crawled, staggering over bumps.

"My father went to South America once," she said dreamily, "And there were jungles and snakes and all sorts of horrid things."

"You'd been afraid, wouldn't you?" said Brand.

"Yes, wouldn't you have?"

Brand smiled scornfully. "I'm not afraid of anything," he bragged, "I could shoot a lion right between the eyes as easy."

"You're afraid to ride Belle," said John, "You know you are."

"I am not; I just don't like riding. I'd rather walk."

"That does to tell! That does to tell!" John made a derisive chant of the words.

"Oh shut up." Brand's face had a way of twitching when he was angry, the muscles at the corners of his mouth and eyes, and his narrow curved nostrils. The pulse in his underlip throbbed and quivered. "I'll show you," he said, "I'll ride her just to show you."

But when they went back to the house an hour later both he and John
seemed to have forgotten about it and Marsh did not like to remind them.

Cousin Edith loved Brand most. She loved John too; sometimes she talked to him as though he were a grown-up person her own age. But it was Brand whom her eyes followed. In the evening before the lamps were lit she would sit in the rocker with Brand on her lap and they would whisper together. Brand’s thin legs dangled against her skirt and he shut his eyes. His face was quiet and still and very beautiful. Marsh wished that she were big enough to hold Brand like that with his head burrowed into her shoulder. Where was a queer pull at her heart when she thought of it.

Brand was like his father. Cousin Edith said so, but Marsh would have known it for herself simply by looking at the picture in Brand’s room. The same narrow face and drooped eyes, the same willful pouting mouth. "My father was a smart man," Brand told her, "He was going to write a book only he died. Perhaps I’ll write a book myself some day, if I aren’t a pianist or a painter." There was no end to the things that Brand might do when he grew up.

Marsh knew more about Cousin Louis now. He was still a prince in a fairy tale, beautiful and remote, but he was also Brand’s father and he had been married to Cousin Edith. He had lived in the city before he married, then he had come to Snow Mountain and met Cousin Edith and had never gone back. He had hated the city and the newspaper office where he worked. He liked to wander through the Old Woods or lie in the open sunny meadow. Cousin Frank snorted when anyone mentioned him, and once Marsh heard him mumble: "No-account sponger, if he’d given half as much time to his book as he did to his bottle—" After that Marsh always saw Cousin Louis with a book in one hand and a bottle in the other, but he looked at the book more than at the bottle. It was very silly.

Yes, Cousin Edith loved Brand most and it was because he was like his father. But sometimes when he was sulky or impertinent or told lies she was angry and punished him. Sometimes, when he showed off, strutting im-
portantly or boasting, she laughed, and her eyes were mocking. It rale Brand furious. He could not bear being laughed at. He took himself very seriously and never told jokes on himself as John did.

Marsh could never decide whom she liked best. One minute it was Brand, the next John. John was kind and good and never tired of doing things for her. She knew all about him at once and felt comfortable. Brand she was never sure of. He was like water that slipped through her fingers and was gone. For an instant she held him, "I'll tell you a secret, but you must cross your heart and swear."

She crossed her heart and swore solemnly.

"All right then, I'm God."

It was thrilling and not quite believable.

"You don't think it's true, do you?"

"Yes,—only how do you know?"

"Oh, I know all right," he said loftily. He looked at her and smiled.

"You aren't even real. I just made you up out of my head."

When she pinched her arm it hurt and there were red marks where her fingers had bitten.

"That don't count," he said, "I made up the pinch too, see?"

He was so sure himself that he almost convinced her. She went about all the rest of that day with a strange feeling of insecurity. "If he stops imagining me I won't be any more." It was awesome and exciting to be so intimate with God. But when on the way to bed she whispered to him, "I haven't told anybody but I believe," he looked at her indifferently, "Believe what?"

"You know, the secret."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said and went into his room.

She was back where she had started and the secret might never have been told for all the difference it made in their relationship, but after all it was a
relief to find that she was not just a make-up who might vanish at any moment.

V

Marsh and Cousin Edith were on the side porch. Although it was still not ten o'clock the sun had sucked the dew from the bright metal-frail blossoms of the morning glory. Heat hung glistening over the meadows. Cousin Edith was sewing, her head tilted above a lap full of white cloth. She took short uneven stitches, jerking the needle in and out. Marsh sat on the stone steps with her knees drawn up beneath her chin. Under the second willow tree at the end of the lane Brand and John lay flat on their backs with their arms behind their heads. Brand was singing, a tuneless formless thing that was somehow music.

Cousin Edith dumped down her sewing suddenly and yawned. "I hate sewing, making things, having; to finish them. Why weren't we born with feathers?"

She went on not waiting for an answer, "Black and white speckled feathers for me, earth brown for John. For you, let's see, dove gray, I think, with a sheen to them. And Brand—" She paused and behind her eyes her mind glanced away over the bright simmering fields, away and away where Marsh could not follow. Then back again "Black for brand," she said, "Black in the shadows, but in the sun all the colors of the rainbow shining together, blotted out by the first cloud."

She picked up her sewing and thrust into it with the needle. "I wonder if you see what I mean?"

Marsh shook her head puzzled.

"Of course not," said Cousin Edith, "now absurd of me to expect a baby of eight—" The sentence hung waiting to be finished, but Cousin Edith cared nothing for tailless sentences. "Do you know, Marsh," she said, "I think it's splendid
for the boys having you here. Already I notice a difference. They're more thoughtful. They've needed a little girl to take care of. Not John so much, he does it instinctively. He's always taking care of something, a calf or a kitten, even me. But Brand—" Her mind wandered off again over the tree tops to the distant sloping hills.

Marsh said: "You were talking about Brand."

Back came Cousin Edith's mind, hovered an instant, then settled behind her eyes, "Brand? Oh, yes. I can't decide which he needs more, someone to care for, or someone to take care of him."

She was not talking to Marsh but to herself, but Marsh listened even though she did not understand. "He's so hard on top, almost invulnerable," she said, "And I'm too easy, I'm much too easy," She laughed, a little shivering sound that broke on her lips. "Brand from the burning, that's what I call him, most of him is charred wood, but there's a spark. Keep fanning and after awhile a flame, who knows?"

"Yes'm" said Marsh.

"You can help him more than I, Marsh," said Cousin Edith, "It sounds foolish, but I do believe—" She finished the thought for herself, and then, "named them pretty well, didn't I? I never thought of that before. John—steady, dependable, of course. Brand—Yes, really."

John and Brand. John—Brand. The names fitted themselves to Brand's piping tune, and suddenly Marsh was aware, dimly, propinquitously, of the meaning behind the names. Something that she could not explain, something that eluded her and yet was a part of the boys, separating them, drawing them together again.

VI

John was teaching Marsh to ride. He had boosted her up on old Charlie and showed her how to hold the reins. "Don't be scared," he said, "I won't let him get away." He walked at the horse's head with one hand on the bridle.
Old Charlie was very fat, swelling drum-tight sides. The stirrups were too long and Marsh's legs stuck straight out. She clutched the saddle and squealed, "I want to wet down. I want to wet down."

"No you don't," said Joh, "You're all right. We'll just go to the end of the drive and back."

Old Charlie was really very gentle, lazy almost. His walk was no more than an amble. Marsh grew used to the queer rolling motion and sat up straight.

"That's better," said Joh. He tilted back his head and grinned at her, "Like it?"

"Ye-es, only don't let go."

"I won't, honest."

When they came back to the house Cousin Edith and Brand were on the steps watching them. "Splendid," called Cousin Edith, "You'll learn in no time."

 Marsh, on the ground once more, looked up at old Charlie and almost burst with pride. It was astounding to think that she had sat so calmly at such a perilous height. "I wasn't scared hardly at all," she said. She glanced at Brand hoping that he would praise her, that he would be properly impressed, but he was busy plaiting three blades of grass together and seemed completely unaware that anything remarkable had happened. It took the glory out of it and made her remember suddenly that her legs were stiff and that she had been a scare-cat right at the first.

VII

Besides Cousin Edith and John and Brand at Pleasant Meadows there was Martha in the kitchen and Jim who did chores. Martha was so old she had forgotten when she was born. Her face was wrinkled and black like a prune and she had misery in her joints. Once she had seen a "Man". "Jes' as natchel as you is, Miss Marsh,
but no haid an' de blood spoutin' out'n his neck like water fum Mose's rock." John was her favorite. Sometimes she made him special little cakes with cream-sugar frosting and once she gave him a rab-
bit's foot for a charm against 'spirits.' "Mes'r John's good like Miss Edith, clean frough," she told Marsh, "Li'l rascal boy," she chuckled. Brand, she said, was the "Spooniest child ever." "Mes'r Louis' son, layin' 'round and actin' uppity." She shut her lips tight and her eyes snapped. "He's goin' t' git his comeuppance, you jes' wait." Marsh listened avidly, poked in a question. She wanted to find out more about Cousin Louis. "Jes' born lazy an' no-'count, I reckon," said Martha. "Livin' off'n Miss Edith and havin' tantrums. Good thing he died mebbe."

"Oh, Martha!" Marsh was horrified.

"Well, hit's Gawd's truf, Miss Edith have lots mo' peace 'n quiet sence he gone, 'cept now hit's Mes'r Brand."

Martha did not like Brand because once when he was angry he had called her 'nigger.' "You old black nigger," he said. Marsh had been shocked and a little thrilled. It was the most daring thing to have done. Afterwards when Cousin Edith scolded him he had sulked.

"I don't care, that's what she is, old nigger."

"That had nothing to do with it," said Cousin Edith, "It's something she can't help. You were rude and unkind and you must apologize."

"I shan't." He had defied her. He had stood with his hands in his pockets and his lower lip trembling and talked back.

Marsh could not bear any more. She slipped out of the room and hunted up John, "He ought to be whipped," said John, "He ought to be whipped good and sound, only Mother won't do it."

When Marsh thought of Cousin Edith's eyes she knew that John was right. But when she thought of Brand she saw that you couldn't do it. That no one could whip him. The pain would be too dreadful. You would suffer too
Supper was a silent meal. Brand was not there; he had been sent to his room to "think it over". Cousin Edith picked at her food and forgot John and Marsh completely. Once she said "If he wasn't so like his father-". She looked at Marsh when she spoke but she was talking to herself.

She sat in the hall on the bottom step and tried to think. She wished Brand would hurry up and be sorry. Then they could all be happy again and play. They had had a good supper, too, and Brand had missed it. He must be very hungry, starved almost.

She climbed the stairs to Brand's room and pushed open the door. Brand was on the bed, lying on his stomach with his face in the pillow. When the door opened he sat up and stared at Marsh. "What do you want?" He was flushed and scowling, his hair ruffled about his head like a feather frill.

"We had tarts for supper," said Marsh, "They had strawberry jam inside, and some of 'em had quince."

"Oh, well, I don't care."

"And Cousin Edith says we can play out until half-past eight, only it's no fun just two of us. There aren't any games for two."

"Make up one then."

"It's not fun making 'em up without you."

Brand wriggled unhappily. "You better go alone. I'm thinking it over. I can't think with you around."

"It would only take a minute," said Marsh, "Just the tittlest half of a minute to tell Martha."

"I won't tell her. I'm not sorry."

"Maybe you could be if you tried real hard."

"No I couldn't either, I never could. She is an old nigger."

"You might be sorry she is one. You might tell her that," she sighed,

"I guess it's pretty awful being old and black like Martha is. Maybe she
"Oh, well, I can't help it, can I?"

"No, only---" she slid toward the door, "The tarts had strawberry jam in 'em and sugar on top and I know a new name for those."

Out of doors it was already gray twilight. The fireflies were blown sparks in the wheat fields. John and Marsh sat together in the hammock and played "I'm thinking of something that begins with T."

"Is it table?"

"No."

"Is it towel?"

"No."

After awhile the door opened and Brand came out. He had a tart in one hand and a white sugar mustache on his upper lip. "It's tart," he said.

It wasn't tart really; it was turkey. But Marsh crossed her fingers and said: "Brand guessed it." Crossing her fingers made it all right with God who objected to lies but could be appeased by charms.

Brand squeezed into the hammock beside them. "I've got one. Something that begins with B." He crammed the rest of the tart into his mouth and grinned, his cheeks stuffed like sofa cushions. "It's a hard one," he said. "You'll never guess."

Inside the house Martha was singing to herself:

"Go down Moses,
Way down in Egypt,
Tell old Pharoah
Let my people free."

Everything was all right once more. Marsh snuggled against John's shoulder happily. "Maybe it's balloon," she said.

VIII

By July the water of Stony Creek was warm enough for bathing. Stony Creek ran through the meadow, clear and shining over flat stones. At the
cluster of willow trees it widened and deepened to form a pool. That was a swimming place.

Marsh had a new bathing suit. It was green like leaves and had narrow straps across the shoulders. She tucked up her curls with one of Cousin Edith's hairpins and ran across the meadow feeling the grass blades prickle her feet.

John was already in the water splashing and flourishing his arms. "Come on in," he shouted, "It's as warm as toast." He dived under and began to swim. His arms came up one after the other above his head, his back was sleek with water, bare and gleaming in the sunlight. He swam with swift powerful strokes, his face down. Now and then he lifted his head and gulped a deep breath, shaking his wet hair out of his eyes.

Brand sat on the bank and dabbed one foot cautiously. He wore short red trunks with no top. His body was white and much too slender. There were narrow ridges where his ribs poked up beneath the skin. His shoulder blades were drawn together, little racing shivers ran up and down his spine.

"Come on," called John, "You'll freeze to death sitting there. He swam over to the bank and held out his hand to Marsh. "It's heaps warmer in that out." With her hand in his she waded into the water. "Now duck." It was over in an instant and after the first breath-taking shock it really was warmer. "Can you swim?" asked John.

"Yes, a little." She stood with the water up to her shoulders and paddled furiously with her feet safe on the bottom.

"That's fine. Now lift up your feet."

She lifted one foot and put it back again. "No, I daren't."

"I'll hold you."

"No—no, I don't want to."

"Oh, well," said John, "you won't mind after you get used to it." He swam away from her, lying on his back and blinking up at the sun.

"Gee," called Brand from the bank, "Marsh can't swim at all, can she?"
"I can too." She paddled again, balancing perilously on one foot.

"Oh, that—" He sprang to his feet and ran around to the deep end of the pool. "Watch me, if you want to see some real swimming." He stood poised on a high rock with his arms arched above his head. He was jerked from his customary indolence and he was no longer shivering. Suddenly he shot into the air, holding his hands pointed and straight before him, his body curved slightly and he entered the pool with scarcely a ripple. A perfect dive. He was up in an instant, shaking the water out of his eyes, swimming easily and without effort.

"There," he called, "that's real swimming."

Marsh backed out and sat on the bank for the rest of the time. It was very cold and her legs and arms were goose-fleshly and blue, but she could not bear to have Brand show her up again. She did not mind John's being smarter, but it was different with Brand.

IX

Cousin Edith had gone into the city on business. She would stay over night with an old school friend and be back late the next afternoon. Martha would look out for them but Cousin Edith gave special directions to Brand and John and Marsh. "Don't go away from the farm, and I think you better not bathe or ride."

"Oh, Mother." There was not much snort, John said, when there were so many things you couldn't do.

"I'd feel much happier if you didn't." said Cousin Edith.

"All right, then, we won't." John was cheerful once more. "You'll bring me a knife, won't you?"

"And my crayons," said Marsh.

"Yes, I'll bring everything."

They watched her ride away in the trap with 'Jin, cocoa-brown and griny',
holding the reins. John had wanted to drive her to the station, but there were errands for Jim to do in the village and the trap only held two. Brand had behaved queerly. He had seemed completely indifferent up to the very last minute, then he had clung to Cousin Edith and cried. "I want to go along."

"You can't, dear, this time. I'm sorry."

"I don't see why I can't."

"Because I say no.‖ Cousin Edith was suddenly firm. "Let's not argue any more.‖

Brand turned his back on her and would not say goodbye. After the trap disappeared down the road he wandered off by himself and they did not see him again until lunch time.

Marsh and John played croquet for a little while and then went out to the barn and climbed into the hay mow. The air was dusty and sweet and the hay crackled and sagged beneath them. "If I wasn't going to be a cowboy or a sailor I'd be a farmer," said John.

"Would you like that?"

"Yes, I would. I'd do lots of things old Frank wouldn't dare try.‖ John always spoke rather scornfully of Cousin Frank. Once in awhile he read grown-up farm magazines and he could talk learnedly about crops.

"Old Frank doesn't know much. If I'd been running the place this year—" He stopped abruptly, "Gee, that sounded braggy, didn't it? I didn't mean it like that, honest.‖ He rolled over and lay on his back staring up into the criss-crossed cobwebs. The sun beat on the roof. "School next week,‖ said John, "Then all our fun's over.‖

Marsh was a little frightened when she thought of school, all the strange children and John and Brand far away in another class. "I wish I could be in your room,‖ she said.

"Gee, I think you're pretty high for only right. I ought to be higher only I stayed out a year so I could start with Brand.‖
"I'll be fourth grade and I'll be nine soon."

"Fourth grade's good."

"But I wish I was fifth so I could be with you."

"Oh, we'll see you at recess and Miss Stern, the fourth grade teacher, is nice."

It was vaguely comforting, but still she was not altogether happy.

Brand reappeared at lunch time. His hair was wet and plastered close to his head. He had assumed an air of false bravado and swaggered a little.

"You've been swimming," said John, "After Mother said not to."

"I have not."

"Why's your hair all wet, then?"

"Oh, I soused it under the pump." It was an obvious lie, but he looked straight at John when he told it and did not even blink.

The afternoon passed somehow, sultry and close, much too hot for romping games. The three of them lay out under the trees at the edge of the lawn. John whittled, shaping a flat block of wood into a little boat. Brand made up stories. They were very exciting ones, but he always left off in the middle just when you were on tip-toe to know what happened next.

Oh, go on, please." "No, I'm tired of that one. I'll tell you another."

If the stories were ever finished you had to do them for yourself and the results were very tame, very feeble, in comparison to Brand's beginnings.

Supper was over and it was bedtime. Martha bundled them upstairs and stood guard in the hall until they were undressed. Then she came and put out the lamps one by one. She had no time for foolings.

John slept in the attic, a low low room with sloping walls. He liked it there because Cousin Edith let him do what he wanted. He could cram the room full of his treasures as long as they did not spill over into the rest of the house. Marsh thought it a very remarkable place. She secretly envied John and was flattered when he allowed her to examine his things, handling
them reverently and with proper respect. There was a hornet's nest like
gray feather as es and a collection of stones of various shapes and colors
on the window sill. There were also butterflies pinned into cigar boxes
and carefully labelled, a whip braided from horses' hair, a turtle's shell,
and a bowl half filled with water and harboring six snails. It smelled
rather bad. The walls were plastered with pictures of horses. "That's
Xerxes, the prize stallion, and that one's Silver Boy, a gelding." They
looked very much alike as far as Marsh could see, except for the color.

"Why's one a stallion and the other--?"

"Oh," said John, "Don't you know?"

"No, why?"

John had been very red and embarrassed. "It don't matter," he said
brusquely, "You'll find out some day."

The mystery was still unsolved.

Brand's room was across the hall from Marsh's, next to his mother's
with a door between the two. Sometimes during the day the door was closed,
but at night it always stood open.

After Marsh was in bed and Martha had gone away she called to Brand:

"Night, Brannie." And his voice came back, rather sleepy, "Night." Marsh
lay on her side and looked out of the window. It was very quiet, not even
a whisper of wind in the trees, very dark, except now and then when a
rosy flutter of heat lightning lit the blackness for an instant and went out.
She began finishing one of Brand's stories in her head, but it grew mixed-
up and vague and before she had reached the end she was asleep.

She awoke suddenly in a blaze of lightning. All the gathered heat of
the day seemed to burst into flame. Before she had time to clasp her hands
to her ears, thunder rolled across the roof. She was frightened and pull-
ed the covers over her head, but the lightning came again, a blinding glare
lighting the darkness beneath the sheet like a lamp. She hated storms;
they always terrified her, creeping up in the night and shattering the
stillness. She wished Cousin Edith would come. She wished—Then she remembered that Cousin Edith was not there, and she remembered Brand. The tell-tale door that stood open every night. She saw Brand lying stiff under the covers, stretched out by fear. "I better go to him. I guess maybe he'd be glad. Oh, I can't!" Lightning again sent her covering back into the pillow. "I'm as scared as he is. I'm more scared maybe." But it was no use. In spite of her terror she had to go. She could not help herself. Some force more powerful than fear pulled her out of bed and across the room. The hall was black velvet filled with formless crouching beasts ready to spring; growling thunder-beasts pressed close around her. She ran, bumped into the door frame and stumbled into Brand's room. "Brannie!"

"May I get in?"

"Yes, I s'pose." In a flickering moment of brightness she saw him lying rigid, with an arm flung across his eyes. Suddenly the storm lost its terrors and she was brave. She crept beneath the covers and put one arm about him protectingly. Their thin little bodies pressed close together. "It's an awful bad storm."

He trembled and clutched her hand as though he would never let it go. "It's God getting even with me," his voice was a little whimpering cry.

"Why?"

"Because of swimming when Mother said not to."

It had been a lie, then; she had been almost sure. Now she knew. But God would not go to all that trouble for one lie.

"He's as angry as anything," said Brand.

"No, he isn't. It's thunder."

"He's doing it. I'll be good ever after if he'll just stop." It was a bargain with God and God took it. The thunder rolled away fainter and fainter. Rain came beating against the shutters, then it, too, died to a whisper, a gentle murmuring. Only the lightning, far off and thin, re-
minded them. Brand's body relaxed, he sighed and pulled his hand free. "You were scared, weren't you?" He was inclined to be superior, pretending that he had been the brave one and Marsh the coward. "Gee, you were scared." Pride and amusement and a queer masculine scorn of a girl's silly fear.

But Marsh knew. She snuggled against his side and closed her eyes. "Yes, I was, a little bit."

"Silly idiot," said Brand, "Let's go to sleep, shall we?"

"Yes, let's." She smiled blissfully into the darkness. She felt confident and happy because for a little while Brand had wanted her.

But in the morning he was so haughty and indifferent that, except for the fact that she woke up in his bed instead of in her own, it might all have been a dream. She had difficulty in convincing herself that it had really happened.

X

School was not so bad after all. Before the first week was over, Marsh was beginning to like it. Miss Stern was nice, with a great deal of fluffed brown hair and a blown-feather voice. The little girls were friendly and walked with Marsh at recess with their arms about her waist. There was Mary Schultz, whose father was a dentist, and Grace Morton, who was ten and had a special standing with God because she had been baptized in the river. And there were the Parmenter twins, Virgie and Sue, fat, stolid little girls, with tightly braided yellow pigtails and round, blue-button eyes. They teased easily and always stuck close together. You could not tell them apart unless you were near enough to see the flat, brown freckle on Sue's nose. They admired Marsh tremendously. They liked to walk with her, one on either side, to say her name over and over, talking to each other about her as though she were not there. "That's a pretty dress Marsh has on, ain't it Sue? It's prettier'n our silk ones, all little ridges." "It's pique," Marsh
explained, "And it's just an old school dress." The Parmenter twins wore faded gingham aprons that had 'run' so that the colors were smeared and ugly. The ends of their braids were held fast by rubber bands. "Marsh's hair is pretty too, ain't it, Virgie? Don't it worry you some blowin' around like that, Marsh?" They touched her hair gently with their finger tips. "It curls like anything, and it's black and soft the way silk is,"

Marsh thought the Parmenter twins were nice but Brand said: "Pooh, I'd be ashamed to be seen with 'em. Their father keeps a livery stable. They smell norsey." After that she sniffed cautiously when they walked with her, but she could not notice anything. Brand must have imagined it.

Marsh could not be with John and Brand at recess. The boys and girls were not allowed to play together. But she rode to and from school with them in the school bus, and John always came over to the boundary between the boys' and girls' side at recess time, just for a minute. "You all right?" "Yes, I got a hundred in spelling this morning. I didn't miss a word."

"That's great." He was off again. Sometimes, walking with Virgie's or Sue's or Grace Morton's arm about her, she would see him hanging by his knees from the horizontal bars or pitching a ball with great skill right over the plate. When he saw her he would grin and wave his hand. "John's your beaux, isn't he?" said Grace Morton. "No, he isn't; he's my cousin." "Well, I s'pose he could be your beaux if you wanted." She thought about it for awhile, and finally decided that she didn't want John for a beau. Cousins were more satisfactory.

Brand paid no attention to Marsh during recess. Even when his games brought him close to her he would stare straight ahead of him as though she were not there. Once she fell down almost under his nose, tripping over a stone and skinning her knee so badly that it bled. He only glanced at her and then ran away. "Clumsy," he called. It was John who picked her up and sopped at her knee with a grimy handkerchief. But when she was
on her feet she looked across the playground and saw Brand standing by himself and watching her and she thought: "He is sorry, only he can't say it."

That night he gave her his "Johnson for Governor" button which she had long coveted and never hoped to obtain. "Here," he said, "You can have it. I don't want it." She wore it proudly, pinned over her heart. She was happy because Brand had given it to her. Perhaps he like her a little, even though he would not admit it.

She had a scholar's companion with flowers painted on the cover and a top that slid in and out. She had three books with a strap to hold them together and a ruler and a box of colored crayons. On her first report card she had four E's and one G, for arithmetic. She like school.

It was October. Clear amber days and still nights shot with frost. The chestnut burrs on the trees in the west grove were opening slowly to show their pale velvet linings. But the chestnuts still huddled waiting for a wind to send them pelting to the earth.

At supper time a breeze came up stirring the branches of the maple tree by the window. Now and then a leaf let go and came spiraling downward to the ground.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Cousin Edith, "If we had a wind tonight."

John pushed back his chair and came around to her, "Oh, Mother, if we do, may we, please?"

"What about it, Brand?" said Cousin Edith.

"I'd like it," he said, "You promised long ago."

"Well, it's settled then, if Jim will take you."

"Oh, Mother!" John scooped her into a hug and let her go. "He will, I
"Is that so," said Cousin Edith.

"What is it?" cried Marsh. "You haven't told me." She was mystified and impatient.

"It's chestnutting," John explained. He crossed over and stood behind Marsh's chair. "Every year now for ages, the wind comes at night and blows all the chestnuts down. Then before--"

Brand caught the words out of his mouth. "Other kids come and get them, and they're our chestnuts. We want first chance this time, and Mother said--"

But John was back for his inning, "Mother said we could go out when the wind blew. No matter if it was four in the morning, no matter when. We'll take lanterns. Gee, it'll be great, Marshie."

Marsh's eyes were glowing. "Can I go too, Cousin Edith, can I?"

"Aw, Mother, a girl. She'll get scared or something." Brand cut in before Cousin Edith had a chance.

Marsh didn't say anything. Words wouldn't come when she most needed them. And anyway if Brand didn't want her--

But John was armed for her defense. "Of course Marsh is going. Isn't she, Mother?" She won't be afraid, Marsh won't."

"Honest true, I won't, said Marsh. Her eyes searched out Brand, but he wouldn't look. "Please, Brand," she begged, "May I?"

Brand stood with his hands in his pockets. "Come along if you've got to," he said ungraciously, "but no wanting to come home. Promise."

"I promise, honest." said Marsh.

John waked her in the night, holding a candle close to her eyes and laughing, "Come on, sleepy head."

A great wind roared thru the garden. It plucked at the shutter fastenings and tore leaves from the trees, sending them zig-zagging and whirling in a
fantastic dance.

Marsh stumbled into her clothes and groped for the buttons. She was ready in a jiffy.

The others waited in the hall for her, John with his hair on end, hands thrust deep in sweater pockets. Brand was only half awake, his eyes still crumpled with sleep, his mouth pouting. Jim stooped above the lanterns adjusting the wicks. In the circle of light his brown face gleamed like polished wood.

"Come along. Come along."

Out side the door the wind caught them, flapping Marsh's short skirts against her knees, tugging at her curls. She held out her hand to John and his closed over it, warm, sustaining. The moon far above them in a welter of clouds flung glancing shadows across the earth. The lanterns made warm patches of light in which they walked. John flung back his head and laughed. Marsh laughed too, but the wind caught the sound from her lips and blew it away.

She came along in a little dog-trot, two steps to John's one. She had forgotten everything but the feel of the wind, blowing her apart, twisting her together again.

"Isn't it great?" shouted John, "Isn't it bully?" He bent to the wind, swinging the lantern, his hand firm about Marsh's.

Jim chuckled deep in his throat, "Mighty fine chestnutin' weather. Mighty fine."

The dry leaves scrunched beneath their feet and the blackness of the grove closed over them.

"Here we are," said John, "Take a lantern, Marshie, and get started." The cold metal of the lantern handle slid into Marsh's hand. "You've got to kick the leaves away," John explained, "they get underneath somehow. See, this way."

He thrust out with his foot into a crackle of leaves. Bent almost double with his face near the ground he pawed thru the leaves, tossing them aside. "I've got one - two. Beaties. Look." He held two shining satiny nuts out toward Marsh,
"Oh, lovely." Marsh scampered away from him to a tree of her own, moving always in a comforting circle of light. The wind was far above her head, roaring thru the tree tops, lashin the branches together. She scuffled thru the leaves, "I found one. I found one." Then more and more, dozens of them. Her pockets began to bulge. She was ecstatic, aglow with a secret inner happiness that was a part of the wind and the trees and the swift moving shadows. Squatting with her knees beneath her chin she flung the leaves aside. "I'm so happy, happy, happy. I'm so happy, happy--" The words fitted themselves to a tune, and the tune was Brand's.

She remembered Brand suddenly and stood upright, the lantern swinging in her hand. Over against the black tree trunks John and Jim moved slowly, their bodies bent toward the earth. But Brand was not there. Only two circles of light, two lanterns glowing, beyond that, darkness, Brand somewhere in that darkness by himself and scared, maybe.

She slipped away between the trees holding the lantern against her skirt. Brand hated the dark, it frightened him. He pretended it didn't, but Marsh knew. She must find him quickly before something dreadful happened.

It was very black outside the patch of lantern light, and the wind came closer. Black pressed in about her ready to devour. "Brand," she called, "Brand." The wind whipped the words away. A root tripped her, and she fell. The lantern crashed, flared and went out. But she was up again, fighting back the darkness with her hands.

And suddenly the moon conquered a cloud, and the earth was washed in silver-white brilliance. Then she saw him, not ten feet from her. He was standing with his shoulders humped, and his hands covering his face. There was a queer tightness about him as though he were holding himself together by main force. As though at any minute the bands might break and he would fall apart. His elbows stuck out grotesquely, like clipped, useless wings.
The lantern lay black at his feet.

She made a little soft sound of her voice, "Brand."

A shiver ran along his body and he spread his fingers to peer at her. Then his arms dropped, limp along his sides. "Oh, Marshie." He came stumbling toward her, his hands outstretched, his face pulled crooked and trembling.

"Marshie, I'm—" His fingers curled about her's like the lash of steel wire.

Marsh could not bear it. Her pity for him was too deep, too piercing.

He would hate himself forever after because she had seen him like this, all his beautiful hard surface smashed to bits. He would hate her. She must save them both somehow. "Brand," she said, "Oh Brand, I'm scared. Take me home, please."

She felt his body relax and then straighten again, a new rigidity. "Scared," he taunted, "Whatever of?" He was brave once more, and inclined to bluster, but his hand still held hers, a tight grip.

Marsh was in disgrace the next morning. Not that anyone said anything. That is, anyone except Brand. But Marsh knew. They had left half the chestnuts ungathered to come straggling home at the end of an hour, because Marsh was afraid. John had been kind, holding her hand and comforting her. "It doesn't matter," he had said, "we made quite a haul. Don't worry, Marshie." But Marsh knew he was a little ashamed of her, a little disappointed.

At the breakfast table Cousin Edith said, "Well, was it worth getting up for? Tell me about it. Then did you get in?"

Marsh looked down at her fingers spread along the table's edge. John squirmed, pushing back his chair and crossing his legs. He was sorry for her. He wouldn't all. It was Brand who answered.

"It was two," he said, "The clock struck just as we got in."

Marsh wriggled, trying to find words. Maybe Brand was going to take the
blame. But she mustn't let him. It would be harder for Brand than for her. Girls could be cowards, but boys--

"Two?" Cousin Edith spoke before Marsh had a chance. "Two? But you didn't start until 12:30. Maybe it was after 12:30, surely?"

John gulped some water. "Oh, well," he said, "we got about all, and it was darn cold."

Cousin Edith laughed. Her words tumbled over themselves in her hurry, "My poor, delicate children. My poor." Her eyes were mocking.

Marsh tried again. Her lips moved stiffly, "I--"

But Brand took the words away from her. "Marsh got cold feet," he said.

He tilted back in his chair and looked at Marsh, his mouth pulled downwards in amused disdain. "She didn't like the dark or something. I knew how it would be if we took a girl along."

Cousin Edith said flatly, "I don't believe it. Marsh is no coward."

Brand jerked back his chair and stood up. His face was washed white, his full, soft under lip pulsed unevenly. "You think I'm lying. You think that. Ask John."

"I'm not asking anybody," Cousin Edith's face was white too, but quiet. "I simply said I didn't believe it."

"Well, it is so, isn't it Marsh?" You tell her." He turned toward Marsh. There was no shame in his eyes, only a fierce indignation that they should question for a moment.

And Marsh understood. He isn't acting. He isn't pretending. He thinks it's true. She jumped down from her chair and, running around to him, flung her arms about his neck. "Of course, Brand isn't fibbing," she cried. "It's true. I was scared."

"See," said Brand, "How will you believe me?" He pulled free from Marsh's arms and stalked from the room. John looked uncertainly from Cousin Edith to Marsh, from Marsh to Cousin Edith, then went after him, running in queer awkward leaps.
"Well, Marsh," said Cousin Edith. Her voice was tired, unhurried, gentle. "You shouldn't do that you know." She held out her arms and suddenly Marsh was in them, sobbing with her head against Cousin Edith's shoulder. "You shouldn't try to save Brand like that," she said.

XII

Marsh was at the piano. She had had a few music lessons before Father died. She still remembered enough to pick out easy pieces and stumble over the bass.

"Play Juanita," said John. He sat on the bench beside Marsh, flipping over pages of the old music book. "No, here's a dandy. Play this." He began to pick out the treble with one finger. Marsh bent closer to the music in the fading winter twilight.

"A Spanish cavalier,

Stood in his retreat--"

She found the right chords, "Sing."

John sang, flinging back his head, his pure high soprano rising and falling as clear cut and fine as the carvings of a cameo.

"Bright sunny days,

Will soon fade away--"

Oh, they were having fun, she and John. Outside it was winter, a still, soft, white winter, the snow falling gently, drifting like petals through the quiet air. Inside there was the fire, the warmth, Brand by the fire sprawled on his stomach with his elbows on the pages of a book, and she and John, close together and friendly in the dark. Happiness caught at her throat, choking her, "Bright sunny days--"


He dropped down on the bench and spread out his fingers. He had broken in on their security, their peace, but he did not care. He did not even know.
"Listen," he said. He began to run his fingers over the keys, a light, clear, staccato sound, the clip of raindrops on tender new leaves. No tune, but a rhythm, a beat, growing louder, whirling suddenly into a clatter of wind and lashing rain. It was all there as plain as a picture, but more breathtaking, more real. It tor at you, jerked you apart, turned you inside-out, and left you at last weak and quivering and a little afraid.

"There," said Brand. His voice had a sharp quick beat, an echo of the music itself. He turned toward Marsh, his face a white splotch in the darkness, his eyes holding the firelight, burning and fierce. "That's playing," he said.

Marsh was crying, tears ran slowly down her cheeks and dropped on to her folded hands. She turned away her head from Brand's seeing eyes. But it was too late.

"Why say, you're crying," he said. And then exultantly, "John, John, look at Marsh. I made her cry."

John crossed over from the fireplace and stood close to Marsh. His mouth was angry, pulled in at the corners. "Well, you needn't be so darn cocky about it," he said.


Brand was cruel sometimes, sharp moments of cruelty. He liked to show you up in the worst possible light, to smash you into bits and thenloat over you. Marsh almost hated him then. He frightened her. She would cling to John, finding in him a refuge from something too powerful for her to understand. But when Brand was afraid of the dark, or sick with one of his headaches she forgot everything except her joy in protecting him, and was happy.

A week later, when Cousin Edith said: "Marsh, I think it would be nice for you to go on with your music lessons. I can manage very well if--" Marsh had shaken her head and set her mouth stubborn-tight. "I don't want to," she said. "I don't care about playing, really." Inside there was a little growing
pain. She did want to. She loved the touch of the smooth, creasy keys be-
neath her fingers. But when she remembered the gap between Brand's playing and
hers, she couldn't do it. "Let Brand take them," she said.

"He won't stick at it. He took lessons for five years, you know, and
then quarreled with Miss Knopf and wouldn't go on. I tried everything."

"Maybe he will now."

"I wonder. If I sent him into the city he might. Perhaps I can manage it."

Surprisingly enough, Brand was willing. "I'll stick at it," he said, "I'll
learn all there is to learn. Someday I'll be famous."

Marsh watched Brand cross a wide, bright stage to the black triangle of the
piano. He bowed jerkily, pushing back his hair. She saw his eyes shining,
glowing under his heavy lids, the little uneven quiver of his lower lip. Then
he seated himself at the piano, lifted his thin fine hands. Yes, Brand would
be famous someday. Brand Barnett, pianist.

So it was arranged, and Brand went into the city once a week for music
lessons. At first he could not get enough of it, practicing most of the time
between waking and sleeping, running scales hour after hour on the old rosewood
piano. But it did not last. Five months, six. The hours of practice came
less and less often. In the midst of scales he would bring his hands down on
the keyboard. Crash. A series of wild rebellious chords. Finally he re-
volted. "I won't take another lesson. I hate it. It's stupid. Old Webb
keeps me drumming away at exercises when I want to play."

"But you have to go through a certain amount of drudgery in anything before
you can really master it," said Cousin Edith.

"Then I won't master it. It isn't worth it. Nothing's worth all this
silly stuff."

Mr. Webb, the music teacher, came out from the city to see Cousin Edith.
He sat in the living room with his hat on his knees. His face was carved out of wood, but his eyes were alive, black and fierce under fierce black brows. "He has unusual talent," he said, "But it will amount to nothing at this rate. He must be made to work."

"You make him," said Cousin Edith, "I can't. I've tried everything. Punishing him only makes him more stubborn and he won't listen to reason. I'm afraid," she said, "I'm rather unsuccessful as a mother." Her chin shook.

Marsh slipped out through the door and up the stairs to the old playroom where Brand huddled on the window-seat reading the "Opium Eater."

"Gee," he said, "You ought to read this. The dreams that fellow had! I'm going to try opium some day."

Marsh stood with her hands folded in front of her and looked at him. After a moment she said, "Mr. Webb's down stairs." Brand pretended not to hear, but she saw his eyebrows twitch and draw together. "Mr. Webb's downstairs," she said again, "And he wants you to go on taking lessons."

"Well, he can go right straight back to town, because I won't."

"Cousin Edith's feeling pretty bad about it," said Marsh.

He glanced up at that. "Is she crying?"

"No-o, she isn't crying, but--"

"Oh, well," he said indifferently, "What'd you come bothering me for then?"

"I thought perhaps you might keep on taking 'em if I asked you."

"I should say not. I'm through."

"But--"

"Oh, don't go butting me. I won't have it. I tell you I'm through. It's my temperament. A fellow can't get away from his temperament." It was a new word, a conjure word, something to impress people with. Marsh could not know what a powerful force it was to become in Brand's life, a fetich, an unfailing alibi, more powerful that Brand himself, controlling him.
She went out of the playroom and down the stairs. On the last step she paused to watch Mr. Webb go. He stepped out into the thin, sharp rain turning up his coat collar about his ears, walking away down the lane under the dripping tree branches. Walking away. Brand had won.

XIII

Something had happened to the farm since Marsh had come to Pleasant Meadows three years before. Jim had gone for one thing, and there was no one to take his place. John helped after school and did most of the milking. "We're poor," he explained to Marsh, "We haven't had a good crop in four years and it's old Frank's fault." Marsh could not see why it was Cousin Frank's fault, but then she was a girl and stupid. She noticed some things, however, even though she could not understand. The house needed whitewashing, long flaky strips peeled from the walls, showing the rough plaster beneath. "I'm afraid it will have to go another year," said Cousin Edith, "I can't spare the money right now." Belle had been sold and there was only old Charlie to drive. Marsh's winter coat was too small for her, but she wore it anyway with a ruffle of gingham dress hanging below. Cousin Edith had new wrinkles about her eyes, and when Brand was naughty she did not often punish him, only laughed a little. A laugh that was not happy somehow, and that made Brand furious. He would go off and sulk by himself and no one paid any attention to him but Marsh.

The garden blossomed and faded, wrapped itself in snow for a little while, and then, with the spring sun blossomed again. The cherry trees flung white festoons against the sky. Stony Creek overflowed its banks and became a river plucking at the willow roots and snarling. When it subsided and was a creek once more. The days lengthened, and it was summer; shortened, and it was winter. Time, like the waters of Stony Creek, hurried on, leaving the years behind.
Marsh was in the seventh grade now, and Brand and John in the eighth. The school bus still picked them up in the morning and brought them home at night. Marsh had Miss White for a teacher. She was cross sometimes, but Marsh was her pet. "Teacher's pet," Brand called her, "Teacher's pet." He had hated Miss White when he was in her class, and once she had sent a note home to Cousin Edith. It was something about "unmannerly and lazy," and Cousin Edith had taken Brand off by himself and talked to him. Afterwards he hated Miss White more than ever. "Then she came to supper one night, he hid in the barn and they could not find him. Marsh sneaked him a cake when he came in. He ate it greedily but did not thank her. Still she felt repaid for her deception because he was starved-hungry and yet too proud to ask for anything.

John and Brand had both grown, but John had grown faster. Marsh only reached to his shoulder now. He had to duck his head to talk to her. When he doubled up his arm you could see the muscles lumping into a knot beneath the skin. His voice was changing. Sometimes it was a thin, high squeak, and then, almost before you knew it, it dropped to his shoes and rumbled. It was very comical, but John did not like being teased about it. He had grown sensitive about a great many things, and once Marsh caught him alone crying over almost nothing at all. He was ashamed and pretended he had a cold, so she pretended too, and told him a funny joke to make him laugh. But after that she loved him harder than ever, if not so comfortably.

MIV

When Marsh was eleven, a new family moved into the house across the road. The place had been idle after Mr. Dutton died, then suddenly it was alive again.

John came into lunch bursting with information. "There's four of them," he said, "Their name's Kemp."

"What sort of four?" Cousin Edith asked, amused.
"Oh, the mother and father, a boy named Lee—He's fourteen, and a
girl. I think Lee called her Frances."

"That's nice," said Cousin Edith, "A girl will be company for Marsh."

Marsh was not altogether pleased. Another girl, a boy for John and
Brand. She did not want to play with a girl. She looked across the table at
Brand. He made a face at her, screwing up his nose and laughing.

"Now us fellows can play sometimes without Marsh tagging along. Pretty good
joke on Marsh, being a girl."

"I don't mind," said Marsh, "I'm glad. I get tired of boys anyway."

It was a lie, but she did not care. She wanted to hurt Brand just once, to
make him suffer as she suffered. But the shot glanced away, leaving him
unscathed.

The next morning Marsh met Frances Kemp. She had gone down to the gate
to get the mail. Across the road Frances swung on her own gate, her bare
toes curled about the lowest rail. When she saw Marsh she grinned. "Hello."

Frances was a square little girl with a rather long, rather square face.
Her yellow hair was cut short like a boy's and lay across her forehead in a
straight bang. When she talked her eyes widened, stretching back the lids
so that a narrow white rim showed about the iris. She wore faded blue denim
overalls, much too big for her, and her blue shirt was open at the throat.

"Hello," she said again. She jumped down from the gate and came across
the road, the dust puffing up from between her bare toes. "You're Marsh,
aren't you?"

"You're Frances."

Frances swung herself to the top rail of Marsh's gate and sat astride.

"That's my real name, but nobody calls me it."

"What do they call you?"

"Biddy."
"Oh."

"It's a chicken name," said Biddy, "when I was little I always said, 'Biddy, Biddy, 'iddy,' to our chickens, and Lee, that's my brother, he was only four then, began calling me that. He couldn't say Frances very well, 'f's bothered him."

"It's a nice name."

Biddy grinned. One of her front teeth was broken, a little pointed fang. It gave her a sudden, lopsided look. "Your's is nice, too," she said. "It belongs to you, somehow." Then, "What shall we do? Let's play."

"I have to take back the letters first."

"I'll come with you." Biddy swung her leg over the rail and jumped. She didn't ask if she might come; she took it for granted. Side by side they went down the lane under the drooping tree branches.

After they had left the letters on the hall table they ran out of doors into the windy sunshine.

"I like your place," said Biddy, "Show me things - everything."

"What first?"

"Have you a swing? We had one in Delaware. It broke with Lee once, and sent him head over heels right into the curmudgeon bushes. 'E looked like he'd been in a cat fight." Under 'iddy's firm, clear voice ran secret laughter, a hidden stream ready to overflow. "See, but he was funny! And mad!"

"It must have hurt awfully."

"You'd have thot so the way he howled."

The swing with its strong, taut ropes hung from the oak tree in the south meadow. It was big enough for two with squeezing. Marsh and Biddy crowded in side by side. They kicked into the hard dirt.

"You have two brothers, haven't you? John and the other one."

"They're my cousins."
"Oh, where's your father and mother?"

"They're dead."

"Oh — how funny. Do you live here always?"

"For a long time. Three years. I was eight when I came."

"Then you're eleven now. I'm older than you. I'm twelve. Lee's thirteen."

"John's fourteen," said Marsh.

"And the other one? What's his name?"

"He's thirteen. Brand."

"He's funny, isn't he?" said Biddy. "I mean queer-funny. He's so— Oh, I don't know, a sort of cat-that-walks-by-himself-and-is-a-friend-to-no-man. I liked John."

"You mustn't say that about Brand," said Marsh. She wouldn't be friends with Biddy if she talked about Brand that way. "But maybe it was because she didn't understand. 'Brand's not funny. It's because he's smart, smarter than the rest of us. He has a temper'ment.'"

"Oh," said Biddy, "Maybe that's it. I only saw him a minute. I liked John."

She dug her toe into the earth and the swing soared higher, cutting an arc thru the blue air. "What's temper'ment, anyway?" she asked.

XV

The four of them were playing croquet. Lee and Marsh were partners, and Brand and Biddy. John was umpire. He leaned against a tree with his hands in his pockets and called out directions. "Now, Lee, it's your turn."

They were playing the rubber. Marsh and Lee were ahead by one wicket. "If you don't watch out we'll beat you," sang Lee. Lee played carefully, measuring the distance with his eye before he struck. He did everything
carefully, slowly, making a serious business of it. Brand played a brilliant, erratic game. The ball cracked away from his mallet and spun across the ground, wide of the mark sometimes, sometimes rolling miraculously into place. But now he was concentrating furiously, watching each play. He wanted to win.

Lee held his mallet with both hands. He bent above it, aimed and struck. The ball went thru the wicket. "We're two ahead now! We're two ahead!"

It was Brand's turn. He had to get into position for the middle wicket. One shot would do it if he were careful. The ball rolled against the wicket and bounced back. He was wired.


As Marsh stooped for her mallet, she sent a fleeting tail-end glance back to Brand, and she saw it was only the flick of an instant, but she saw Brand's foot creep out an inch, the fraction of an inch, and ease his ball into position. She struck and her ball went wild, missed the hoop by a foot, and rolled away.

"Rotten," said Lee, "that was a rotten shot. Gee whiz."

Biddy and Lee, it was Brand's turn again. He aimed and the ball cleared the wicket. "Now who's ahead?"

But Lee spun around on him. "What's funny," he said, "what's darn funny. You were wired last time. You couldn't have made it. How'd that ball get moved?"

Brand flung back his shoulders and stood erect. His face was pale, the edges of his nostrils quivered. "What'd you mean?"

Lee rushed over to him. "I mean your ball was here," he thumped the ground with his mallet. "It was here. It couldn't of got thru without its being moved. See?"

"All right," said Brand. "Say it."

"All right, I will then. You cheat!"
They faced each other, Brand, his eyes very black and wide in his white face, his lower lip twisted between his teeth to stop its uneven pulsing, Lee scarlet, lowering, his breath coming in short, hard gasps.

"I'll fight you for that," said Brand. His voice was shrill and sharp. "I'll fight you for that, you dirty, common liar."

"Liar yourself!"

But John was between them. "Cut it out," he said, "Shut up, Brand. Shut up, both of you."

"I won't shut up. I'm fighting I tell you." Brand swung about on John, furiously beating off his restraining hands.

"He's bigger'n you, Brand. He'll knock you out."

A pulsing shiver along Brand's body, a moment of indecision. "Well, he's got to eat dirt then. He's got to eat dirt before I quit."

"Like hell I will."

There was no other way to settle it. In back of the barn was a space of hard trampled ground, far away from the house. John helped Brand out of his shirt. "Now go at it easy," he cautioned, "Don't hit until you're sure."

But Brand was not listening. His eyes were on Lee. Lee crawled out of his sweater, flung it to "iddy and came forward with his chin thrust out, his arms bent at the elbows, hands clenched into fists. "Come on."

Brand moved toward him, head high, smiling. His eyes were narrowed and shining under their heavy lids. He did not seem afraid. But Sarah wondered. Perhaps it was only a pretense, a pretense that would crumple away under the first blow of Lee's fist. "He stumbled across to John. He smiled at her, and put his arm about her shoulder.

The two boys came close together, stopped face to face, a moment. Then Lee drew back his arm, lunged and caught Brand on the shoulder. There was an instant of recoil, a second when Brand wavered. Sarah shut her eyes, she couldn't look. But she had to look. She put her hands to her face and peered thru her fingers.
The moment of hesitation was over. Fury had caught Brand out of himself, shaped him anew. He came at Lee, head high, arms flying. He moved lightly on the balls of his feet, ducking away from Lee's plunging, awkward blows. He danced tiptoe, his lower lip drawn back from his teeth, a demon suddenly, a dynamo, unafraid, untouchable. Lee's fists missed him by an inch. He struck out viciously, doggedly and met only air. Brand's quick, pelting blows caught him on the chest, the shoulder, the side of his head. He brushed them away bewildered and tore in again to strike at a fleeing shadow.

"Good old Brand," shouted John, "Good kid, didn't know you had it in you."

Even Marsh was swept out of herself, lifted on a mounting wave of excitement. "Give it to him. Give it to him."

And then it happened. Lee, with his head thrust forward, came at Brand, and Brand, cool contemptuous, dodged, shot out his arm and caught Lee on the nose. There was the thud of Brand's hard-boned little fist on soft flesh, a gurgling, inarticulate cry from Lee, a spurt of blood splattering Brand's white jersey. Lee wavered, turned and ran towards Biddy, his hands pressed against his nose, blood oozing from between his fingers.

Brand's arms dropped to his sides limp. He looked from Lee to his own crimson spattered jersey, back to Lee. Then his face went a queer pasty white, his mouth twisted. Turning his back on them all he was violently, wrenchingly sick.

Lee was not hurt after all. The blood had fooled them. He mopped it away with Biddy's grimy handkerchief and grinned at them shamefaced. "Guess Brand won," he said, "his ol' nose. Let's shake, Brand."

But Brand would not have it, would not look at them. He started off toward the house, walking uncertainly, his shoulder blades sticking out of his jersey.

Marsh said, "Let him alone. Can't you see?"

"See what?" Lee asked bewildered.
"He's sick," said Biddy, "It's turned his stomach. Don't be look funny?" Laughter bubbled to her lips. She and Brand were alike, laughing at other people's unhappiness. But different, too. Biddy had nothing to hide; her laughter turned inward at times, clear laughter without shame. She found even herself a little funny. Biddy could never hurt you as Brand hurt. She would never suffer as Brand suffered.

Cousin Edith put Brand to bed and fixed him orange juice in a tall glass. She was a little distressed, but a great deal more amused. "He'll be all right by morning. I suppose all boys fight now and then. What was it about, Marsh?"

"Croquet," said Marsh.

"And what happened?"

"I don't remember, except they got mad." Fibbing made her uncomfortable, but being a tattle-tale was worse.

"I shall have to put the croquet set away if it happens again," said Cousin Edith.

Marsh went out to the porch and sat in the hammock. In a little while John joined her. He leaned against the railing and stared moodily down the drive. A man on horseback stopped at the gate, waved, and then rode on. "That's Charlie Pratt," said John, "Guess he's been to town." He glanced at Marsh. "Wish I knew something."

"What?"

"Wish I knew whether Brand did move that darn ball."

"Why?" She had difficulty in getting the word past the string-tight place in her throat.

"Oh, because, if he did he ought to be licked, that's what."

"Would you-----lick him?"

"Well I might. I could do it, only I'd hate it like anything."

She had meant to tell him, but now she couldn't tell him. It would
be too dreadful, Joan licking Brand and hating it. "I guess he didn't," she said faintly.

That evening Cousin Edith had callers, Mr. and Mrs. Davis from Oak Hall. Marsh slipped off to bed early. At Brand's door she paused, and then opening it cautiously, went in.

In the pale, thin moonlight she could see him lying flat on his stomach, his face buried in the pillow. His shoulders moved convulsively under his cotton pajama jacket. Marsh dropped on her knees beside the bed. His hand came out dry and hot, and closed over hers. "Don't go," he said, "Don't go." He was crying, gasping, tearing sobs that pulled his body apart. There was no pretense now, no shame.

"I won't," she said, "I won't go, Brannie."

His free hand thumped the pillow. "I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking about it. His nose squashing out under my hand, his dirty blood on my shirt. Ugh!"

"But it's over."

"No, it isn't. I'll always remember it. You shouldn't touch people close like that, it's dirty."

"Well, you needn't ever again."

"I'll have to; some day I'll have to."

"Why?" She could not understand. She was frightened and cold and the hard boards cut her knees. "Why will you?"

He turned on the pillow and looked at her, "A fellow's got to. He's got to do things other fellows do or else they'll laugh at him."

"Well, let 'em laugh. What do we care, you and me?" She repeated the last words firmly, "You and me."

He jerked up in the bed staring at her in the dim light. "You don't care what they say about me, do you Marsh?"

"No."

"You don't care what they call me?"
"No."

"Even if they say I'm a cheat. Even if they say that, you won't be-
lieve them."

Marsh watched Brand's foot grope out and secretly ease the ball an inch, the fraction of an inch. It slid across the grass into position. "I - I saw," she said weakly.

"Saw what?"

"The ball, when you moved it."

"Oh--" He seemed overwhelmed for an instant, embarrassed and uncomfortable, then quite at ease again. "Oh well," he said carelessly, "It was only a little bit."

yes, that was true, that was quite true, and yet--

"I'd have won anyway," he said, "That just hurried it along, see?"

It sounded reasonable enough. She could almost believe that there was no sin in it, he treated it so casually. But his indifference was only a pose after all. Suddenly he seized her arm. "You won't tell, will you? Promise."

"Tell what?"

"About the ball. Not that I care, except - Let's keep it a secret, us two knowing and that's all."

She liked secrets. If you shared a secret with a person it meant that you belonged together, that there was a bond between you that could not be broken. She put her hand down on the pillow beside his. "All right, I pro-
mise, honest true."

He sighed and relaxed, "You're a good kid, Marsh." It was high praise from Brand. She gloved a moment, cherishing this new, unhoped-for intimacy. Then the glow faded and she was cold and a little miserable. A fib-secret was not, like other secrets, completely satisfying. 'T pinched in places and made you squirm because, remembering John, you felt that he would despise you if he knew. Even the delight of belonging with Brand was not worth that.
John was late going home that afternoon. He had stayed on at school after the others left to finish an experiment in chemistry. While he was working Mr. Scott, the science teacher, came in. John sat on the edge of the long table and talked to him. It was not their first talk. They had got to know each other rather well during the past year. A sort of friendship had sprung up between them born of their common interest in research.

"This is your last year in school, John, and then what?"

"I want to go to the U if I can. I want to keep on with this work."

John's hand swept out in a vague inclusive gesture.

"I see. Think you'd like to go on in chemical research?"

"Well, there's nothing else I'd like better." That was not what he wanted to say, but words were difficult unwieldy things. He could never handle them with Brand's facile ease.

To go on in chemistry. That was what he wanted most of all. Long hours in the laboratory. The smell of chemicals, the careful intricate details. One failure after another twisting his heart. But in the end maybe success. Not much perhaps, but a link in the chain of human knowledge, a step forward. It was something he couldn't talk about.

He said, "I like puttering around with test tubes and things. I like working on my own."

"It's a long grind, John. Sometimes it seems like a thankless one. It takes endless patience. And the rewards-- well, there aren't apt to be many."

"I don't care about rewards much. And I don't mind the grind. Of
course—" He paused and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, lighted it.

"I may not have it in me," he said, "I've been at it such a short time. It's hard to tell yet, but I'd like a try at it."

Mr. Scott smiled. "I'd like to see you have a try," he said. "You're right. It's too soon to judge you yet. Two years of chemistry isn't even the first rung. But I believe you have the stuff in you. After four years in college you'd know pretty definitely.

"That's the way I look at it. If I can only swing it."

"Think you can manage four years? There's a chance for a fellowship after that if you want to go on."

"I don't know. I've talked it over with Mother and she's all for it. But there's the farm."

"It's run a bit to seed, hasn't it?"

"Yes, that's it. We have good land but—" He paused. It did not seem quite fair to crab about Cousin Frank, but he did want to talk to someone. He couldn't stay bottled up forever. "Mother's cousin, Frank Tyler, has been running the place for us since grandfather died," he said, "I guess I don't know much about farming but, oh, he keeps on in the same old rut and won't try anything new. We just about make enough to live on and that's all."

"And you?"

"Me? Well, I'd like to buy some new machinery and things so we could run the place efficiently. As it is, we keep plodding along going from bad to worse."

"But new machinery costs money."

"Sure, I know that, but it would pay for itself in no time."

"Why not sell the place, it's worth a good bit, isn't it?"

John leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. His fingers twisted the cigarette. "We can't," he said, "not until I'm twenty-one. That's two years off. Grandfather left the farm to grand and me. He can't
sell it until I'm of age."

"I see," Mr. Scott looked at John thoughtfully. He was a big loosely
hung man with a ruffle of gray hair, sharp kind eyes, a long neck with a
swelling Adam's apple. "In that case," he said, "why don't you borrow the
money? You can give the farm as security. Then when you're of age, sell
and pay back what you borrowed."

"Yes, we could do that, but I don't know. Mother's pretty fond of the
place. We all are I guess. I think we'd kind of hate to sell."

"I understand how you feel. Still you shouldn't let sentiment influence
you. You've got to make some sacrifices in order to get what you really want."

"Sure, that's true, and I'd be willing to sell all right, but I'm not
the only one who has a say."

"Perhaps you can get the others to see your point of view."

"Well, I'll think it over and sound them about it."

"If you don't borrow, what's your idea for getting through?"

John flung his cigarette from the window and dug his hands in his pockets.
"I've figured it out this way," he said. He paused a moment scowling thought-
fully, then went on. "Cousin Frank will go on running the farm on shares
like he's been doing. I'll work summers, that's the busy time. With what
we've saved and counting on an average crop this summer we'll pull through
one year anyway."

"And then?"

"Well, if we made one year we'll make the next. I don't look any further
than that."

"Yes, you ought to get thru if nothing unforeseen happens."

"I hope so, but expenses mount up to quite a lot. At home, you know,
and then college. I figure I can live on fifty-five a month. Add fifty-five
or sixty for Brand. That makes a hundred and fifteen. It's pretty high,
isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I'd forgotten Brand finished this year. Is he going to the U too?"

John nodded.

"What's he taking?"

"He doesn't know yet. Brand's so darn clever. He can draw, you know. Really well, Miss McKubbin says. She encouraged him a lot. And he's got a bug about writing. Brand can do most anything he wants to. He's not like me. I'm the dumb one." John laughed. "We're going to be proud of Brand someday."

"I hope so," said Mr. Scott. His eyes looked past John out of the window to the blue haze of the distant hills. "You mustn't let Brand stand in your way, John," he said slowly. "He's clever, but you've got something that will go further perhaps, that's perseverance."

John flushed; a dark painful red. "Thanks," he said abruptly, "I know about where I stand. I'm not a fool maybe but I'm not smart. Brand's got first say, that's only fair."

"Well--" said Mr. Scott.

They had talked half an hour longer, about courses and requirements, about life at the university. As he rose to go, John said, "I'm thinking of cutting out the insurance this year. It eats into our money and we've never got anything out of it yet."

"That's rather risky, isn't it?"

"I guess maybe it is, but the cash will come in handy."

"Why not insure for 75%? It would cover any loss."

"That would make some difference but I don't know. Do you think sixty would do it?"

Mr. Scott hesitated. "Yes," he said at last, "Sixty might be enough I wouldn't chance any less."
"I'll think it over," said John. "Thanks a lot."

Out in the cold March dusk John turned his back on the school and started toward home. He was glad of the mile and a half of lonely road that stretched before him. He did his best thinking when he walked alone. Funny thing the way people talked about Brand. Only it wasn't what they said exactly but what they didn't say. You couldn't come back at them for an implication. But something within John always rose for defense. It was as tho he stood fists clenched ready to fight Brand's battles.

He strode on, his soft hat pushed back on his head, the wind in his face. If the weather didn't warm up soon he'd never get the spring wheat in. Then they'd be set for sure and it would be his fault. Frank had wanted to plant winter wheat as usual, sixty acres or so and the rest of the land in corn and oats. But John had rebelled, backing his stubbornness against Frank's. For the first time he had won out. Frank had yielded, ungraciously, grudgingly, but he had yielded. "It's a darn fool thing to do, but go your own way if you think there's no hereafter."

"But gee, Frank, there's lots more profit on wheat than anything else. We have a chance to make a big turn-over if we plant a hundred and twenty-five acres and don't bother with the little stuff."

"Putting all your eggs in one basket is pretty risky."

"There's not half as much risk with wheat as with other things. Just because the crop winter killed last year is no sign. We'll plant spring this year so there won't be a chance of that." He had gone on eagerly, "It'll ripen so we can harvest it the first of August and get it on the market before the northwest crop comes in. It'll mean big money."

"Sure if you get anything to harvest; this isn't a wheat country."

"It's a good wheat country if you know how to go about planting. Sam Davis cleared two thousand last year."

"That's because the weather was just right. It don't often
happen."

"Well, I'm going to try it anyway. Gosh, Frank, I ought to have some say, oughtn't I?"

"All right, go ahead I tell you. There's no sense trying to make you listen to reason."

That had been the preceding fall. Now it was spring, but a spring still ice-bound, winter-locked. "Gee, it's got to warm up soon," John thought, "It can't stay cold much longer." He felt that he had almost convinced Frank about the wheat, but if anything went wrong, now he'd never hear the last of it. He set his mouth in a stubborn line. "Oh dog-gone," he said, "I'll pull through yet, watch me."

As he turned out of the last street into the country road some one called him, "John, slow down for Pete's sake." He swung about. Siddy was running toward him waving her tam. She was breathless and laughing. "Golly, I've chased you miles and I was winded when I started. Two hours of basketball, whew!"

She caught up to him and stopped panting. Her yellow hair clung in little damp strings to her forehead. "You old bum," she said, "Now walk like a gentleman." She slipped her arm thru his.

"Here, give me your books." John held out his hand.

"You are a gentleman. But I don't need help."

"It's my one wish."

"Oh no, your thousand and oneth."

John looked down at Siddy's little square face turned up to his in the dusk. Nice kid, Siddy, she met you on your own grounds and asked no odds. What a cheerful little face she had, wide apart blue eyes and a straight freckled nose under the yellow bang. She was built like a boy, straight and firm with broad shoulders and narrow swinging hips. Thought like a boy too, no silly sentiment. She knew what she wanted and went after it.

"What kept you hanging around so late?"
"Talking to Scott."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he went to the U. and I'm gathering information."

"Oh-- you want to go there, don't you?"

"You bet I do. I want to do some good stiff work in chemistry. It's the thing I like."

"It's fun, isn't it?" said Biddy, "Knowing what you want to do and going after it."

"It makes things a lot easier somehow."

"And lots more exciting."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I guess the fellow who doesn't know gets just as much kick out of trying things."

"I don't think so." said Biddy decidedly.

They walked a little way in silence, then Biddy spoke. "Marsh didn't stay for basket ball. Brand wanted her to pose for him so she went home. Marsh'd be a peach of a player if she'd only keep at it. Can't you make Brand leave her alone?"

John did not answer for a moment, at last: "I guess Marsh does what she wants to do. If she'd rather do that--"

"Oh, you!"

"Well, you just said 'know what you want to do and go after it.'" Biddy grinned and squeezed John's arm. "Strike one! I 'spose if it's what she wants--- But it means we're short a darn good player."

"Selfish."

"Well, if I'm selfish so's Brand, and so's Marsh. She's selfish for Brand."

"Oh, well."

"That's the way you always trail off when I say anything about Brand. You're not as bad as Marsh. She curls up like a porcupine. But you're all that way. As if Brand were Napoleon or someone like that. As if --
I were swearing at God."

"Why are you so down on Brand then?"

"I'm not down on him. It's just that I'm not up on him either.
I'm the only one who can see him straight. Even Lee--"

John thought: There's something in what Biddy's saying after all. We
have got a different way of looking at Brand. Perhaps her's is the
fairer. But loyalty to Brand smothered the doubt. For an instant he
almost hated Biddy's clear, straight unemotional mind. "Oh, let's talk
about something else."

Biddy laughed. "'Scuse please," she said. "Shall we talk about
the three angles of an equilateral triangle?" Biddy didn't get sore and
pout. A good kid.

After supper John went out to the barn to feed the stock. He had
begun to take over a good bit of the work on the farm. "Getting my hand
in," he said. And he like it well enough. After he had poured the grain
into the feed boxes he lingered a moment breathing in the close sweet,
rather acrid odor of the stable. The horses munched noisily with their
noses deep in the grain, their smooth bodies caught the gleam from the
lantern swinging in John's hand. He smiled a little and tangled his finger
in old Belle's mane. Then he turned and went into the room off the barn.

It had once been the harness room but John had fitted it up as a
laboratory. A musty close little place with one window high up in the
wall. Badly equipped too, a Bunsen burner, a row of test tubes, three or
four bottles of chemicals, that was all. But John loved it. He had spent
some of his happiest hours there. He put the lantern down on the table
and reached for a test tube holding it critically before the light.

Brand's voice startled him. "Hello. I thought I'd find you plug-
ning away in here."

He came into the room and lounged against the wall with his hands
in his pockets. The upward light from the lantern threw his face into shar
relief against the dark boards. The face of a little boy, not yet molded
into conformity, not yet defined. Contradictions. Tired, heavy lidded
eyes and a full tremulous sensitive mouth. Two faces in one. Neither
willing to yield ground to the other, each struggling for supremacy and
the outcome unsure.

John put down the test tube and turned toward him. "Say, I think
the things's working out. I believe I've got it."

"You really like that sort of stuff?"

"You bet I do. If I get to the U next year I'm going to dig away at
it night and day."

"Gee whiz, it's the last thing in the world I'd want to tackle. Shut
up all the time in a musty lab."

"I know, but you're different from me."

"A lot. I want to see things and meet people. I'm tired of being
buried alive here. You've no idea how stupid it is for a fellow with in-
telligence. You like it."

"What?"

Brand was suddenly discomfited. "I didn't mean it exactly that way,
John. You've got brains. But you aren't temperamental like me."

"No," said John. He caught Brand's head in the crook of his arm
fumbling his hair between his fingers. "Old Brand."

They went back to the house together arm in arm. Marsh looked up
from her book as they came into the living room. "I wish I could do
algebra. It doesn't even make sense." Her forehead was drawn into a little
worried pucker, a lock of hair fell across her cheek. Marsh had grown in
the last four years, shooting up straight and tall like a candle. She had a
dark rather long face, between two waves of dark hair, a drooping full
lipped mouth. Her eyes were set deep under black brows. Most of the time
they were quiet eyes, still and clear, but when Brand spoke to her they
widened and darkened as tho the spirit behind them struggled to leap across
to him.
"Here," said John, "Let me have a look at it." He held out his hand for the book.

"It's this one. I can't make it work out somehow."

"We'll have it in a jiffy." John dropped on the arm of Marsh's chair and reached for a pencil. "If three men can do a piece of--"

But Brand interrupted them. He came close to the table and stood over them his hands in his jacket pockets, an little sulky, a little bored. "What's the sense of fooling with that stuff anyway? If three men can do a piece of work in four days how long will take a hen to lay an egg?"

"That depends a lot on the price of eggs," said John. He laughed and bent closer above the book. "Shut up for a sec' will you? This takes concentration."

"Marsh, you said you'd pose for me tonight. You promised." Brand turned away from John, turned to Marsh. His eyes under their heavy lids held her's. "How am I going to get that thing done anyway if you keep backing out?"

Marsh wavered looking from John to Brand. "It'll only take a few minutes, Brand," she pleaded. "I've got to have it for tomorrow."

"I suppose my work doesn't count."

"It counts a lot. You know that. But I've got--"

"Oh, well, go along then."

"John," Marsh's hand came out and touched John's sleeve. "Do you mind working that by yourself and showing me later? I promised Brand."

"Yes, I do mind," said John. His own voice surprised him. "Brand can wait five minutes I guess. I've got my work to do too." It was not often that John flared up at Brand in that way, but something siddy had said coming home had made him more critical. Brand wasn't playing fair with Marsh. He wasn't playing fair with any of them, even himself, expecting them to drop everything for him. "Look here, Marsh. You do it this way."
John's voice shook a little but he bent lower above the paper and dug into the problem.

Brand turned his back on them and slouched over to the window. He stood with his shoulders hunched, looking into the dark.

"You see," said John, "You've got to let X equal-

But Marsh was not listening. Her eyes, dark, worried, wide-open were fixed on Brand. Her mind was on Brand too, far away from X's and y's and the division of labor.

John flung down the pencil. "You two," he said, "Go ahead and get at your drawing. I'll worry this out by myself."

It wasn't fair. It was darned unfair. But what could he do? Marsh always stuck up for Brand and left him out of it. Jealousy gripped him an instant. Marsh and Brand, and he playing second fiddle to Brand's cleverness. His mind was a clenched fist until a new thought relaxed it. Marsh came to him when she was in trouble, when she needed comforting. Those moments were his, not Brand's. The best moments.

When his mother came in from the kitchen fifteen minutes later she found John still bent over the algebra book. Brand and Marsh were across the room. Marsh sat in the high-backed wing chair, her hands folded loosely in her lap, her old profile outlined against the dark tapestry. Marsh's eyes followed the movement of Brand's quick fingers, the little impatient jerk of his brown head as glanced from her back to his drawing. She gave Mrs. Barnett a half smile, the slightest movement of her lips. Brand did not look up.

"Well, Mother?" said John. He pulled his mother's favorite chair close to the table beside him. "You and Lizzy counting the leftovers?"

His mother dropped into it and sighed, resting her head wearily against the chair back. The past five years had changed her, she was quieter, less voluble, a wash of gray over a bright landscape.

"I believe I'm tired. This trailing around after Lissy each
night to see that she doesn't go off with half our eatables. If only old Martha hadn't died. She was one darkie I could trust."

"Well, what do you do it for anyway?" Brand spoke impatiently without lifting his head. "I'd let her go off with the whole works before I'd play detective. It's cheap."

Mrs. Barnett smiled, "It's easy to talk in that high and mighty fashion, Brand. But suppose you try running the house for a while. You know as well as I do that we simply--"

"Oh well, I'd find some way to handle it."

"Yes, of course, only you never do." She reached for her sewing. "John, get me my glasses, will you? That's a good boy."

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. I left them somewhere. Look on the cabinet in the kitchen. No, I think--"

But John was gone. He came back five minutes later carrying the glasses. "Where do you suppose I found them this time?"

"I won't even guess."

"In the icebox."

"John! What in the world made you think of looking there?"

"I always look in the most unlikely places first."

Marsh laughed, straightening her lips quickly into their studied line of repose.

"You're getting old and forgetful, Mother," said Brand.

"I know. I'd lose my head if it wasn't screwed on."

"You lose it as it is."

"Oh, I know. I know."

John popped the glasses onto his mother's nose. "There you are."

There was quiet in the room for a little while save for the scratching of Brand's charcoal. Then Mrs. Barnett spoke. "I think at the end of the month I'll let Lissy go. I think it would be easier--"
John turned toward her smoothing his rumpled hair. "Easier how?"

"Oh, doing the work myself than following her about."

"You couldn't handle this big house alone."

"I think I could."

John laughed wryly. He understood his mother. She couldn't fool him. It wasn't many niggers who could be trusted when you came right down to it. Mother wanted to save money, that was it. Twenty-five dollars a month. It mounted up. They were so darn poor and there were still five years to go before any of them would be earning anything. Well, they'd manage somehow. He wasn't going to have another slave for them. He got up and went over to her dropping down on the arm of her chair.

"I'll go over accounts tomorrow," he said, "And see how we stand. I think we can pull through and keep Lissy too."

Brand flung down his charcoal. "That's enough for tonight. Guess I'm not in the mood."

"Whew, I am stiff." Marsh stretched gingerly moving her chin up and down, tapping her foot on the floor. "Both of my feet are asleep."

"Well, walk on 'em. That'll wake them up." Brand turned his back on her and crossed over to his mother. He sprawled on the floor at her feet flinging his arm across her lap and yawning, "Drawing's hard work."

His mother ran her fingers thru his hair but he moved away impatiently. "Aw, Mother, mussin' me all up!"

She smiled a little and took her hand away.

"What's that you and John were holding out about?" asked Brand.

"Something about firing Lissy."

"Yes, I said I could do the work easier myself than having to keep an eye on her. But John--"

"John's right for once in his life," said Brand positively. "It would look pretty wouldn't it, having you play cook!"
"Well I'm sure—"

"You aren't strong enough," said Brand decidedly, "And anyway it isn't necessary. We're not that hard up, are we, John?"

"Oh, we're hard up enough," said John, "But I think we can manage without having Mother—"

"Sure we can manage."

"A lot you know about it." John laughed and nudged Brand with the toe of his shoe, "Old day-dreamer." He leaned back looking his hands behind his head. "I was talking to Scott today," he said slowly, "He suggested we borrow enough money on the place to see us through college and then when I'm twenty-one, sell."

Mrs. Barnett's hand fluttered open, a slight protesting gesture. "But John, I've lived here all my life and my father before me, and his father. The place belongs to us."

"I know. I don't want to do it either. I was just telling you what Scott said."

"Oh, Scott be hanged." Brand jumped to his feet stretching his arms above his head. "A lot he knows about it. I guess we're not going to tear mother up by the roots just so we can go to college. That's darn selfishness." He bent and caught his mother into a quick close embrace. "Don't let John scare you, Muzzy. He can go to college and I'll stay here and run the place."

His mother laughed. "Crazy boy," she said, "You don't know a thing about farming."

"Well, I could learn. I'd work like a nigger rather than lose Pleasant Meadows." His lip trembled. "Golly, I love this place," he said abruptly, "I couldn't bear—" He swung on his heel and stood with his back to them facing the fire.

"Gee Brand," John was puzzled and a little annoyed, "You needn't make such a row about it. I don't want to sell any more than you do. I
just said—" He hesitated a moment. "Anyway you were japping out in the
barn not two hours ago about being buried alive here. I that—"

Brand turned to face him. "Sure, you that," he said defiantly,
"That's just it. You can't understand moods. Why I'd rather be buried alive
here the rest of my life than not have this place to come back to, see?"

"Oh let's drop it," said John.

"Yes, let's," Marsh scrambled to her feet. "I'm going to bed. It's
after ten. Coming, Brand?"

"Yeah," Brand stooped to kiss his mother, "Don't worry any more," he
said. "That's settled."

He and Marsh went out of the room together.

As the door closed behind them John turned to his mother a little rue-
fully. "I guess I was a piker even suggesting such a thing. I only thought—
Well, when we're through college who's going to run the farm? Brand will be
off in journalism or painting or something and I in chemistry. Of course
Frank can still handle it but——"

His mother interrupted him. "Perhaps you're right, John. I mustn't
be selfish. Find out how much money you can borrow and then, as you say,
sell later on. It's the sensible thing to do."

"No," he shook his head, "We'll pull along as best we can and if
anything happens I'll turn farmer. I believe I'd make a good one."

"You probably would, but it isn't what you want, so there's no reason
on earth why you should consider it."

"'Ell, I won't consider it until I have to." He squirmed uneasily, "I
reckon I've misjudged Brand a lot. I kind of though he was just plain
selfish. But tonight——"

"Tonight," said his mother, she smiled, a queer unfathomable smile,
and put aside her sewing. "Tonight," she said again.
John coming home from school the next afternoon found his mother alone in the house. "Brand and Marsh went over to Kemp's for a little while. They left word for you to come along after them."

John dropped down on the sofa yawning. "Don't believe I'll go. It's a good chance for us to look over the accounts. Just about how do we stand, Mother?"

His mother fumbled in the desk for her worn account book. "Here," she said, "You look it over. I get so muddled when I try to figure."

John went over the long columns of figures carefully checking them one by one. At last he glanced up and smiled.

"Well?" His mother's anxious eyes sought his.

"Not so good and not so bad."

"You mean?"

"We've got that thousand dollars at interest. We don't want to touch that. And we've got enough over for our running expenses thru the summer if we're careful. If we could have a good crop this year that will put us on our feet. Even if we have only an average yield we'll have enough to see us thru one year of college, I guess, and keep the place running.

"That's not so bad, is it?"

"No," John ran his fingers around his collar. "No, it's pretty good but it straps us now. And the insurance is due in three weeks."

"Oh, I'd forgotten that." His mother's hand flew open in a gesture of dismay. "That's always a nightmare, coming when it does."

"I know," said John, "when I was talking to Mr. Scott yesterday I told him I though we'd cut down on it or drop it altogether."

"What did he say?"

"He said sixty per-cent would probably cover it. But even sixty per-cent is a lot to lay out just on a chance. I wish I knew what to do."
"I wish I knew how to advise you. I'm so stupid about such things.

Why not talk it over with Frank?"

"I guess I'll have to, but you know what he'll say, mother."

"Well, as long as he's helping us it's only fair to consult him."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Maybe I'll ride over there now and get it settled."

Sally, the roan mare, whinnied and quivered with excitement when John led her out of the barn and cinched the saddle girths beneath her belly. She was a beautiful high strung creature who had not yet been broken to farm work. John swung into the saddle and slapped her flank with his palm. "Come along, honey." Her legs lengthened to a run and they were off.

John loved to ride like this, the wind cold against his cheeks, the flex of the mare's body between his legs. He held the reins in one hand and leaned forward watching the dark bare trees wheel by, feeling his mind swept clean of petty worries for a little while. "Golly," he said aloud, "golly."

Frank was not at the house when ten minutes later John reined in the mare at the kitchen door. Emma, the old mulatto woman who had kept house for him since his wife died, sent him out to the stable. "He's been there since 'bout two, Mas'r John, mendin' up some harness."

John found him in the harness room sitting close to the window in the dim light. He wore faded blue overalls and a corduroy jacket. His wiry black hair was streaked with gray. "Well," he said, "what's the trouble now?"

"The way you talk you'd think I never came here except for trouble."

John's face grew red, the sting of hot blood beneath his skin.

"It looks like it was that way a good part of the time."

They were always at war, these two. John with his new-fangled ideas about farming, Frank with his old. "What does a young whipper snapper
like you know about a farm?" "Well, I know enough to realize you've got to keep up with the new methods if you're going to get anywhere." Neither of them ever convinced the other. Now they were at it again. But this evening John had no time for quarreling.

"I rode over to talk to you about insurance," he said. He leaned against the wall with his arms folded and looked down at Frank.

"What about it?" Frank put the lines he had been splicing on the bench beside him. "Go ahead and insure just like you've always done."

"That's just it, we've insured to the limit year after year and never got a cent out of it. It's waste of money when we need it for other things."

"It'd be a lot bigger waste if you didn't insure and we had a hail."

"But gee whiz, Frank, there hasn't been hail in this country for years."

"That's no sign there won't be."

"It's no sign there will be either." John choked back his racing temper.

"Suppose I don't insure for all, say about sixty per-cent? I was talking to Mr. Scotte yesterday and he thinks that would cover any loss."

"He don't know any more about it than a baby. Just a lot of fool theories like most school teachers."

"He knows a darn sight more than you think. He's up to the minute on things like that."

"Yeah, I suppose," Frank paused reflectively. "Well," he said after a moment, "I've got just this to say. If you don't insure like always I don't help with the farming. I've been working your place along with mine and taking my share of the profits, but I'm not going to give my time for nothing. First your notion about planting wheat. I let you have your way there. But I won't risk any more fool schemes. Like as not if you don't insure we'll
have a storm and then where'll you be? In the hole, that's where."

He had tied John’s hands. Without Frank’s help college was out of the question. Renant farmers were shiftless and incompetent, poor white trash, there was not enough money to hire an overseer. They faced each other a moment, wordless, each obstinate and defiant. The same stubborn set of the jaw, the same brace of the shoulders, then—"Oh, have it your own way," John said sulkily. "You know right well you’ve got me buffalosed."

He wheeled and went out of the barn.
Spring came late to Pleasant meadows that year. The brown varnished buds on the horse chestnut trees opened slowly, the crocuses were tightly furled gray green spears thrust upward thru the earth waiting for the warm sun to open them. It was April before the ground had thawed enough for the spring planting. Long gray days, a chill wet wind with the smell of the sea in it, sharp icicle teeth along the creek bank.

One day early in April Marsh came home with a bunch of arbutus, fragile waxy pink blossoms with stiff awkward stems. She came into the living room and dropped them in John's lap. He looked from her to the arbutus smiling.

"Where'd you find them?"

"In the Old Woods. Smell them."

John pressed the flowers to his nose, wet earth and frail growing things, a faint indescribable sweetness. He snuffed it in hungrily. "Looks like spring might get here someday."

Marsh dropped cross-legged on the floor. The wind had whipped color into her cheeks, her hair was mussed, curly with dampness. "Look at my hands," she said, "Grubby!"

"Well, if you will dig like a terrier."

She laughed and wrinkled her nose at him. Then suddenly she was serious. "I don't care if I am grubby. It's worth it. Just the way it makes you feel. The trees and the quiet. Oh, I don't know."

"I do."

"Yes," said Marsh, "You do." They smiled at each other like two people who had reached complete understanding, whose very inarticulateness was a bond between them stronger than mere words.

There was the slam of the front door and Brand came into the room. "What's this, a seance or a Quaker meeting?"

They blinked at him startled. Brand was in a high good humor, the little cocky lift of his head, his mouth twisting upward. John knew all the
"Well," he said, "Let's have it."

Brand perched on the arm of a chair swinging his legs. "There's a portrait sketch contest for high school students. Miss McKubbin told me about it today. A hundred dollars first prize. I'm going after it." He spoke confidently holding his chin high. "Miss McKubbin sure is a peach. She's got more enthusiasm."

"That's great," said John, "I hope you win."

"Oh, he will," said Marsh.

Brand turned to her smiling. "I stand a pretty good chance. There's no one in our school."

"Well, there're other schools trying, aren't there?" asked John.

"Sure," said Brand indifferently, "But what of it?"

"Oh, nothing. But you don't know for sure."

"Well, there's no use taking the wind out of a fellow's sails before he has a try. Miss McKubbin says—"

"No there isn't, John," Marsh interrupted.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I was only trying to look at it straight." He was always getting his foot in it, saying the wrong thing. "You big blockhead," he told himself, "Maybe you'll learn to shut up someday."

At that moment Brand spied the arbutus. He leaned over John and scooped it up in his hands. "Arbutus! Golly, I'd forgotten there was such a thing. Who found it?"

"I did, See?" Marsh held up her hands. "John says I'm like a terrier digging--"

"Nope, John's on the wrong track. Terriers dig for bones, Marsh digs for--" He flushed suddenly and buried his face in the arbutus.

"For what?"

"Oh, nothing, for digging I guess." He glanced at Marsh quickly, his eyes bright, almost loving. "Golly, they are sweet. I'd forgotten--"
Then as if ashamed of having said so much he walked out of the room carrying the arbutus carefully between his hands.

IV

Brand was charming when he was happy and he was happy now, exquisitely, breathtakingly so. He worked at his sketches with a fierce concentration, a deep singleness of purpose that amazed his family.

"If he's only found himself at last," Mrs. Barnett said to John. "He's been groping about so long I'd about come to the conclusion that he'd never find the thing he wanted. But now—"

"I know," John turned to his mother. "It's as tho he's been saving up his energy all these years just for this. As tho--" he fumbled for a moment, then brought it out triumphantly. "As tho someone struck a match and he flamed."

His mother laughed softly. "That's it," she said, "Brand from the burning. The spark's caught at last. All he needed was an incentive, the right incentive. Only, I hope it isn't just Miss McKubbin's enthusiasm that's carrying him along."

"I don't believe it's all that. Of course, she does encourage him a lot and he thinks she's great." He saw Brand and Miss McKubbin working side by side in the art room at the high school. Miss McKubbin, tall and dark, a large-boned intelligent face, black eyes that blazed with enthusiasm. "She's got so much pep," he told his mother. "I think she could even get me goofy about drawing if she set her mind to it. But it isn't just that with Brand. He's interested on his own account. At least I think so."

And it did seem that way. For the first time in his life Brand kept at his work with dogged persistence. Ural posed for him hours at a time, until every muscle ached, until she felt like a bundle of sharp angles that could never straighten out. It was always she who gave out first. "Please.
Brand, I can't any longer." Such a faint voice blown outward by her lips.

Brand was at her side in a moment. "You poor kid, I forgot absolutely. Here, let me help you." He had one arm about her waist lifting her. "There! Oh, what creaky joints. ten minutes more and I'd have had to thaw you out. Why didn't you say?"

Marsh made a little grimace of pain. "I'm all right. I didn't realize until just then."

"Fibber! John, isn't she a perfect fabricator of white and stainless lies?"

John had jumped up from the couch where he had been lying. "Stainless all right. Come and lie down, Marsh." He stood awkwardly incompetent while Brand arranged the pillows beneath Marsh's head. "Say, you're pale as a ghost."

"She looks like a narcissus blossom with a broken stem," said Brand. "Pretty Marsh." He leaned over and brushed her hair with his lips. "Let's call her Casabianca, John, shall we? Faithful until death." He dropped on the floor by the couch and leaned back. "If we win the prize, Marsh, I'll divide with you. We'll go around the world together, shall we?"

"On a hundred dollars?"

"Sure, who couldn't on a hundred. Where shall we go first?"

"You decide."

"All right then, Capri. Sun and sand and the sea like blue silk. I'll paint you as a mermaid if you want, Marsh, with a long green tail to match your eyes."

"And seaweed in my hair?"

"Yards of it."

"Oh, won't I be beautiful!"

"Raving! The critics will come in droves to be ravished. And I'll introduce them to my beautiful model with a wave of my hand," he sketched a gesture, "and our fortunes will be made-made."
"My, but you travel quickly," said John.

"Don't I. "the wings of imagination." Brand laughed and stretched out his legs a long way in front of him. "We'll have a studio on the left bank of the Seine. Smocks and smocks and tubes of paint all over the place. Art students dropping in to admire and adore. They'll all want to paint Marsh but I won't let them. Private property. Hands off. I'll make a sign with flourishes and pin it on her back."

"Then I won't go with you," said Marsh. "John, you'll save me, won't you?"

"I'm only defending your virtue," Brand said with dignity, "And you act as if--" He grinned.

"I refuse to be private property," said Marsh, "You will save me, John?"

"Sure I will. I'll come dashing over--"

"In a ready-made suit and yellow shoes." It was impossible to curb Brand. "And we'll show him the night life of Paris and send him home absolutely depraved. A model young man gone wrong. A horrible example to the youth of America." He sprang suddenly to his feet. "Come look at my sketch," he said, "Tell me it's beautiful. Blow me so full of air I'll explode like a gas balloon."

"I feel like a mechanical toy wound up to go," he said. "I could work forever and not get tired. Come on look at my picture and then I'm going out and do the milking so John can loaf."

He held out a hand to Marsh and pulled her erect, ran his arm thru John's.

"There's not a family in a thousand who would let me rave on like this and not squelch me. Oh, you're rare jewels, both of you." His hands tightened on theirs.
John stayed out of school a week to get in the spring planting. The weather had changed at last. Clear warm days with a wind and the smell of freshly turned red earth. The willows along the creek bend thrust out sharp tongues of pale yellow-green. John drove the two horses hitched to the drill up and down the long field. He liked the tug of the lines in his hands, the strain of his muscles taut under his firm skin.

He had thought it never would warm up enough to plant but it had. A little late, but things would come along fast now if the weather only held. And they should have a good crop. He was planting the wheat thin this year. Frank had always overseeded. That was another of his fool ideas. Plant thin so that the wheat would have long full heads, the farm journals stressed that. Oh, he knew more about scientific farming than Frank even dreamed of. He whistled and gripped the lines tighter. He had sent off a check to the insurance company that morning for the full amount. He had been forced to use some of the thousand dollars they had saved. It made him good and sore but he guessed they'd pull through all right. College was a pretty safe bet. He and Brand--He squinted at the sun and pushed back his hair. Brand was working hard on his sketches. They looked good too. Not, John thought, that he knew anything about it. But there was something in the pictures that was Marsh. Not her eyes or her mouth or even the little lift to her chin. It was something underneath that was Marsh herself, he smiled thinking of her.

The sun was lower now. When he turned the drill to the west he frowned in the sudden blaze of light. He wouldn't get the field finished by dark after all. That meant another day out of school. Well, he'd catch up somehow, but it was hard to buckle down to lessons after a day of plowing. The wind and the sun made him sleepy. What a goof he must have looked the night before fast asleep over his geometry lesson. No wonder
Brand had kidded him.

He stopped the team at the edge of the field and stretched moving his shoulders to relieve his strained muscles. Then he started back on another round.

When John came down from his bath a few moments before supper he found Brand and Marsh in the library bent over the sketches.

"Come here," said Brand. "He held the sketches at arm's length. "Which shall I send?" The composition in this one's the best. This has more tone value."

"This one's more like Marsh."

"That doesn't matter, silly. What'll the judges care whether it looks like Marsh or not."

"That's right," said John. He looked at the pictures again trying to view them with detachment, but it was no use. "I'm no good at this sort of thing. You decide."

"I can't, I tell you. Gee, I wish I could send both."

The eyes of Marsh looked out clear and distinct from the first sketch, the other was in profile, the clean long line of her chin and throat, the little lift to her head. But the eyes held John drawing him back again. "I do think this is better. It gets me somehow."

Brand switched to Marsh. "Which do you like?"

"Both," said Marsh. She laughed a little. "It's embarrassing to choose seeing it's me. I'd bound to pick the prettier."

"Tell, which is, then?"

"This one," Marsh pointed to John's favorite.

"Why is it prettier?"

"Oh because. She shook her head impatiently. "It doesn't show up my chin so much." She confessed. "You know how I loathe it."

"It's a good enough chin," said John.
"Oh, it's hideous."

"Well, what of it?" said Brand. "It's your chin. You might as well put up with it. anyway that hasn't anything to do with the picture. you two sure are helpful."

"Aren't we!"

"Mother," called Brand, "Come take a look at this, will you?"

Mrs. Barnett came in from the dining room. She carried a handful of spoons that clinked together as she walked.

Brand held up the pictures. "I've got to get this settled. Which shall I send?"

Mrs. Barnett put her head a little to one side. her eyes went from one drawing to the other, then back again. "That," she said at last. She turned to Marsh. "Marsh, you really have unusual eyes. Funny I never noticed before."

Brand groaned. "Same old thing, eyes and chin." he put down the first drawing. "Guess I'll choose for myself. This one goes." He started toward the door, hesitated and came back again. "Gee, I don't know. The composition in the eye one is better. I guess maybe-

He suddenly thrust the first sketch at John. "Wrap it up quick before I change my mind again. if I don't win it's your fault."

"Well hardly!" said John.

"I'm going by your choice."

"I know, but you don't have to."

Brand ran his arm thru John's and laughed. "I'm just kidding," he sai "We on, wrap it up quick."

VI

The next morning it was raining. A low mist came in from the sea blotting out the hills, bringing the sharp spatter of rain. At breakfast
Brand said. "This lets you out of planting today, doesn't it, John?"

"I'm afraid so." John got up and crossed to the window. The rain fell straight and fine, dripping from the pointed spears of the firs, striking the broad leaves of the magnolia tree by the window like light fee in a dance. The clouds hung low above the hills. "Looks like it'll last all day. Well, that means I can dig into my chemistry."

Brand put down his fork. "It's Saturday," he said, "Who ever heard of studying on Saturday."

"I'm miles behind."

"Oh well," he pushed back his chair and went over to John. "Jay, walk into town with me to mail my sketch and then let's hike out thru the valley."

"I ought to study."

Mrs. Barnett spoke above the rim of her coffee cup. "Why don't you go dear? You've been working so hard. It'll do you good."

"All right." The chemistry could go. He and Brand had drifted further and further apart lately. Here was a chance to get together again.

Half an hour later they started out turning up their slicker collars against the rain. Brand held his hands to his palms outward, thirsty hands.

"There's something about rain that gets me," he said, "It's so—clean."

"Yeah," said John. They swung along together in silence down the straight wet pike. Mud squashed up from under their boots, the puddles danced with raindrops. At the post-office Brand mailed his package. "Well that's off. Now all I have to do is sit back and wait for the money." He grinned at John and waggled his head turning up his face to the rain.

They struck off down the village street then cut across to the valley road. Once a car passed them in a splatter of muddy water. A cow stared at them across a rail fence with solemn mournful eyes. The bushes along the roadside were polished and shining.

John reached in his pocket for cigarettes. He passed them to
brand. They stood close together for a moment while they lighted up, John's hand cupped about the match.

"Remember the first time we tried smoking?" said John.

"I should say. You'd have thought we were planning the world's worse crime."

"How long ago was it? It seems ages."

"Oh about seven years. It was right after I was ten. You gave me the cigs for my birthday. On the q.t. of course."

John laughed deep in his throat. "We hid behind the barn and thought we were devils of fellows, remember? Then when we went back to the house, Mother said 'if you boys want to smoke there's no reason why you can't do it at home. You're apt to take cold standing out behind the barn in the slush I always did wonder how she found out.' He laughed again flinging back his head. "It sure took the kick out of it."

"Someone's always taking the kick out of something," said Brand.

"Oh, I don't know. There's lots of kick left for me."

"Say, John!" Brand spoke abruptly turning away his head. "I've got something I want to ask you."

"All right. Shoot."

Brand hesitated. He drew deep on his cigaret and then flung it from his lips. "It's this sex business. It gets me somehow."

John's nerves were suddenly, taut. "Gets you? What do you mean?"

"Oh I don't know how to say it. Women, people getting married, kids."

He lifted his face again to the rain.

John thought he knew what Brand was driving at. Sex was the damnest muddle, twisting you out of yourself, putting those in your head you didn't want there. It was a fight you never quite won. "What about it?" he asked.

There was nothing else he could say.

Brand flushed a dark painful red that mounted slowly to the line of
of his brown hair, his lower lip pulsed unevenly. "It's -- oh I knew
about animals and all that. Any kid would on a farm. But I never tho't
about the other much until a couple of years ago. "he kids at school talk
a lot. i had to listen." He paused an instant. "I wanted to listen,"
he said defiantly. "Some things you've got to know whether you like it or
not. But it's been hell ever since."

"Sure, I know." John reached out and gripped Brand's hand. "Let's
have it, fella."

Brand's hand returned the pressure an instant. "It's so dirty,"
he said. His voice came out shrill and sharp from between his teeth. "It'
so damn dirty."

John had never tho't of it in exactly that way. "Dirty?" he said.
"I don't get you."

"Oh the whole thing," Brand flung out his hand, "Getting close like
that. Women are dirty, i tell you. The whole thing's dirty."

That was a new idea to John. Sex was a muddle, yes. Damned unpleas­
ant at times. it made you do things you loathed yourself for afterwards.
That part of it was dirty perhaps. But women? He tho't of the women he
knew. His mother with her soft graying hair, Marsh growing up straight and
white, Biddy's firm compact body, her arms brown as a boy's and muscular.
"No," he said slowly, "You're wrong there, it's the way you think about
it makes it dirty. it isn't really."

Brand kicked out viciously at a stone and sent it bounding ahead of
him. "It's my way of thinking about it. i can't change."

"I know. it's the devil. Try doing something else, working hard. it
helps some."

"I have tried. Tried and tried. But I can't stop thinking, it's
there in back of everything. i can't keep it out."

John's hand came down on Brand's shoulder, a firm grip. But he had
no words. They strode along in silence a few moments keeping step, then
Brand spoke. "It's so damned awful. If I were God I'd have made a lot
better job of it. It's not fair making us want things and hate them at the
same time." He shot a quick oblique glance at John. "Don't you ever?"

John knew what he meant. "Yes, I do," he said. He was embarrassed
but he went ahead. "I guess all fellows do. We've just got keep fighting
till we get married I guess."

"I'm darn sick of fighting, and I'll never marry."

"I guess maybe you will someday."

"I won't. I couldn't stand being close like that always."

They turned up the hill path toward home.

"Sometimes," said Brand, "I wish I'd never been born. It's so darn
hard. All the time it gets harder." He held out his hands again palms up­
ward. "When I was a kid it was bad enough. But I went ahead and did what
I wanted. I got by." He turned toward John his lips quivering. "Oh, I
know what a little brute I was. It didn't worry me then. I'm just as rot­
ten now but it gets me sometimes, then I hate myself."

John put his arm about Brand's shoulder and drew him close in sudden
awkward hug. Actions took the place of words with John, but sometimes
actions were not enough. "I wanted Brand to know that he understood, that
he really cared. "You'll come out all right," she said gruffly.

They tramped the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the
lane that led to the house John stopped and held out his hand. Brand's car
into it. "He stood a moment face to face. They were both constrained,
awkwardly shy, but John plunged. "I'm glad you let out, Brand. It means s
we've got together more." He grinned at Brand. "Let's stick," he said.

"I'll try," said Brand. "I'm glad I let out too." He suddenly jerked
his hand free. "I'll probably wish I hadn't tomorrow," he said fiercely.
"That's the hell of it."

Together they turned into the lane.
Biddy and Lee came racing over after supper. Lee had grown into a tall, awkward boy. He moved clumsily getting his feet tangled up in rugs and chair rockers. He and Brand were the same age, eighteen, but Lee had none of Brand’s indolent grace leaping suddenly into fiery action. Brand’s slowness was a thing of the body, Lee’s was of the mind.

Lee admired Brand tremendously. He tried to copy the way he walked, the arrogant lift to his head. He bought a blue shirt and a soft tie because Brand wore blue. He had the shirt on that night and was conscious of it, coming in like a child to show off.

"Hello," he said from the doorway. "You all busy?"

Biddy darted past him into the middle of the room pulling off her tam. Her hair stood up in sharp-little peaks, stiffly, her blue eyes danced. "We got tired of ourselves and came over. What are you doing?"

Marsh and John had put down their books, Mrs. Barnett smiled at them above her sewing, but Brand, sprawled on the couch under the reading light did not move. He only scowled and turned a page of the book he was reading.

"Come in, Lee," said Mrs. Barnett, "John, clear off the chairs will you? This room is a mess. Now sit down both of you."

Biddy dropped beside Marsh on the hearth rug. "I’ve had a perfectly wild day. I’ve been nowhere and done nothing. Cousin Edith shoed me out of the kitchen and John and Brand went hiking without me. So I sat by myself and was sorry for myself."

"As if you’d ever be sorry for yourself."

"I am sometimes, awfully. Aren’t I, Cousin Edith?"

Mrs. Barnett smiled vaguely. "Aren’t you what, dear?"
"Sorry for myself. Don't I simply groan and writhe with sorrow sometimes."

"You bet she does," said John, "You ought to hear her. She howls." He glanced across at Brand. "Doesn't she, Brand?"

Brand nodded impatiently. "Sure, anything you say, only for Pete's sake shut up. I'm reading."

Lee plunged over to him and leaned above the book. "What're you reading? "Prejudices". I never heard of it."

"Oh," said Brand, "You wouldn't." His tone was deliberately insulting. Lee flushed and turned away. Biddy's eyes widened to show the narrow white rims. She made a move to get up. "Lee-

But Marsh interrupted. "She spoke quickly her words tumbling over each other. "Let's play a game," she said. "I know a new one that's just loads of fun. We played it at school one noon hour."

Biddy dropped back on the rug. John watching her sighed with relief. Marsh was a wise one. No one but Marsh would have thought so quickly. They all knew Biddy's absurd passion for new games, but it took Marsh to remember it at the right moment.

"What is it?" asked Biddy.

Marsh shook back her hair. "It's called Personalities. All you do is describe someone in the room in one sentence and then the rest guess who it is."

"Oh."

"It's really loads of fun. You pick out things about them that are different, you know. Want to try it?"

"Yes, let's."

"Cousin Edith you start first," said Marsh.

"You start, Marsh."

"No, you, please."

Mrs. Barnett took off her glasses and looked about at the little
group, her quick, rather nearsighted eyes roving from one to the other. "I'm thinking of someone," she said slowly, "who always thinks of others before himself. There, is that satisfactory?"

"Sure," said Marsh. She crinkled her eyes at Mrs. Barnett. "It's an easy one then."

"Well, who is it?"

"John." Biddy and Marsh spoke together.

"Who, me?" John blushed and ran his fingers thru his hair. "Say, is that right? I didn't know."

"Of course it's right." Mrs. Barnett leaned over and patted his sleeve. "Now whose turn is it?"

"You go, Biddy."

"No, you."

"I have one," said John.

"All right, you take it."

"Well," John leaned forward with his hands on his knees, "I'm thinking of someone who always knows what he, she or it wants and goes after it."

"Third person, singular number," Marsh thrust out her tongue at him.

"Old smarty."

"Well, who is it?"

"Is it John?" asked Lee.

"Good lord, no." John gave a shout of laughter, "I know what I want most of the time but I don't always go after it."

"It's me," said Biddy.

"Yep."

It was Biddy's turn but before she had a chance Brand spoke from the couch. He rolled over on his side and looked at them from beneath his heavy lids. "Here's one." He spoke deliberately. "I'm thinking of a person who hasn't originality enough to be anything but a copy cat and who
hasn't brains enough to know he's copying."

There was an instant of silence. "Then John said, "Let's rule that
out. That's a dirty one, Brand."

The moment he had spoken he was sorry. It would have been better to
have passed it off casually, taken it as a joke. He had only emphasized
it. He saw Biddy's chin lift, the little backward thrust of her shoulders
now they were in for it. But when she spoke she surprised him.

"I've got a great one," she said. They waited while she fitted the
words together carefully. "There's someone in this room," she paused,
"There's someone in this room who always hits below the belt." She jumped
to her feet and stood facing Brand, "He never played fair in his life,"
she said distinctly.

Brand swung his feet to the floor and came toward her. He twisted
his chin about over his collar and his nostrils quivered. "You meant that
for me?"

"Yes," Biddy's eyes did not falter. She seemed calm, almost amused.

"Children, please." Mrs. Emmett's voice trembled. "This isn't
playing any more."

"You bet it isn't playing."

"Well stop then. You must stop. Do you hear?" Her sewing slid from
her lap as she rose. "Please, Biddy."

Biddy turned toward her, "Brand started it," she said, "He can't
talk that way about Lee. No one can talk that way about my brother."

"Aw, let up, did." Lee was embarrassed, jerking at his tie.

"I won't until he apologizes." She looked at Brand, her eyes hold-
ing his, "Will you?" she said.

"Brand," his mother spoke, "Biddy's right. You owe her an apology.
I'm ashamed of you."

Brand's shoulders twitched. He put up his hand to his mouth, drop-
ped it again. "Oh well, all right", he said ungraciously, "Have it your ow
"Well, that's over," Biddy smiled, "Let's go home, Lee, before I start another row." She grabbed up her sweater and cap, "Goodnight."

Mrs. Barnett went with them to the door. She did not come back into the living room. In a moment they heard her climbing the stairs, the creak of her bedroom door. Brand and John and Marsh stood facing each other in the middle of the room. Finally Brand spoke.

"Was it true what Bid said?" He glanced quickly from Marsh to John.

John fidgeted. "Yes, I guess it was." He looked appealingly at Marsh. "What do you think?"

"It's true sometimes."

"Not always?"

"No, I don't think always."

"It's true the most of the time. Oh I know." There was a bitter defiant quiver in Brand's voice, "I'm a no-good. I don't play square and I skin out of things instead of facing them." He looked at Marsh pleadingly. "I can't help it," he said, "You know I can't."

John's hand went out to him but it was Marsh who spoke, "You're not skinning out this time, is he, John?"

"No," said John. "He isn't."

Brand looked at them. "Why, that's right," his chin lifted, his mouth twisted into a smile, "Why, that's right," he said again. "I'm not such a bad fellow after all. It's just that I'm temperamental."

Suddenly he laughed. "What I said about Lee wasn't half bad, was it? He's such a damned ape."

John did not answer. He went out of the room, out of the house. For a long while he stood very still with his face turned up to the dark sky, the sharp spatter of rain on his cheeks and eyelids. He wondered why Brand had had to spoil it all by getting cocky at the last. Why he..."
couldn't face the good as well as the bad and see it through. Brand was like a pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other, finding no middle course. Marsh understood him better than the rest of them. It had been so ever since she came to Pleasant Meadows. "He felt left out sometimes, seeing the two of them. But he was glad. Marsh could do more for Brand than he ever could. He knew that.

VIII

May brought long sunny days, the dogwood blossomed and faded leaving only tight bunches of pale green berries, buttercups were burnished gold in the open meadows, the daisies shook out their fringed petals. Ideal weather for the wheat. It was already a foot high, sharp green knives thrust upward from the soil. The days followed one behind the other in bright succession. Work in the fields, lessons and school, neighbors dropping in, Mrs. Kemp calling to borrow a book or a recipe. "No, I won't sit down. I can only stay a minute." The minute lengthened to an hour while she and Mother chatted in the doorway. She was like Biddy, squarely built, alert and competent.

"She's the one who runs that farm," John said to his mother after she had gone, "Mr. Kemp knows it, too, but I don't believe he minds."

"He's not exactly what I'd call inefficient."

"No, he just hasn't her push, I guess."

"Biddy has it certainly. She'll manage her husband if she ever marries."

"Yes, won't she though!"

Miss McKubbin came to supper, a gay evening in which the sketch contest was the outstanding topic of conversation.

"Of course there's a chance in ten thousand that Brand won't win," Miss McKubbin's eyes glinted with merriment.

"In fifteen thousand," said Brand, "I won't consider less than
They laughed together.

There was talk of art training. "You can get a fairly good course at the university for a year or so. Then New York and--"

"Listen to the millionaires," said John, "where's the money coming from?"

"Oh, scholarships," said Brand, airily. "There are any number of them for promising young men. Aren't there, Miss McKubbin?"

"Quite a number."

Brand was in the clouds the rest of the evening, his chin lifted cockily, his eyes bright with excitement. "It's going to be an awful flop for him if he doesn't win," John thought, "He's so darn confident."

After Miss McKubbin left Brand played for them. He had not touched the piano in weeks, now without warning he flung himself down on the bench, his fingers flew over the keys. A racketing, high-strung tuneless thing that pricked the nerves. "There," he said with his fingers still spread for the final chord, "that lets off steam better than anything I know. When there aren't any words you play and relieve the strain that way."

He spun about to Marsh, "Like it?"

"Yes. No-- oh, I don't know." Marsh's clenched hands opened and closed nervously, her eyes lifted to Brand's were all glittering black pupils. Suddenly she darted forward and dropped at John's feet. Her fingers clutched his and she sank back against his knee with a little relaxing sigh. "Now play again," she said, "Of course I like it, only it turns me upside-down, somehow."

IX

The winner of the sketch contest was announced late in May. John found the letter in the mailbox when he came home from school. He raced to
the house with it. "Hi, Brand, where are you?"

His mother answered him. "Brand's down by the spring house sketching. What is it?"

"There's a letter for him from the Art Institute. I bet he wants"

"Oh I hope so. Run and find him quickly." As he bounded out of the door she called after him. "Come right back and tell me. Tell Brand-"

Brand was sitting cross-legged in the grass with his drawing board on knees. He had sketched in a corner of the spring-house, the willow tree trailing its long fringes. When he saw John he looked up and waved. John dropped the envelope into his lap. "Here," he said.

Brand picked up the letter and turned it over and over in his hands. Then he looked at John.

"Open it."

"Oh all right, give me time." His hand shook as he ran his finger under the flap. As he unfolded the letter a slip of paper fluttered out and lay face downward on the grass. John thought, "He's won all right, it's a check." He said, "Brand, you old son-of-a-gun, golly I'm glad."

Brand did not look up. He refolded the letter carefully and then with a sudden quick movement crumpled it into a ball and flung it from him. His face was sallow, the muscles of his mouth twitched.

"Why what's wrong? Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't." said Brand. He looked away from John across the green sloping meadow.

"But what's this?" John stooped and picked up the check. It read, "Pay to the order of Brand Barnett the sum of twenty-five dollars". "Say, you're crazy, you won something."

Brand reached for the check and looked at it without interest. Then deliberately, carefully, he tore it in half, tore it again. The pieces fluttered to the ground like petals.
"There," he said, "That's that." He got to his feet jerkily, "And this is this too," The paper was ripped from the drawing board and destroyed. That's over." He turned to John smiling, his mouth pulled down at one corner, his full underlip quivering.

"That's it all about?" John was bewildered.

"I didn't win," said Brand, "Get me?"

"But the check?"

"Third prize, booby prize." The paper was ripped from the drawing board and destroyed. That's over." He turned to John smiling, his mouth pulled down at one corner, his full underlip quivering.

"That's it all about?" John was bewildered.

"I didn't win," said Brand, "Get me?"

"But the check?"

"Third prize, booby prize." The line of Brand's cheek was taut, his eyes smoldered under their heavy lids.

"Booby prize nothing. I think you did great."

"Yeah, great! Booby prize."

"Well--"

"Well, hell. If I hadn't listened to you I'd have come in first."

"Marsh's eyes. Marsh's beautiful eyes."

"We told you not to go on our say-so."

"Sure you told me, but you knew right well I would."

"We did not."

"Oh shut-up."

John shut his mouth tight but the words bulked up in his throat choking him. He spat them out. "You darn coward," he said, "Blaming it on us." Instantly he was sorry, "Oh good lord, Brand, I didn't mean--" He held out his hand. Brand looked at it without moving, his eyes black and narrow in his white face. Then suddenly his face crumpled. He began to cry without making a noise. "You're right," he said, "I'm no good."

"You are some good," said John, "You're a whole lot of good." He kept repeating the same words over and over foolishly, "A whole lot of good."

"I guess I know. Third prize, it's worse than nothing."

"It's good, I tell you."

"Oh, I now." Brand rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes.
"Making a fool of myself, thinking I'd win and all."

"You will next time."

"I'm through."

"You can't quit after one try. Lots of people don't win the first time."

"I'm met people. I know when to quit."

They started toward the house slowly, walking side by side and not looking at each other. As they turned the corner John saw his mother on the porch. She called to them. "What was it? Did Brand win?"

At the sound of her voice Brand's shoulders went up, a protective gesture. "Jay, John?"

John turned toward him.

"You tell her," said Brand, "I can't. Tell her I didn't win, see? Tell her I'm no good."

Without waiting for an answer he swung about and began to run, his head thrust forward, his arms jerking at his sides. John went on along to where his mother waited.

X

The Farmers' Cooperative Dairy was putting a milk route through the country around Snow Mountain. John came home from school one day bubbling with excitement. "Gee," he said, "that's going to remake this country."

Frank was at the house when he came in. He had stopped by for a moment on his way back from town. "It won't last a year," he said. "This has always been farm country around here."

"You just wait and see. I'll bet in five years two-thirds of the farms will go into dairying and these that don't will be back numbers."
"I reckon I'll be a back number, then."

John stood in the center of the room and looked from his mother to Frank. "If I wasn't going to college I'd turn this place into a dairy farm as quick as that. Raise just enough grain for the stock and put the rest of the land in pasture."

His mother laughed. "You're as bad as Brand with all your schemes. You better stick to what you're doing."

"Oh, I'm going to, but if it wasn't for all the time and money it'd take I'd sure go into it."

Frank stood up. "Well, I'll be getting along before John tries to talk me into another of his notions." He paused halfway to the door turning his battered straw hat between his fingers. The late afternoon sunlight through the open window fell across his seamed weather-furrowed face. "Better keep your eye on him, Edith, he's liable to go off at a tangent."

John and his mother watched him drive away sitting erect in the jiggling wagon, looking straight ahead of him between the horse's pricked ears. "Osh, you couldn't get a new idea into him with a crowbar" said John.

"I'm not so sure," his mother shook her head, her mouth curled upward at the corners, "He seems to have let you have your way about the wheat."

"Oh that— I almost had to knock him down to convince him. He isn't convinced yet, I guess. But wait till harvest. He won't have any comeback then." His arms went around his mother's shoulders in a quick squeeze. "Just wait, we're going to have the best crop ever."

"I hope so."

"Gee, I knew so." He paused, then after a moment, "Lord, I'd like to turn this place into a dairy farm. It's got the grandest possibilities."

The graduating class of the high school gave a dance each June the
day after commencement. The gym was decorated with the class colors and the class flower if it happened to be in bloom. This year the flower was clematis, the colors white and gold. There were great ropes of clematis festooned from the ceiling, twisted about the basket ball hoops. The air heavy and sweet, almost drugged with fragrance. The musicians, half hidden by a bower of clematis caught the dancers in a swirl of music.

Marsh had a new dress, white chiffon, thin petals of chiffon spraying away from her slim body like mist. She danced lightly with her arm about Brand's shoulder, her chin lifted.

John watching her above Biddy's yellow head was stiffened with a tenseness of longing. To dance with Marsh like that, lightly, lightly, blown feathers swayed by the wind of music. To be part of the music itself, frail bubble notes fused into one. The longing was there without words. A corner of the musicians platform hid Brand and Marsh. The music was once more only music rather cheap, rather blatant. High school boys and girls jostled each other on the crowded floor. John grinned down at Biddy.

"The floor's slick tonight, isn't it?"

"Awfully." There were tiny beads of perspiration on Biddy's nose, her shoulder was damp thru the thin stuff of her dress. Biddy danced as she did everything else, with an intense concentration. She made a business of it. John was conscious of a slight wave of irritation. Dancing wasn't a job after all. It was something to lift you out of yourself, the singing beat of music thru you veins. He searched above the dancers' heads for another glimpse of Marsh's light blowing body.

He had wanted to bring Marsh tonight, had planned on it a lot. He hadn't said anything to her about it because he supposed she had taken it for granted as he had. Somehow it hadn't seemed unnecessary to treat Marsh the silly way you treated other girls, asking for a date and all that rubbish.

They were too close. He had not thought about Brand's taking her. Brand had been running around with Claire Taylor a lot lately. A corner.
like a rosette of baby blue ribbon. Brand of course would take Claire to
the dance. But Brand had fooled him. He and Claire had had a smash-up
at the last minute and Claire had gone with Buck Stone.

Brand came home from school late one afternoon three days before the
dance. Marsh and John were sitting side by side on the porch steps.

"Hello, you," he said. Then he stopped before Marsh and made a jerky hal:
ironic bow. "May I have the pleasure of accompanying you the graduation
ball, Miss Winchester?" He looked quickly at John, "No previous engage-
ment, have you?"

"Why no--" Marsh hesitated a moment. Then she jumped to her feet and
made a sweeping curtsey, holding out her full skirt. "Miss Winchester
will be delighted to accept Mr. Barnett's kind invitation." She turned to
John. "I'll save you lots of dances, John-John, if you want them. I
suppose you'll take Biddy."

"Yeah, I suppose," said John. He could have kicked himself for a
fool. But it was his own fault. It wasn't safe to take things for granted;
not even Marsh.

The music swung to a close and there was the spatter of applause.
John clapped automatically. "Whew, it's hot," he said, "Let's get some
punch."

They wormed their way to the punch bowl and stood side by side
drinking the cool sweetish liquid during the encore.

"Dancing seems sort of silly to me," said Biddy, "I'd rather play
tennis any old time."

"Yeah," He knew he ought to make himself agreeable. He guessed he
just wasn't in the mood for Biddy that night. All his thoughts ran to Marsh,
a different way of thinking about her somehow, a new note in their relation-
ship. Marsh was growing up. With that silver thing around her hair she
looked anyway eighteen, pretty as a wind flower.
Two more dances and then their dance. The music thinned in his ears and then beat loud again, or was it the beat of his blood? Two more dances, they were over at last. Brand caught Biddy and whirled off with her.

"Shall we dance?" said John. His voice was a detached and formal thing. It did not belong to him.

Marsh looked up at him smiling a little. "Shall we? You sound so formal, John."

"Do I? I don't feel it. I mean I do feel it."

"You mean you don't know what you mean." Marsh's arm slipped about his shoulders, her fingers on his back tapped out the measure. "I could dance forever." she said. "I could dance forever and ever and forget I had feet."

"You dance beautifully," said John, "there's no one else here who can dance like you." The music was the pulse of their blood beating together.

"Why, John, you don't sound like yourself somehow, saying proper thing"

"But it's true. I mean it, no feeling."

"No fooling?" she laughed up at him, crinkling her eyes. "Brand dance beautifully," she said. Her eyes suddenly dark and deep searched the room for Brand's straight thin back.

Brand dances beautifully. Brand dances beautifully. John's feet were on the floor again moving awkwardly.

"You're out of step," said Marsh, "here, that's better." He felt her body relax against his arm.

"It's a nice dance, isn't it?"

"It's a lovely dance."

She was cool, cool and remote. Even with his arm about he could not touch her. When he had danced with Biddy he had danced with Marsh. Now that he danced with Marsh he danced alone. And Marsh? She danced with Brand. There were things that he wanted to say but there were no words.
there was an aching that could not be appeased.

They jostled someone in the crowd and Marsh laughed. "You're daydreaming, John. Let's rest."

He was dancing abominably he knew but he could dance better. The throb in his ears drowned the music. He had to follow the beat, but Marsh could not follow it. "Yes, let's stop," he said, "I'm all feet tonight."

"Shall we go out doors," asked Marsh. "I am hot."

They stepped thru the door into the warm grass scented night. There was no moon, only the dark sweep of the sky pointed with stars. "Here," said John. He spread out his handkerchief carefully on the stone coping. "If en that. This old thing's moldy with dust."

Marsh dropped in a whirl of petals. Her profile was outlined against the lighted window, delicate, fine, remote. John sighed and rammed his hands deep in his pockets.

"What's the matter?" Marsh's head bent inquiringly. "You sound so lugubrious. Is that the word?"

"I guess it is. Nothing."

"I don't believe you like dances."

"I do, a lot."

"Then you don't like me."

"No I don't --" He bit back the words with a snap of his teeth.

"I what?"

"Oh, nothing. I do like you a lot."

"I know you do. I was only fooling." The light touch of her hand on him stiffened him. "You haven't said a word about my dress, not a single--"

Why couldn't he say what he thought? Beautiful. Like cool dissolving mist over the meadows, the foam on new milk. Like--shh, he had no words for it.

He said: "Do you expect that sort of thing?"
"No, I don't," Marsh made of her hands a cupped chalice for her chin. "But I like it."

"It's very nice," said John. "It's good looking and all that."

"Yes, isn't it." Marsh laughed softly. "Brand says--"

"What do I say?" Brand was there before them a dark straight shadow against the light. "It isn't fair to go compromising me behind my back."

"I wasn't compromising you." Marsh's laugh caught on the swift intake of her breath. "I won't tell you what I said, so there."

"All right then, I'll pump John later." He turned to John. "Say, this is the last dance. I'm not coming home yet. Some of the fellows--"

He paused. "You'll take Marsh home along with Sid won't you?"

"Sure, but--"

"Oh I won't be late. Thanks. Well, so-long."

They watched him cross the space to the open door. He hesitated a moment scanning the dancers. He his head lifted. Claire Taylor stepped from among the dancers into his arms. They swung off together, Claire's blond head nestled against Brand's shoulder.

"I guess I better go find Sid," said John, "She's probably wandering around."

"Oh, she'll look out for herself," Marsh's voice was a splintered thing. "Let's sit just a minute." She leaned against him suddenly. John's arm went about her. "You're so good John," said Marsh, "I don't know what I'd do if--"

"Well, don't worry about ifs--" said John gruffly, "There aren't any. You'll always have me sticking around as long as you want me."

"That's always." She burrowed into his shoulder like a child. And John held her close comforting her. His blood was cool and quiet, flowing evenly through his veins. The ache had vanished and the dark half-defined
leaging. "Poor kid," he thought, "he's a piker spoiling her first real
dance. Well, she'd got me anyway." He smiled above her head in the
darkness.

III

Heat. The earth sweltered under the fierce rays of the sun, the
humidity rose higher. A clammy suffocating heat that caught at the throat
like damp fingers. Not a breath of air, the leaves on the poplar trees
hung limp and motionless, the grasses were hot beneath the feet. Day
after day and no change. The earth between the wheat dried and cracked,
opened into fissures. "God lord," said John, "if this lasts much longer
crop's ruined. There's not a chance for it." He wandered desolately about
the fields pausing now and then to pinch the newly formed heads. The
thinly planted wheat could not keep the sun from the earth. It baked,
hardened into a crust. The leaves at the base of the wheat stalks grew
crisp, crumbled and broke between the fingers.

On the sixth day the humidity dropped and a wind as dry and hot as
burnt powder blow across the fields bending the grain, scraping the heads
together like stiff paper. The alfalfa had been cut and lay sweet and hot
drying in the sun. John worked hour after hour stacking it. It meant fees
for the stock. Even if the wheat crop failed the stock must be fed. And
when he worked hard he had no time to think. Frank was busy with his own
place now. Sometimes Brand came out for an hour or two to help, but the
sun gave him a headache. He would leave off in the middle of a job and
lounge back to the cool darkened house. Often John, intent on his own
thoughts, did not miss him until he stumbled over the pitchfork flung down
carelessly in the stubble. He would pick it up and toss it over to the
edge of the field. Then he would go back to his work again to pitch
furiously with his face pulled into a snarl. Brand might help a little
with all the work that had to be done. It made him good and sore.
But then his nerves were on edge, anyway.
He felt as jumpy as a field mouse. If only the crop could be saved. If only Frank would not look at him with that 'I told you so' air. Maybe he had made a mistake; but how could he know the weather would scorch up like this in June? Something would save the grain surely. He wouldn't give up hope yet. And Brand would have to get busy and do his share.

In the evening he spoke to Brand about it. He and Marsh and Brand were on the porch, John stretched in the hammock with his hands behind his head, Brand on the step his back against the pillar, a book open on his knees.

"Wonder you wouldn't at least carry the fork up to the house. I nearly broke my neck over it."

"I forgot. if you'd had my headache you'd have forgotten too."

"Well, if you'd wear a hat."

"I tell you I won't wear those flapping straw things. I feel like a rube."

"Maybe Mother'll make you a sunbonnet."

"Is that supposed to be funny? If my humor was as obvious as yours I'd keep quiet."

"All right, I will." said John. He flushed under his tan.

Marsh said hastily. "Middy and Lee went to town today. I bet it was cooking hot."

"I'll bet it was," said John. "I'd rather be in the fields any old day." He smiled at her. Poor Marsh, always having to step in between them and straighten things out. Stupid to let Brand get under his skin like that, but he couldn't help it. He was up in the air about the grain that the least little thing set him off. He rolled over and looked at Brand. "What're you reading?"

"Poetry, by a fellow named Brooke. He died in the war."

"Read some of it aloud, won't you?"

"Do you want me to?"
"Yea, I like the way you read." John stretched out his legs and yawned. He was darned tired. If he could only forget everything for a little while and rest.

"What shall I read?"

"Oh anything. I don't know one from the other. Do you Marsh?"

"No, I don't." Marsh doubled her legs up under her and smoothed her skirts. "You decide, Brand."

Brand turned the pages. "Here's one John will like."

He read well holding each word upon his tongue, savoring it before he let it go. At first John was carried along by the sound of his voice. The words were only an undercurrent shaped to a rhythm. Then suddenly they assumed meaning. The rhythm became an obligate played softly as an accompaniment to the words themselves.

"These I have loved,
White cups and plates clean-gleaming
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs beneath the lamplight, the strong crust
Of friendly bread, and many-tasting food;
Rainbows and the blue bitter smoke of wood."

They were all there, all the exquisite category of fragile changing things. Things that he too loved but with an inarticulate delight that could never find expression. They were captured for him between the pages of a book, crystallized into words.

Brand read on to the end. "Well?" he said.

"I liked it," said John, the words were flat, inadequate. "It's the way I feel about things myself," he added.

Brand held his fingers between the pages of the book, his eyes followed the long-flung shadow of the trees black against the bright grass. He spoke quietly. "A poet can do things to you, can't he? He can make you see things that you've seen a thousand times before in a new way. The trouble with me is," said Brand, "they mean more to me when I find them in a book than when I see them for myself. I guess I go along living inside
myself and not noticing." He was silent for a moment, then he flicked over the pages. "Here I am," he said. He read only five lines.

"But there are wanderers in the middle mist
who cry for shadows, clutch and cannot tell
whether they love at all or loving whom:
An old song's lady, a fool in fancy dress,
Or phantoms of their own face in the gloom—"

He closed the book. "Do you see?" "Wanderer in the middle mist',
that's me all right."

"Why? I mean in what way?"

Brand spread out his hands palm upward. "Oh," he said, "going after things and when I get them not wanting them. Not knowing if I want them even before I get them. It's what John calls working in circles I guess." He glanced quickly at Marsh. "Isn't that right?"

"I guess maybe it is," said Marsh.

XIII

The first week in July there was rain, a thin gray drizzle seeping into the parched earth. "The mist hung low over the meadows in the morning lifted a little at mid-day and then settled back again like steam rising slowly from the hot ground. For two days it rained, but on the third day the sun triumphed, a cool wind blew from the west, the hills stood up sharply against the clear bright sky. "If it only stays cool," John thought," and if we have a shower now and then there's still a chance for a fair crop."

After supper, during the long summer evenings, they often strolled over to the hemp's for tennis. Lee and Biddy had made the court themselves, digging up the sod and rolling the bare earth until it was as packed and firm as a floor. Trees shaded the court to the west cutting off the sun. They were all there that evening playing doubles. John lay on his stomach in the grass watching them. "He was tired after a long day in the fields."
The muscles of his shoulders ached. Farming was hard work, but he didn't mind it. And he did feel a little encouraged. The not weather had been hard on the wheat, but the rain had done wonders. He'd show Frank yet that he knew something bout farming.

He stretched luxuriously feeling the warmth of the earth thru his body. Watching people do things was as much fun as doing them yourself once in a while. Fun being lazy, fun working hard too -- the flex of muscles beneath your skin. "Felt the whole live body go, one tingling health from top to toe."

What was that? Something Brand had read aloud once. It had stuck with him. He noticed that the things he remembered in books were the things he had known before, only he had never shaped the knowledge into words. Finding them was like coming across old friends in new clothes. He smiled lazily and dug his fingers into the grass.

"Thirty love," Biddy's voice with the little laugh bubbling to the surface. John propped his head on his hands to watch the game. Brand was jerked from his accustomed lethargy on the tennis court, shaped anew into swift flashing motion. He had a wicked slashing serve. The ball grazed the net and slurred along the ground just out of reach. Biddy was the only one who made any attempt to return it. She played well, a straight clean game. John like to watch her, the flick of her full skirts about her knees, her laughing intent face, hair all mussed up. She tackled everything in the same way: heart and soul in it, asking no odds. John chuckled. Funny kid, Biddy, she'd get what she went after, no fooling.

The sun had dropped behind the hills. Twilight came in over the meadows wiping the color from the world, painting it anew in silver gray. The shadows under the trees deepened. Brand flung his racket to the grass.

"Our game and our set. Guess we'll have to lay off for tonight." He crossed over and dropped down beside John. "Got any cigs on you?"

"I've been lying on them, they're flat."
"Oh well, better than nothing." Brand tossed the package to Biddy.

"John rolls his own, steam roller." He held the match to Biddy's cigarette, "Come on, Marsh."

Marsh smiled and shook her head. "I'm waiting till I get my growth."

"Rotten excuse. You know it's because it made you sick the first time."

"I know. I was as green as a pea."

"Who's to blame for that?" asked John, "You told her to draw the smoke deep in her lungs. The poor kid nearly choked to death." He crumpled a corner of Marsh's skirt between his finger.

"Birdie wait a little longer till your little lungs are stronger," drawled Brand. "Look at Biddy. She's got a chest on her, regular Bernard McPadden. "Say, what are you going to major in at the U, Bid? Boxing?"

"Football. I'm going to get a B. A. for being the best woman tackle in the state."

"Great! I'll be your press agent. 'Biddy-brings home the ball' and all that." Brand stretched out on his back with his arms behind his head. "Looks like you and John and I will be the only ones to represent Snow Mountain at the U, unless Marsh changes her mind. I'll go ahead and prepare a place for you. What's that familiar quotation, the Bible?"

"Yeah," said John.

"Good old John, knows his Bible from cover to cover. You ought to go to the seminary. John, instead of the U. A preacher in every home."

"Well, I'll think it over."

"It's worth considering, no fooling. Big temple, sawdust, weeping sinners on their knees. John with his hair on end wrestling with the devil. Marsh in ascension robes playing the cornet. Me passing the hat. Lee would testify for you, John. 'How I was saved from the demon rum.' How about it?"

"Great, especially you passing the hat. That's a real authentic touch."
"You bet it is."

"Oee, it'll be lonesome without you all next year," said Marsh.

"What'll Biddy and I do?"

"You might take up tatting."

"That's an idea."

"You'll be here, won't you, Lee?" asked John.

Lee shook his head. "Uncle Jake's going to take me into the business.

I'll be in New York."

"What business is that?"

"He's a commission merchant."

"Ok, think you'll like it?"

"I suppose, as well as anything. I'm no good at books, you know.

There'd be a lot of sense in me going to college."

"Yes, wouldn't there?" said Brand. He yawned. "Know your place in the world, young man, and fit into it."

"What's your place, Brand?" asked Biddy.

"That's just what I'm trying to find out. I'm like a chameleon, put me on blue and I--"

"Well don't bust yourself trying."

"I'll never try that hard."

"Don't believe you would at that. What are you going to major in?"

"I don't know. I'll just drift around until I find something I like. I want to take a lot of writing courses and some lit. maybe I'll be a big critic someday or a foreign correspondent."

"Whasspey, whatch yourself, don't you?"

"Well, not exactly."

The three of them started home at ten o'clock, Marsh in the middle with her arms laced through Brand's and John's. "It's grand night," she said, "Let's not go in yet. Let's walk."

"Where shall we walk?"
"Let's climb Moss Hill and watch the moon come up. It's almost time for it."

"Marsh is moonstruck," said Brand, "Let's humor her."

They climbed the hill, the tall grass brushing against their knees. The valley lay below them, dark under the stars, a line of smoky mist where the river curved.

"Beachy growing weather," said John, "If it just lasts—"

"Isn't John romantic?" said Brand, "Walks like a poet, all airy vaporings,

He dropped down on the grass and lay looking up at the sky. They were quiet for a moment. The darkness seemed to lap about them shutting them away from the world. The sky was infinitely remote, the deep warm blue of water. The stars were little silver-bright stones shining there. Suddenly Brand rolled over and lay face downward with his face downward with his head buried in his arms. The muscles of his shoulders were taut under his thin shirt.

"What's the matter, Brannie?" Marks's hand grasped his. She looked at John a little worried pucker between her eyes.

"'Ok nothing much,' Brand's voice came up muffled from between his arms.

"Just the bigness of everything. The stars always make me feel that way, and the dark. We're so little, so--so impotent. It's funny, I suppose, the way we keep struggling along, going about as though we owned the world, as though it really mattered what we do or don't do. And all the time we're getting older and older and after a while we'll die and the stars will shine on and the grass will grow, but we'll be dead. There won't be anything left as far as we're concerned."

He jerked himself suddenly erect, "I can't bear thinking about being dead," he said fiercely.

"How do you know we will be?" asked John slowly, "You don't know."

"No, but you don't know we won't be either. That's the damnable part of it, not knowing."
"Well, it's fun living now."

"That isn't enough. It isn't enough for anybody who thinks." He turned to them his face very white against the darkness, "It's hell."

Marsh and John did not answer. They were caught out of themselves, dazed and bewildered by the violence of his mood. Then Marsh stood up. "Let's go home," she said. She brushed the grass from her rumpled skirt and slipped her arm thru Brand's. "Take me home, Brand please. I'm just plain scared."

Brand's shoulders straightened. "Come along," he said, "I didn't mean to give you the jim-jams. I'm all right now."

"Sure you are." said John. Marsh could always pull Brand out of moods while he fumbled around hunting for lost words.

Together they went down the long slope of the hill. The smell of clover came up to them from the valley warm and sweet. There was a faint silver-white glow in the east. The men was rising.

XIV

After a day of cool weather, heat again, as dry as chaff. The persistent monotoneus skrill of locusts in the burnt grasses, and at night the creaking of tree frogs. John's hope that had flared for a few hours flickered and went out. The wheat was ripening now, but the heads were short and poorly filled, the kernels shrivelled by the sun. Acre after acre of yellow brittle grain with the bare earth showing between stalks.

By the last of July it was ready to harvest. It had matured early because of the dry hot weather. "We'd better start day after tomorrow," said Frank. "It's hardly worth threshing but I guess we'll have to go through with it. You may clear a little something over the expenses."

"It may come out better than we think." John, standing at the edge of the field broke off a head of wheat and crumbled the chaff between his fingers. The
kernels were wrinkled and small. "Oh well," he said, "perhaps some of it's better than this. You can't judge the whole crop by a head or two."

"Hope," said Frank, "Not altogether, but you can pretty well." He did not say more, but John knew what he was thinking--if you'd taken my advice and planted corn and oats there'd have been something to fall back on. As it is, I guess you're about set.

John turned away, "I'll be getting back to the house," he said, "It's nearly dinner time." He did not look at Frank, standing with his hands in his overall pockets at the edge of the field. "I won't give up till I have to," he told himself. "It may thresh out better than we think."

At the porch step he paused to scan the sky anxiously. Clouds massed along the western horizon; his sort of weather brought hail. If only there'd be a good racketing hail storm and they could collect the insurance. It might not be much but it would save them the expense of threshing. He use to hope for that though. Luck was against him this year sure. He pulled open the screen door and stepped into the darkened house.

All afternoon John watched the sky, one eye on the horses and one on the looming ominous clouds that bulked up beyond the hills to the west, green-black in the sunlight. The air was limp with heat, the horses' bodies sweat-streaked and glistening.

At three, Marsh came across the field with a jug of lemonade. Under her wide hat her face seemed very small and white, drained of all color, all vivacity. John led the horses in the shade of the trees by the field's edge and dropped down on the grass. "Lord what weather!" He smiled at Marsh crookedly, "You look done up, Marshie."

"Oh I'm all right, just dripping." Marsh's laugh was half-hearted lacking its usual upward lilt.

John studied her smiling, "Your nose looks cool anyway," he said, "Like
butter out of the spring house, little cool drops on it."

"Are you trying to be insulting or what?"

"What, I guess," John rolled over and lay on his stomach, his cheek resting on his arm, "I'm so tired," he said, "I'm so darned tired."

"Take a nap."

"I mustn't."

"Just a little one, fifteen minutes. I'll call you, honest."

"Well---" He closed his eyes. It seemed cooler that way. It shut out the glare. He groped like a sleepy child and finding a corner of Marsh's skirt rumpled it between his fingers. The starched crispness was pleasant to the touch. Golly, it was comfortable. If he could lie here forever and ever, forever and ever and not move. He slid away down a cool dark stream.

"John," Marsh's voice cutting into his sleep brought him back to the field dazed and blinking. "Wake up, John, there's a storm coming." He opened his eyes to a changed world bathed in a cold green opacity, a world at the bottom of the sea, half obscured, remote and intangible. Clouds covered the sun. As he leaped to his feet the distant grumble of thunder echoed across the fields. He held out his hand to Marsh and pulled her erect. "We've got to hurry," he shouted, "It's coming fast. You run ahead; I'll bring in the horses."

In an instant the team was unhitched. With the lines taunt in his hands he urged them forward, "Come along, Barry. Gee, Belle." They tossed their heads, arching their necks and sniffing the close air.

The barn. The horses safe in their stalls. Just a moment to get his breath, then out again, head thrust forward, arms swinging at his sides. The colt flew away from him in a spatter of stones and flying earth, tail lifted like a plume. nostrils stretched and quivering. Come hebe, baby.
There. There. She spun about and faced him, her feet firmly planted, ears flat against her head. He had her at last, one arm about her neck.

His free hand caressed her flanks, quieting her. "Come along, honey."

As they reached the barn lightning flamed across the sky, thunder crashed closer. He tied the colt in her stall and raced for the house just as the first great rain drops spattered against the earth.

"Is mother swung the door open for him. I was afraid you wouldn't make it, dear."

He dropped down breathless at the table, pushed his hair back out of his eyes, "I'm all right. I got the colt. The chickens?"

"They're safe." Marsh's voice came out of the dark corner of the room where she sat on the arm of a rocker with her hand on Brand's shoulder. "Cousin Edith had most of them in when I got here. I rounded up the strays. Brand went after the turkeys but couldn't find all of them. I'm afraid--"

"Brand's voice, muffled from between his hands. "Listen to that thunder, will you? Good God, it's awful."

John slumped forward with his elbows on the table. It was raining hard now, a ceaseless persistent drumming on the porch roof, the tap of raindrops against the bowed shutters. "It's all up with us now for sure. If it had been hail we could have collected the insurance, but rain, Lord, how we needed it five weeks ago."

His mother's arms went about him. "Maybe it will be better than you expect."

"No, we're set all right. It isn't even raining hard enough to do any damage, just make the cutting heavier." He pushed back his chair and crossing to the door pulled it open. Thin rain falling gently, the smell of wet earth. Lightning suddenly tore the clouds apart. There was the crack of thunder close above the house.

"Shut that door!" shouted Brand. He leaped to his feet flinging Marsh's arm away. "Oh, you damn fool, don't you know. Don't you know----"
He stood with his hands pressed against his ears, his whole face twisted and quivering. "I don't give a damn about college, about anything if only it will stop." He began to prowl up and down the room bumping into the furniture, his hand still pressed to his ears. "If only it will stop."

"You're just making it worse, Brand. You're not helping any." said his mother.

"I can't help it, good lord."

"Come over here and sit down, please Brand." Marsh's voice came out of the dark corner a little breathless. "It's the safest place in the room, really. Please, I'm scared."

He stumbled toward her and slumped into the chair. Her hand closed over his. The four of them were silent for an endless period. At last Marsh said: "I think the rain's stopping, isn't it, Cousin Edith? Isn't it John?"

"I guess maybe it is." John's voice was tired, each word a weight to be lifted.

The rain did seem to be diminishing. The thunder rumbled fainter now, dying away. The storm passed over to spend itself in the hills. A rugged hand of sunlight crept between the shutter slats and quivered along the floor. "Look," he said. He flung open the door.

The storm and the heat combined had sent Brand to bed with one sick headache. Marsh went with John out into the fields. They walked along side by side not saying much. The sun had come out again, the world glittered catching the light from wet shining leaves. A faint steam rose from the fields.

"It's a little cooler since the rain." John's voice sounded sharp, a brittle thing ready to snap apart.

"Much cooler." Marsh did not look at him but her hand found its way into his sweater pocket and closed over his clenched fingers. "I wish you wouldn't worry, John. The grain may thresh out better than you think. You're not sure yet."
"OH I'm sure enough. I've tried to kid myself along, but I know. The wheat 's no good. We'll be lucky if we make enough to pay the threshing crew and for the seed grain. And it's all my damn foolishness."

"It isn't really. You couldn't help the weather."

"Not the weather maybe, but I should have listened to Frank instead of being pig-headed." He turned away from Marsh and shut his lips together tight. The world was blurred by a gray mist. "I guess I feel worst right now because when I saw that storm coming I thought it would be hail. It might have cry us. I got all pepped up about it. But rain just makes it harder, coming when it's too late. I guess it's all up," he said huskily, "I guess college--" his voice cracked and broke.

XVI

The threshers had come and gone. For two days the monotonous chugging of the engine had echoed across the fields, the cloud of yellow brown straw rose straight in the still air. Hungry men to feed, work from sunrise to sunset and then the black coil of night. Sleep without dreams. It was over at last. The wheat had been hauled to town and sold. There had been a little more than John had hoped for, but poor grain, small shrivelled kernels of an inferior grade. He had been able to get only eight-five cents a bushel for it. When all the expenses were paid there would be perhaps fifteen hundred dollars. Enough to keep the place running for a year; a little over, perhaps, to add to the eight hundred at interest. It would see one of them through a year of college. It would see two of them if they both got work. Some fellows worked for their board, took care of lawns and furnaces, shoveled snow, washed dishes in restaurants. So John, his eyes stretched wide in the darkness, followed the treadmill of his mind hour after hour while the rest of the family slept.
He broached the subject to Brand over the supper table one evening.

The day had been fine and clear with a cool wind chasing across the sky.

But at sunset the wind dropped, the clouds massed in the west were the pale, delicate colors of a sea shell's heart. Brand's chair faced the window.

He sat with one elbow on the table, his chin propped on his hand. The glow on his face was the reflection from the sunset but it was also something else, something from within kindled by the beauty of the evening sky. John looking at him felt a quick stab of pain. Brand the sensitive, the fastidious, cleaning furnaces, washing dishes. The idea was absurd. And yet. "I can't give up college--- I can't."

"Brand," he said. Brand's mind came back and looked out from behind his eyes. "Yes?"

"I've been going over accounts and as well as I can figure now." John began to draw intricate designs on the table cloth with his thumbnail.

"As well as I can figure now," he repeated, "we'll have just enough money to run the farm next year plus about a thousand."

"Well?"

Brand wasn't going to help him out, that was plain. He went on doggedly. "Well, it'll either see one of us thru a year straight or both of us if we work part time, see?"

"What do you mean part time?"

"Oh, odd jobs, furnaces and things. Frank McCoy put himself thru the U. that way. Remember?"

"Sure I remember but Frank wasn't a Barnett."

"What difference does that make?"

"What difference? A whale of a lot. Frank's father was a tenant farmer, the Barnettts, well, the Barnettts used to consider themselves gentlemen."

"I guess working your way thru college doesn't make any less -"
The muscles of John's throat were stiff.

Mrs. Barnett said quickly. "Please, boys." John's face grew red.

"Sorry, Mother." He pushed back his chair.

Brand rose too. "Wait," he said, his voice was flat, toneless. He spoke hurriedly. "Maybe John is right, I don't know. Maybe I'm a damn fool trying to be proud in tatters and all that. But it's the way I am. I can't help it." He paused a moment with his teeth clamped against his trembling lower lip. "I can't help it, I tell you. I'll give up college and get a job on a newspaper or something, but I won't work my way through. That's final." He turned quickly and went out of the room.

John stood with his back to the supper table looking out of the window. The color had faded from the sky leaving only a gray tain wash of light. He spoke at last, half to himself. "Well, I'll stay home this year. Next year we may have a better break and I can swing it."

His mother crossed over and stopped beside him resting her hand on his sleeve. "I don't want you to do that, John. It isn't fair."

"It is fair; it's the only fair thing to do. Whose fault was it that we had such a bum crop? Mine. If I'd listened to Frank instead of rushing ahead and thinking I knew everything we'd have had enough for both of us."

"That's simply surmise."

"Maybe, but there'd have been more chance."

His mother spoke almost impatiently. "More chance or less chance, that isn't the question. That's over and done with. The real question is whether you should stay home from college so that Brand can go. You know what you want to do and he doesn't. College may mean simply four wasted years for him, while you—"

"More reason for his going, then. He's got to find what he wants somewhere. He never will here, you know that, mother. If I lose a year or two it won't make much difference. I can work all the harder and catch up."
She nodded, Yes, I see that of course. But there's another way. You suggested it yourself last spring. Borrow enough money on the farm for both of you and then when you're twenty-one sell."

"No," said John decidedly, "No, I won't do that. Maybe I'm just plain stubborn but I made up my mind after we talked it over that I'd never sell. I thought then I'd get the place in good shape this summer and Frank could run it. Oh, I had big ideas but—" he drew in his breath sharply, "I'm hard-headed, Mother. A hard-headed Tyler like Frank. I won't sell Pleasant Meadows if I have to give up college altogether and turn farmer. That's settled."

"But—"

"There're no buts to it. I'm staying home. It's really the most sensible thing after all. I can get the place in some sort of order and do a little reading on my own. Mr. Scott will help me." His lips touched his mother's hair lightly. "I'm really sort of relieved," he said, "I need a year to brush up."

He went out to the barn whistling, "It ain't gonna rain no mo', no mo'," a rollicking jig of a tune, but within him a knife twisted in a wound that could not bleed.

XVII

All thru September Brand got ready for college. John had not realized the amount of preparation that was necessary, the expense that would be involved. To him, leaving for college would have meant hauling his father's worn steamer trunk down from the attic, dumping in a few books, picture of his mother and Marsh, his clothes. Perhaps he would have ordered a new suit, his best one was undeniably shabby, but it would do for every day. When he had thought of it at all it had been in this way,
But with Brand it was different. Trips into the city to be measured for suits, gray knickers and tan knickers, three new sweaters. No, he did not want his mother to knit them, the ones in the shops had lots more style. Ties and shirts and socks all matching beautifully, the bills mounted up. He called John into his room one night two weeks before he left home, "Thought you might like to have a look at this junk," he said.

John whistled softly. "Looks like a haberdashery or the boudoir of a movie hero. Do men ever have boudoirs?"

"I suppose movie actors do. How do you like that green sweater, John?"

"It's a beauty, only I can't imagine wearing it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm used to that old red one of mine, I guess."

He could not explain to Brand that the sweater looked as tho it might belong to Marsh. A pale delicate green, loosely woven, as soft as a cloud, not a man's sweater somehow. But Brand knew more about those things than he did. He sat down on the edge of the bed and crossed his legs.

"You're pretty well fixed, I guess."

"Oh, not half bad." Brand ran his hand along the smooth silk of a tie. "They'll pass me off as a hick not having a tux, I suppose."

"They're so darn expensive, Brand. Didn't you say fifty was the cheapest?"

"Yes, but I'll probably have to have one sooner or later."

"Well, let's wait and see. There must be a lot of fellows without them, all the men at the U. aren't millionaires by a long shot."

"Of course they're not," Brand put the tie back on the bed, "But when you join a frat you have to go in for a lot of social stuff."

"Oh, you're going to try for a frat?"

Brand grinned, "Nope," he said, "They're going to try for me, see?"
That's the difference." Then serious. "I'd sure like to make a frat. It's a big part of college. A barb's simply out of the running."

"What's a barb?"

"Well you are dumb. A barb's a non-fraternity man. He isn't in on anything, a sort of pariah."

"Oh— well, you better join then. Does it cost a lot?"

"Not so much, just the initiation fee and the dues, I guess. I can swing it on a hundred a month all right."

John had not counted on Brand's using all of that thousand the first year. He said "Don't you think you can manage on less than a hundred, Brand? We're pretty strapped right now."

"I know we are." Brand dropped on the floor at his feet and flung an arm across John's knees. "I'll try my darndest." He hesitated a moment. "I guess you think I'm a poor sport running off and leaving you with the farm and all," he said at last slowly. "I do feel cheap about it, no fooling."

"Oh that's all right."

"No, it isn't either, but I don't know what else to do. I can't run the farm and I can't get any kind of a decent job without training. I don't even know what sort of work I want to go in for yet. My mind's all a muddle. I've sort of hoped college might straighten it out for me and start me out on the right foot."

"Sure it will," said John, "You're doing the only thing you can do. A year at home won't hurt me a little bit. I'll do some experimenting on my own."

"Well of course that true. A year off won't hurt you as much as it would me, "I'd just laze around and get nowhere, but--"

John rumpled Brand's hair between his fingers touselling it into an unruly mop, "Oh forget about it," he said.
"I can't," said Brand, "I feel like such a cur." He twisted around so that he could face John, "I've been doing a lot of thinking," he said "about working my way thru and all. I know my kind pf pride's the bunk but I can't see myself doing janitor work somehow, and yet--it's not fair your staying home on my account."

"Will you shut up!"

"No I won't, not till I've had my say," Brand was unsmiling. "I've thought of a way I might earn some money. The sort of a thing I could do." He paused a moment then went on. "They have lots of dance orchestras at at the U.---frat dances and things, you know. It pays well, two dollars an hour and more. Well--" he looked up at John. "There's a chance for me there. I can still play fairly decently. and Jazz is easy once you get the hang of it. Give me a quarter to look around and get acquainted and I'll see if I can't land something.

"That's a good idea."

"Then you can come," Brand continued, "And putter away at your chemistry to your heart's content. I'll try darn hard to get a job."

"I know you will."

"And," said Brand magnanimously, "I won't go into a frat if you think it'll be too expensive. I just thought it would give me a lineup on playing. I'll meet the right sort of men."

"Sure," said John, "Go ahead. I hadn't looked at it from that angle."

XVII

Brand had gone. They had all driven to the station in a hired car to see him off. Brand had balked at the surrey. And really it was a dilapidated rig. Almost everyone had a car nowadays, horses were becoming antedeluvian. "Well, we'll have a car before many years," John said, "One of those new model Fords."
Brand grinned, "Sure; he said, "That's about what we would have—a Ford."

It was a beautiful afternoon. One of those mellow September days like a peach ready to be plucked, sweet straight to the heart. And yet, a hint of winter in the air, a vague smokiness on the far hills, upturned clods of red clay, the trees along the pike smoldering under burning Suddenly to gold.

On the station platform there had been a moment of constraint while they waited for the train to pull in. Brand was restive, eager to be off. He had glared at his wrist watch half a dozen times. "The train ought to be here. It was due three minutes ago."

"My, how anxious you are to leave us, Brand," his mother chided gently.

He looked at her frowning a little in the bright sunshine. "It isn't that. It's just—oh, I hate these dragged out good-byes. Everybody trying to think of something to say, gaping out platitudes. It's easier when it's over."

John thought: "He's right about that. These minute waitings are darn hard on everyone. It's holding on to something that's already over."

He grinned at Brand. "You sure look great," he said.

But he didn't look it, only the restless beat of his lower lip betrayed his nervousness. There was something about Brand that was distinctive, that set him off from the rest of the crowd, made him a being apart. Standing in the full glare of sunlight on the station platform, his new bags about him, his brown hair ruffled by the wind he was not an ordinary boy going off to an ordinary college. He was part of the wind itself, restless, seeking.
Far down the track the train whistled, a thin aigrette of smoke curled upward from between the hills.

"Well," Brand stooped for his bags, "We're off." He dropped the bags and put his arms about his mother, holding her close.

Her fingers stroked his cheek. "Be a good boy."

"I will," he said with a little boy's solemnity. "Honest."

He turned to Marsh and held out his hand. "Look out for them, Marshie."

"I'll try." Marsh's eyes were very black and wide, straining back the tears. Suddenly Brand's arms went around her, a quick desperate embrace. He kissed her on the mouth. Then as suddenly as he had held her he let her go.

John hand met his in a strong grip, "Good hunting."

"You've been a peach, John. I won't forget. I—" Blur ed edges of words lost in the roar of the train.

"Good-by, good-by." The train moved off, a hiss of steam, wheels grinding along the track. Brand had gone.

The three of them left alone on the station platform faced each other a moment wordless. Then John said: "If you don't mind I think I'll walk home. I want to stop—" There was no place he wanted to stop. There was only the need to be alone. The crying need to be alone.

His mother understood. "Go along, dear. Mr Keith will drive us back."

He helped then into the car and watched it rattle away down the dusty street. Then he struck off across the fields leaving the pike behind him, the snake-rail fences. He took off his hat and swung it in his hand, lifting his face to the wind. A thrush fluttered up from his feet in a whir of dusty wings. "You better be getting south, young fellow," he said, "Winter's coming along soon." He plodded on across the sharp stubble. At
the far end of the field there was a stilé, a small triangular ladder of
steps. He climbed to the top and sat down. It was very quiet, only the
creaking of the grasshoppers in the dried grasses. A dog barked once sharply
then was still. John buried his face in his arms to shut out the bright
burning world.

It was all over and he'd banked on it so. The U was a dream that had
tarnished. Next year? But next year was along way off and things could
happen. It didn't do to count on it and then have it frizzle out. The hurt
was to keen. He wished he were Brand, meeting new people—doing new things.
Brand always came out on top. It made him sore sometimes, but after all it
wasn't exactly Brand's fault. It wasn't anybody's fault, just the way life
worked. If he could only see it like that always and not go blaming people
for something that couldn't be helped.

He lifted his face to the sky, a blue china bowl shutting out the world.
When he was little he had had a lot of funny notions. He'd wanted to be a
cowboy, the captain of a ship, kid ideas. But chemistry was different.
It was part of himself, deeprooted. More then a dream, much more than a
dream. He sagged forward with his elbow on his knees. Well, he'd have to
yank the roots out, he supposed, and pretend he didn't bleed. Take second
best and make the best of it. He saw himself muddling along year after year,
the place getting more and more run-down. Never enough money for the
things he wanted from life, the things that made life. Tired muscle and
a tired mind following a deep grooved rut. All the power that was in him
gone to waste, running the farm and looking after his mother and—

Marsh would be there! He realized it suddenly with an upward leap
of joy. Brand would have college but he would have Marsh. The two of them
living on at Pleasant Lendows together. He could not fail as long as
there was Marsh. He could not see life without Marsh. She was woven into
the pattern.
He sprang to his feet and stood erect, hands clenched frowning into the bright sky. This wasn't the time to quit, it was the time to go on. Crying like a damn baby because he'd broken his toy. Well, he'd make a new toy, all by himself too and ask no odds of anyone. He'd turn Pleasant Meadows into a dairy farm, the best in the state. He'd have pedigreed stock, a cow that was worth a farm in itself, a—Perhaps second best would be first best after all. Pleasant Meadows was a home. He belonged there. And after a while he and Marsh.—It would be a place for Brand to come back to.

Oh, things would work out somehow. He laughed and sent his voice far across the empty field in an echoing challenge. "I'm not through yet." he shouted, "I'm just starting."

Jumping down from the tile he struck off across the stubble toward home.
Brand closed the door of the dean's office behind him and stepped out on the windly campus. The interview had been brief, formal. He had felt himself to be only an inch in the trailing tangled yards of new students. An inch like any other inch lacking in definition and identity. Questions and answers were snapped back and forth; the clock ticked off his allotment of minutes.

"You expect to do your work in English, Mr. -- " the Dean glanced at his card, "Barnett?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm not sure."

"Mr. Holt is your advisor. He will help you plan your courses."

"Where?"

"Library 34. Well, that's all then. Good day," a gesture of dismissal.

The next freshman was already in the room darting scared glances from under a tumble of hair.

Library 34. Mr. Holt, He found it after twenty minutes wandering. But there were half a dozen student ahead of him, lolling against the walls before the closed door or prowling up and down the narrow hall. They all had cards, yards of them like overgrown railway tickets, crisp inky schedules, student handbooks with names typed on the covers. The girl next to Brand was named Maybelle Brewer. He read it in one quick glance. Lord, what a name, sweet and thick as tasteless as corn sirup. She was talking to him.

"There's four ahead of us now and they stay forever," a sirupy wail.

"My feet are killing me. Why don't they have chairs?"

"I guess it's part of the training, harden our muscles and let our mind go."
'Well, I didn't come here to have my legs developed.' Silly remark. But no sillier than his own. Part of college, he supposed, froth of whipped cream on the top of a pudding. He looked at the girl smiling from between his lashes. She was pretty in silver-blond hair, a white throat. A little like Claire. Claire had been pretty in a way too. But one tired of it. Was that life, he wondered, girls like silhouettes cut from thin paper. The whole life a painted background with no depth against which you moved gropingly the only sentient thing.

The girl was talking to him, 'You're new this year too?'

'Yes, I just got here last night.'

'Where are you living?'

'At Collins Hall.'

'Are you? I'm in Stone. My roommate hasn't come yet, has your's?'

'I'm by myself.'

'Gee, that'll be lonesome, won't it? I can't bear being by myself. I think a dorm will be great, people around all the time.' She Chattered on not waiting for a reply. 'What frat do you think will bid you? I'm going Theta, I guess, both my sisters are Thetas. It runs in the family.'

The door in the office opened. 'Say, I'm next. So long, see you again maybe.'

The clatter of voice went around him. Three boys had joined the waiting group. 'I'm signing up for seventeen hours if I can... This damn' R.O.T.C. gets me down... How many credits do you have to have for an Sc. major... I know an upper class fellow who says... Say, Dean Frederick is a cool chunk of ice, isn't he... Idiotie yammering, would he never get away from it? It was his turn,
Mr. Holt, old, forty at least, young, eyes like the crack of a whip, black under black brows, brusque courtesy that was more than a gesture. He was once more an individual, Brand Barnett.

"Sit down, you're tired. This infernal registering." Mr. Holt motioned toward a chair. "Now take a look at these mountains. in the morning before the mist has left them——-

The window held the mountains like a frame, misty purple, bloom on the grape. Rounded gentle mountains climbing into the sky. He kept them in his thoughts after he had turned away.

"You're majoring in English? I'm glad of that." Mr. Holt's voice was sharp and clear, singularly resonant,"Then you're taking Freshman Composition, of course?"

"Yes I want to take that. I'd like to take as much writing as I can "

"Perhaps you'll get in my class when you're sectionized. I'd like to have you. What sort of writing are you interested in particularly?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to find out."

"Of course. That's what college will do, help you find out."

"Will it? I thought so when I came but now--I feel like--like just another cigarette in a package."

Mr. Holt laugh. "I can understand that. I went through it myself years ago. But it straightens out gradually. One finds oneself."

"I hope so. I'm so awfully lost." Why wouldn't his silly mouth behave? He bit into his underlip holding it still. "I think it's the noise mostly," he said, "and rushing about with no idea where you're going or why. At home--" Foolish weakness to think of home now. He turned his head toward the window and the mountains were there, patient aloof, resting their heads against the sky. "Oh, I'll get along," he said abruptly.
His schedule was completed and he had to go. The group beyond the door was growing restive, milling about, feet and loud talking. "Sorry I can't ask you to stay longer," a tinge of regret in Holt's voice, "Stop in again when this wild scramble is over."

"I'd like to—if I may."

Holt smiled, a strange softening of sharp lines. "Of course, come in whenever you feel like it. And now—since I'm your adviser here's a bit of unofficial advice, drop registering for this morning and forget it. Go for a walk along the lake or in Nine Mile Woods, it's quiet there."

"I believe I will," he said, "Thanks." He went out into the corridor and shouldered his way among the waiting student not seeing them. He hoped he'd get into Holt's class. College might not be such a bad place after all with a man like that to talk to now and then.

II

Warrensburg where the university was located was a town of ten thousand. The university itself was at the north end of the town half a mile from the lake. A conglomeration of buildings of no particular style of architecture. They formed a semi-circle about the oval, Main Hall, the Library, the four dormitories. In the back of them, half hidden by the trees Chemistry Hall, the Journalism Hut, the Museum, Brand was continually losing his way the first week or two. "There's no rhyme or reason to this lay-out," he told himself angrily. "Somebody planted a few bricks here and there and the building sprouted. One needs a compass and a map to get around." It annoyed him to have to upper classmen to direct him. He hated the small green cap with the peaked visor that all freshmen were forced to wear. I feel like an organ ginder's monkey without the organ." But he wore the cap. Better to fall into line as much as possible. If he got in wrong now he'd be queered for the rest of his time in college.
Sophomore boys in gray sweaters roamed about the campus wielding paddles. They were on the lookout for unwary freshmen who had abandoned their caps. "Assume the angle." The captured freshman bent double, grinning self-consciously, trying to adopt an air of bravado. Jack. The paddle descended. "If I had to do that I'd quit college," Brand thought. He could never have borne such public humiliation. It's so damned childish." he said aloud. He and another freshman were cutting across the campus to their history class. A boy ahead of them had been caught and after a brief struggle subdued. "Two whacks for resisting authority." The sophomore's voice was exultant. He swung the paddle above his head and brought it into place. "Had enough, fresh?"

"It's so damned childish." said Brand again. Sadistic sophomores flaunting their authority.

"Oh well, we'll have our inning next year," the other boy said easily.

"Sure if one cares to behave like an ass. Personally, I don't."
The boy look at him. "High hat," he said, "along way that'll get you."

"It depends on which direction you going, doesn't it?"

"Oh my Gawd, listen to him, he grinned at Brand loftily, "What do you think this is anyway, a Y.M.C.A?"

"No," said Brand, "I could feel the blood mounting beneath his skin, "I thought it was college not a kindergarten."

He said the last word to the air for the boy had gone, "Hey Skip, wait up." He called back over his shoulder, "Say, you're cuckoo."
Brand walked on alone. "Maybe I'll learn to keep my mouth shut someday," he thought, and then, "Good lord, what difference does it make. I'd rather go around by myself than get with a bunch of morons like that fellow." He swallowed past a lump in his throat and settled his green cap more firmly on the back of his head. His classes weren't half bad. If he could just remember that he had come to college for study and let the rest go. The intellectual life, the scholar living in a world apart, Teufelsdrockh at his window high above the city.

"I guess I know what college is for," he assured himself. "This other stuff is just kids' play."

III

The men at the Delta Phi house were showing Brand about. Well-dressed boys in knickers and grey flannels, the Delta Phis had the reputation for being the best dressed men on the campus; they held no commerce with dirty white cords and collegiate sweaters. "The furniture's all paid for and we have a drawing account of two thousand — We've an Orthophonics and a really decent piano." They were cataloguing thier assets for his benefit. It made him important suddenly, desirable, but it was a little odd. "We've a good house and a good bunch of fellows, not a dud in the lot." The group across the room was saying the same thing to Spike Regan. Brand could tell by their gestures, the quick movement of their eyes. But Spike was a dud, a body like an ox, all swelling muscles, a cramped dirty little mind. Brand looked from Spike back to the boy at his side. Dix Templston, a flame of red hair, a twisty humorous mouth. He grinned at Brand.

"Oh, Spike's a good egg," he said casually, "Star halfback on the Harnsworth team, two years in professional football. That's on the q.t. of course. He's the team's last flickering hope. We haven't won a game in two years, but there's a chance with Spike." He shot Brand a glance, "Come into the larder, Maud."
The pantry was a narrow cupboard place with a high window. "How about a little liquid refreshment?" The flat smooth surface of a flask slid into Brand's hand. He'd never learned to like the stuff but he took it. No use acting like an unsophisticated hick. The liquor burned along his throat. Beastly. Pleasant too, the warm glow of it spreading, tingling. Thanks a lot."

"Oh that all right. Always have a little bottle about me. Keep it for an emergency like this."

What a good fellow Dix Templeton was. They were all good fellows, a good house. The Delta Phi was the only real frat on the campus. He hoped they'd bid him.

That night in bed he thought it over. He had about given up the idea of making a frat and surprisingly the Delta Phi and the Sigma Nus both began to rush him. Rival houses, but he preferred the Delta Phi. "They're more sophisticated. I like their place better." He saw it again, a substantial brick house with wide verandas, a clipped green lawn. The rooms were spacious and the furniture wasn't half bad although it did look a little like the stuff in a display window. Dix Templeton. Something about him that drew you, made you remember him. The other boys merged into a mass of indistinguishable faces but Dix stood out clear and distinct.

He closed his eyes trying to see himself in the relation to the group of boys at the Delta Phi house. "I wonder how they'll like me when they really know me? But they'll never really know me, nobody does. I wonder how I'll like them." To be an integral part of an organization sharing its ideas and prejudices. Did he want that? But would he really have to share them?
Outwardly perhaps, yes. But his inner secret life could go on untouched, untouchable. "Perhaps they won't bid me." A black shivering moment while he face the frat. "I'm no good at activities, unless playing counts. It probably doesn't," He saw himself unchosen, a barb, pointed out as the fellow who didn't make a fraternity, grouped with the rest of the unwanted, untidy, serious chaps, mulling dry facts, bolstering up their self-esteem with grade-points. No, he didn't belong there. "I'm as well-dressed as any man on the campus," he thought, "And I'm not a social flop. Oh, I'll make it all right. They'll probably be darn glad to get me. Good clothes and a surface sophistication, a queer means of selection but better to make it that way than at all. Underneath the outer covering Brand Barnett, himself, wandering in a maze of inexplicable motives, rowelled by conflicting desires. A wry-mouth dreamer following always a far windy call through burnt over grasses.

At the end of the week Brand was bid Delta Phi. He walked to the house under a thin moon caught in dissolving mists. His cigarette point pricked the darkness under the trees branches, the dead leaves beneath his feet were sodden with moisture. Quiet. He filled his mind with it. And then the blaze of light of the Delta Phi house. A clouder of voices, hands reaching out to welcome him. The thump of hands on his shoulders. "We're sure glad to have you. You can bet you haven't gone wrong in joining us." Across the room Spike Regan's rough hand towered above sleeker younger hands, a galaxy of pale stars about the sum. They were glad to have Brand but they were gladder still to have Spike. "We got Spike all right. The Zeta Chis were after him and the Rho Delts but we got him. Glory hallelujah!"

Someone shouted: "Let's have some music. Barnett, you play, don't you? Give us a thumping jazz tune." Hands again shoving him toward the piano. He spread his fingers along the cool surface of the keys. "What shall I play?"
"Anything. Go thru that stuff on the piano."

He opened the first sheet, a clipped ragged assured tune. He swung into it;

He's just a stevadore,

Down on that Sewanee shore

Working and singing a song--

It came to life under his fingers. "That's swell. Gosh, what a find, we didn't know-- Play it again." The boys were crowding around the piano. They had forgotten Spike. It was as easy as that.

IV

Gradually out of the mass, the mist-dim swirl of impressions, a few faces emerged, assumed individuality, became separate and distinct, The boy cat-a-corner from him at table. Richard Fernald. A fine-boned narrow face, quiet eyes. smooth wing of dark hair. He hesitated when he spoke, then brought out his words in little breathless phrases. Once he stopped Brand in the hall.

"Would you--like to go for a walk?" Suddenly like that without preparation. He blushed after he had said it and ran his thumb nervously across his lips.

"I can't today. I'd like to some other time." Brand was half-regretful. A thin cord of understanding between them."Some other time."

Maybelle Bower. He had come across her again in French class. All her silver-gold brightness, her face like trival laughter. She was already one of the keenest dates on the campus. And she like Brand, singling him out to sit beside.
"I've had four bids for the mixer," she confided to him. "But I've
turned them all down. They aren't my sort. Are you going?"

"Perhaps, I don't think so."

"Oh come on." She waited but he did not respond. He knew her kind,
Clair's kind, possessing you temporarily. He was not going to be en-
meshed again. Better to work hard. He did want to make a decent showing,
for John's sake, for his mother and Marsha. He owed it to them. "No,"
he said, I'm not going."

Another girl in the same class. He had walked across the campus
with her one day. She was a junior working her way thru school. A
little thing, all vital energy, boyish independence. She was going to be
doctor. Five more years of grinding work, of shabby ill-fitting clothes.
"Don't you get tired of it, slaving and doing without things?"

"Awfully darned tired sometimes. But it'll be worth it in the end.
I want it more than anything else."

Fascinating and repelling, a doctor's life, probing into people's
bodies and minds. How could a woman stand it? He wanted to see more of
her. He did not want to see her again. "What do you like about it?"

She started to reply but there was no time. The sharp clamor of
the bell. "I'll tell you some other time. Stop around some day."

"All right I will, someday."

someday.

There was Dix Templeton with his flaming hair, his slow impudent
drawl, clever and irritating and lazy. A gentleman and a waster. He
played the banjo and sang obscene song in a mellow sleepy voice.

"There once was a pretty coed,
Who cried, I would rather be dead—"
"He knows more dirt than all of the rest of us put together." One of the boys at the house told Brand. "But it isn't just when he tells it. It's damn funny."

It was funny, a turn to phrases that only Dix could give. Strange to be attracted and repelled at the same instant. To like Dix and to hate him. "He's a perfect rounder, but--" A careless flattering arm about Brand's shoulder.

"Come on let's have a little muic. There's not another fellow in college can make the keyes talk the way you doan. Wait 'till I get my banjo." Silly deafening jazzy tunes. "Say, we ought to have an orchestra. A drum and a couple of saxes and us two. We'd knock 'em cold. Make money, say!"

"Let's do it." To make enough money to get John in college. Enough money to justify himself. But Dix' enthusiasm was a blown spark glowing for an instant and then gone. "Oh not now. Later on maybe when I stop being the laziest man in college. It's my one noticeable feature. I can't bear to part with it. Be an individual at any cost, yes."

He was silent a moment plucking the strings of his banjo. Then groaning. "We'd have to practice. Hours of it. Be on time. Rustle around. God what an unholy idea. No, not new, not now."

So they had dropped it for the time. And in the meanwhile there were other things. Lectures and assignments. Pledge duty, repellent tasks that must be done in order to become one of the initiated. The monotony of dormitory meals. Stolen half hours in the library. Books to be explored later on, but no time now, only a glimpse, a fluttering of the pages, the taste of a sentence, bitter sweet. "Here is the head upon which all the ends of the world are come, and the eyelids are a little weary." Remember that, come back to it. "It is not passing sweet to be a king? To ride in triumph through Persepolis?"
Christopher Marlowe killed in a tavern brawl, so young, so filled with golden words. "As I came thru the desert thus it was. As I came thru the desert—" Here was someone who understood. The inexplicable loneliness of night, the inexplicable horrors—

V

Freshman Composition was the only class that Brand liked. Mr. Beacom, the history professor, was as dry as the dates of the battles. French was a muddle of rules and silly phrasrs. But Mr. Holt— a witty Irish tongue, a keen mind probing beneath non-easentials. Brand found himself looking forward to his class. But even so there were moments of boredom. Freshmen themes. It was a crime to have to listen to such silly vaporings. Let your mind go then, let it wander. A good chance to sketch. A few strokes of the pencil and there was Holt. Exaggerated, grotesque, and yet Holt. A tousel of hair, the sharp inquisitive thrust of his chin, eyes that snapped like firecrackers. The drawing was absurd and it was devilish.

The two boys next to Brand chuckled suddenly and turned away. Holt's eyes flared for a moment above the paper he was holding. "And what is your opinion of this theme, Mr. Rodrick? You find it amusing evidently."

"Yes, sir. I mean no sir." A fumbling desperate instant, then vanquished. "I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

"I'm afraid that students who don't listen flunk the course."

Holt's voice was the curl of a whip. "And you, Barnett, perhaps you too were not listening."

Brand looked up slowly, he drew out each word measuring it carefully before he let it go. "First of all, he said, "It lacks form. You might call it too heavy, like a cone turned upside down." The class was watching him, rows of faces on twisted necks. Good lord, he had to go on. He couldn't queer himself at the very first. But he hadn't heard a
"Yes?" said Holt, "And what else?"

"Well," Brand studied his right thumb with minutes attention. Anything to get away from those eyes ready to crinkle into laughter. He'd show them. A turn of the table and he'd be the one on the top. He looked up at Holt with his sudden charming smile. "The only way to write a thing of the sort," he said, "is to do it awfully well. It's been done so many times before that it's about worn out. The idea I mean."

"Yes," said Holt, "I suppose I've had twenty-five themes in the last two years en prohibition and none of them say anything new. All of them are cut from the same pattern."

A quick breath of relief. Now that he knew what it was all about it was plain sailing. The thing to save it would be a new twist. Milne did it in his essay "On Going Dry", you know."

"But we all aren't Milnes. What's the alternative?"

"Brand eyes twinkled, a fine spray of wrinkles at the corners of his lids. "The waste paper basket," he said clearly. For a moment he and Holt looked at each other, an amused understanding glance that was half a challenge. Then--

"Quite right," he said. He tore the paper across once and tossing it into the basket beside the desk reached for another theme. "Eight o'clock he read. "I would like college if it were not for eight o'clock classes. At seven the first bell rings---"

Brand slumped in his chair, his mind drifted away out of the window. Why pay attention to such fool drivel? Better to spar for a few minutes, every nerve alert and tingling with excitement. That was being intelligent. Anybody could be a conscientious grind. Anybody that is but Brand Barnett.
As the class filed out, a gabble of voices, the scraping of feet on cement floors, Holt beckoned to him. "Just a minute, Barnett." He crossed over and stood beside the desk waiting while Holt shuffled his papers into an untidy bundle. He looked up at List. "I'd like a talk with you sometime. This afternoon perhaps. Say at two. Can you come then?"

"I have a class until three."

"Make it three then. You know my office?"

"It's thirty-four, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'll look for you."

All during his two o'clock history class Brand's mind wandered in a tangle of that. "Perhaps Holt will razz me for not paying attention. But it can't be that, he doesn't know. I was quicker than he today."

The sharp light explosion of Holt's eyes. "I think I fooled him. Perhaps I won't keep the appointment. It's easy to forget the things one doesn't want to do. Freud build up a whole system just about one thing, didn't he? I'm going to read more of Freud, he can tell me about myself."

Funny how important it was to know about oneself. More important than anything else, a groping eternal quest, digging deeper and deeper and never coming to the bottom. Other people got along well enough, better maybe, finding things outside themselves to question. But if you weren't build that way there was no help for it. The search had to go on. Perhaps if he got to know Holt well enough he could ask him about it.

"I keep trying to discover reasons for the thing I do. To explain myself but it's all a muddle and I can't seem to find the right end to start from."

He saw himself asking this question, and yet he knew that he would never ask it. It was knit too closely to the bone, to tear it loose would be to tear apart warm living flesh, to sever fine nerves. No, he would never ask. But he would keep the appointment.
Mr. Holt looked up from a scramble of papers as Brand opened the office door. "Come in," he said. He kicked a chair forward with a thrust of his foot. "Sit down."

"I sent for you," he said, "because I like your impudence." Brand's eyebrows lifted. "Oh, don't pretend you don't know what I mean. You may be a fool in some ways but you're not stupid." He leaned back in his chair. "I knew you weren't listening this morning. I'd had my eye on you for ten minutes. But you bluffed well. It takes a certain sort of intelligence to do that. Only why waste time buffing?"

Brand shook his head, in a cocky half-serious gesture. "I had to save myself somehow. I couldn't flop like Rodrick."

"You find the class a bore?"

"No I don't," Brand spread his fingers along his knees, "It's the only class I have. I get any kick out of. It's just--"

"Well?"

"It's just these vapid themes. The same old platitudes in the same old way, always."

"I've been at it for eleven years," said Mr. Holt. Measure that against three weeks.

"I don't see how you stand it."

"It's part of my job, the worst part. I put up with it because of the things I like. And once in a while there's a youngster with a spark of ability. That helps a bit." He looked at Brand sharply. "You've got that spark," he said, "But it's only a flicker. Put some energy behind it; fan it into life. What's the matter with you anyway, lazy?"

"I guess so. No, it's not that it's--"

"Oh, I know. The work's not hard enough for you so you slide. You can get by without half trying. You're the most irritating sort of a chap to have in class. A fellow who's capable of doing good work and won't."
"I did work over that last theme."

"How long?"

"Oh, about an hour."

"I thought five hours might have whipped it into passable shape."

As it is you've muddled the idea, groped around and gotten nowhere. It's crude."

Crude. No one had ever called Brand's work crude before. The shock of it was the thrust of a sword, but a clean thrust. His lower lip trembled a little. "I'd like to work it over," he said with surprising humility. "If you think it's worth it."

"Right!" Mr. Holt fumbled among the mass of themes, "Here it is." He spread it out on the desk. "You've got an idea here," he said. "Oh, it's not a new one. There are dozens of writers who have used it. Read Cabell, read Conrad. "We live as we dream, alone." That's from "Heart of Darkness." Ever read it?"

"No."

"Well, someday. It's the sort of thing you'd like, I'll wager."

"All right, I shall, but the idea?"

"Oh yes as I was saying, it's not new. But it's new to you evidently and that's all that matters. That and the truth of it. And it is true. People never do quite contact. Even at moments when we seem closest there's always a wall between us. Let's call it a glass wall. It fools us sometimes because it's transparent. But it's impenetrable. Our voices don't carry thru."

"My wall's brick, I think." Brand grinned pulling his mouth down at one corner. "I haven't anything but peep-holes and I have to look thru them with one eyes. I suppose it given me a lopsided view."
"Ever try looking over the top?"

"It's too high."

"You have to be an acrobat to do it, of course. Get outside yourself to a certain extent. Stand on your own shoulders."

Stand on your own shoulders. That would be your second self standing on your first self, all the other selves crowding around clamoring. Or perhaps it would be the other way about. Which one should be on top? Maybe it didn't matter. Except--- on the other side of the wall, Marsh, her face strained clear with waiting. The flicker of Marsh herself behind her eyes. How had she got there? You didn't know. She had always been there it seemed, pressed against the bricks, trying to break thru. But the wall was impenetrable, impenetrable.

He said at last: "I suppose that's the only way to do but I don't quite know how to go about it." Then, with sudden insight. "We're doing it now, aren't we? Talking thru a wall, Marsh."

"Yes," said Mr. Holt, "I suppose we are." He laugh. "Well, to be practical, let's look at the thee. Now this paragraph— "We show only the top layer or so and are mute and unapproachable on the influences and half though that are struggling for existence down below the surface. We are indefinite creatures at best." You see what is wrong with it don't you? What do you mean by struggling influences for instance?"

Brand's head ducked above the paper. "Well--" he said.

Half an hour later he rose to go. Mr. Holt held out his hand.

"Drop in whenever you feel like it," he said cordially. "And Barnett--" Brand paused with his hand on the door. "It's absolutely up to you now whether or not you work. I have an idea what you can do. If you don't measure up to that, it's your loss."

A crinkle of laughter in Brand's eyes. "That got across all right," he said, "I'll do the best I can. Watch me."

"I shall.

---
"I shall," said Mr. Halt.

VI

Brand's room at the dormitory was on the top floor, a private room, cramped and narrow. The few pieces of furniture almost filled it, a cot bed, a fumed oak table with a hanging study light above it, a dresser and two chairs. It cost more but he had to have it. The close intimate contacts of dormitory life seemed to him somehow indecent. Here was a breathing space behind closed doors, a shelter to which he could come to straighten out the chaotic maze of impressions.

He was there now. Supper was over. The roar of voices all shouting at once, the chatter of heavy dishes, food that tasted always the same. Back in his room he stood by the window looking out across the dark campus to the star-swept sky. Three lessons to get before eleven but he must clear his mind first. After this he'd do some of his work in the afternoon instead of hanging around the house listening to a lot of silly talk.

His back was at the window now. Lord what a room. Hidesus. No matter what he could do disguise it ugliness. His picture and books seemed only to emphasize it. Courses in the appreciation of art and holes like this to live in. Rise above your environment, young man."

He leaned against the window ledge and closed his eyes. For an instant there was darkness and quiet, but only an instant. Hand at the door jerking it open. "Say, Barnett, have you a cig on you?" Spike Regan, a bulking immensity in a red sweater. He came into the room and dropped on the bed leaning against the wall with his arm about his knees. Brand tossed him a package of cigarettes. He drew one out and tamped it on his thumb. "Go in training next week," he said, "That means no more smokes."
Good God, couldn't the fellow see he wasn't wanted, bursting in without knocking and making himself at home. Keep the door locked after this. Brand scowled. "That's a pretty good thing for the rest of us, isn't it?"

"A good thing? I don't get you."

Of course not, of course not. What could one expect. A mind as flabby as a bladder. "Oh nothing. I was just thinking out loud. You're going in for football, aren't you?"

"You bet," Spike's eyes were suddenly alive under the heavy ridges of his brows. "That's what I came to college for."

"Excellent reason."

"It's plenty good enough for me."

"Naturally."

"Say, what are you trying to pull anyway?" Spike was growing suspicious, a restive twitching of his hands. "If you're going to get funny."

"I was never more serious in my life." Fun to play with him like that, worry him along. "I don't think you could have found a better reason."

"Well if you mean it--" Spike lolled again, a sag of tensa muscles.

"What are you going in for?" he asked.

The delicate arabesque of words across a white page. The firm and celer or phrases. Intricate clear-curl beauty of design shaped to a meaning.

Mr. Helt had made him see it more clearly. The bitter-sweet desire to express the inexpressible. "Oh writing I suppose."

"You're a journalist?"

"No I said writing."

"Well it's the same thing, isn't it?"

Spike eyed him puzzled. "You're a deep one. I don't get you half the time."

Nobody ever does. Nobody ever gets me. Why should you expect to with your little cramped brain? "Well, it's not exactly the same," he
"Oh.\" Spike reached for another cigarette. "Taking fresh comp?\" 
"Yea.\"
"Who's the prof?\"
"Helt.\"

"I'm in Moore's section. Benehead English. Looks like I'll flunk it. I can't write to save my neck."

Eight o'clock classes. Prohibition. Inanities piled on inanities, and Helt's was the top section. Leak, the absolute rot Spike's kind must turn out.

"Say,\" Spike fidgeted with his cigarette. "Let me have your old themes, will you? I can't flunk out."

"My old themes? I don't ---\" It was Brand who was obtuse.

"Yeah, to hand in. They won't catch on."

So that was it. The idea was for a moment amusing. As Spike could write about the impenetrable glass wall, as if Spike—Revolting. Open up his mind for Spike's pawing hands. He flashed to his feet. "So that's the idea. So that's it!\" He swung the door open. "Get out of here. Get out with your dirty schemes, quick."

A mumble from Spike. A child's angry threats. Then the door was shut and locked and the four walls held him, drew about him like protesting shields.

He knelt by the window with his forehead against the glass. A trembling along his body, a wrenching ache of taut nerves. The dirty feel, to even dare---. The window was a swirl of tree branches crowding out the sky. To push them apart and leak away across the hills toward home. Oh he wanted to go back, he wanted to go back. To see it once more. The old quiet familiar things. He shut his eyes and he was there. Spray of sunlight thru the willow branches, drench of sunlight on the open meadows. The blue spears of larkspur against old cream walls. Mother with her soft untidy hair, digging about the roots of the rose bushes. Marsh
in the hammock under the grape arbor, one arm hanging limp, her fingers
trailing thru the fringe of the grass, patterns of grape leaves on her dress
and threat. His arms relaxed along the window sill.

Then, a scuffle of feet in the corridor and men's heavy voices.

"Let's get a couple of wenches and make a night of it." "That's talking,
where shall we go?" College! Home was a dream, a heartbreaking phantom
of reality. He buried his head in his arms and began to sob noiselessly,
his chin shaking.

VII

The days merged slowly into one another. October was a drifting of
yellow leaves, curled amber fringes of chrysanthemums, the blue of the wood-
smoke against the brighter sharper blue of the sky.

Clear brittle days. Chill night bringing the mist from the lake to blur
sharp edges.

Coming out of the library one night Brand saw Richard Fernald and
hurried to over take him. He had that of running in at the house for
a little while, but he was not in the mood for jazz and loud aimless talk,
not in the mood for Dix Templeton's stories. "Oh Richard, how about taking
our walk now?"

Richard's shy little boy smile, "I'd like to a lot."

They set off toward the lake caught in dim swirls of mist, neither
of them speaking, each walking in his own world and yet together. The
lake came out of the mist a moment, the blackness of water under a
dark sky, the hushed lapping of waves against the shore. "Let's sit here
for a while, shall we?" Roots of old trees rising from the sand, the smell
of water and wet grasses.

"I must rise and go now for always night and day

I hear lake water tapping with low sounds on the shore."
He could understand that. Always night and day running like a fine thread thru his tangled thoughts the remembered curve of the hills at home. But Richard was speaking to him.

"Helt showed me one of your themes the other day."

"One of my themes?"

"Yes, he read it in class. And then we were talking about it afterwards." Small breathless gasps between spilled words.

His themes being read and talked about when he was not there. One's mind was a printed page that all might read.

Richard went on: "I thought it was so immensely good, that's why I went in afterwards to talk about it. I didn't know it was yours until then. Helt just said it was a freshman theme.

"Oh-- what class are you taking?"

"I'm a junior. I'm taking advanced chem."

"My work must have seemed awfully, oh crude," Helt's word. He did not believe it himself.

"I thought it was great." A wistful note beneath Richard's enthusiasm, It's better than I can do." And then, eagerly,"Oh, I'm not just being polite. It is really. My things always go crooked. I get an idea and it sounds all right but when I put it down it's wrong. He says," He was silent a minute nursing his knees with his arms. "I do work so hard ever the things, and I want to write more than anything else in the world.

You know how it is. You'd starve rather than not do it. You'd go without everything, even friends to be able to write what you wanted to just once."

Go without anything, even friends. Did he want to write like that? Only at moments, secret moments when a phrase held the meaning of life itself. But not always.

"I never thought about it quite like that before," he said slowly.
"I've never tried very hard until the last month or two. But I knew what it is hunting for the right word. It's there some place in the back of your mind and you can't quite get it. It keeps slipping away." He tossed a stone into the water, a muffled splash. "Half the time I give up," he said, "and write any old thing."

"I knew. That is the easiest way, isn't it? Only it bothers you a lot afterwards. Yours didn't sound as if you did the. It was quite all right to me. Wish I could do as well."

"I'd like to see some of your stuff sometimes."

"Maybe. It's really pretty awful."

Silence. The dark sweep of the tree branches. Quiet talk about things that mattered. College gave you this too. Better than the other things perhaps, more meaningful. Better to have a purpose like Richard, clear unwavering. Even if you never get there you at least were reaching up. 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for'. That was Browning, but Browning was passe. No one read him anymore except old ladies. Banal optimism Dix would call it. Dix read Percy Marks and Van Vechten and College Humor. "Sure, I knew it's trash, but it's damn funny sometimes. Listen to this one." Was it really funny or simply indecent? Dix again: "Sex is the only thing that matters. Barney. Sex and food and plenty of drinks. These fellows know what they're talking about." But did they know after all? Browning had that he knew perhaps. So had some of these other fellows. How could you be sure who was right?

The two of them had sat half an hour longer by the lake, then they had walked. The mist was thickening. Their voices were muffled and strange. Scraps of conversation came back to Brand afterwards and with the smell of the mist and its cold damp freshness on his checks. 'That old feel argument about life reflecting art or art life, I believe it's a little off."

"I*ve never tried very hard until the last month or two. But I knew what it is hunting for the right word. It's there some place in the back of your mind and you can't quite get it. It keeps slipping away." He tossed a stone into the water, a muffled splash. "Half the time I give up," he said, "and write any old thing."

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"I'd like to see some of your stuff sometimes."

"Maybe. It's really pretty awful."

Silence. The dark sweep of the tree branches. Quiet talk about things that mattered. College gave you this too. Better than the other things perhaps, more meaningful. Better to have a purpose like Richard, clear unwavering. Even if you never get there you at least were reaching up. 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for'. That was Browning, but Browning was passe. No one read him anymore except old ladies. Banal optimism Dix would call it. Dix read Percy Marks and Van Vechten and College Humor. "Sure, I knew it's trash, but it's damn funny sometimes. Listen to this one." Was it really funny or simply indecent? Dix again: "Sex is the only thing that matters. Barney. Sex and food and plenty of drinks. These fellows know what they're talking about." But did they knew after all? Browning had that he knew perhaps. So had some of these other fellows. How could you be sure who was right?

The two of them had sat half an hour longer by the lake, then they had walked. The mist was thickening. Their voices were muffled and strange. Scraps of conversation came back to Brand afterwards and with the smell of the mist and its cold damp freshness on his checks. 'That old feel argument about life reflecting art or art life, I believe it's a little off.
a little of both, don't you?... No, I didn't join a frat. I was bid Chi
Delt but I came to college to--- Wouldn't you like to travel? Russia
and the bells of the Kremlin across the snow.... I'd rather write poetry
than anything --- but I can't.... The pseudo-sophistication of sophomores
Is it mental growing pains or just plain idiocy?...

Toward the end they had talked about Helt. "Do you know him well?"

Brand shook his head. "Just in class and I've been in his office
twice. I keep meaning to go again but there's never time."

"I'd find time if I were you. He's worth knowing. You can get
close to him if you see what I mean. There's not the professor-student
barrier. And he's so darned square. He really cares about some of us
fellows. Real interest, not professorial. I think maybe he'd like to
know you. You'd both get a lot out of it."

They parted at Richard's door. "Come in and talk whenever you feel
like it."

"I shall. I've enjoyed it a lot."

Richard and Helt. Dix and the fraternity crowd. An invisible line
separated them. On which side did he belong? Neither side. Both sides.

Would he ever know?

VIII

A letter from Marsh, bringing her back to him suddenly, making him
remember. "I went to a dance with John last night but I missed you. I
like dancing with you better than anyone I guess." Marsh dancing,
the free light movement of her body answering his. The two of them
whirling, pausing, floating down a bright stream of music. 'So few
chestnuts this year. They were hardly worth gathering except for the
fun of it.' A night long ago and Marsh a little thing, a tangle of
blowing curls, coming to him with her hands outstretched. The darkness
of that night seemed to close over him again, to smother him. And
then Marsh's hand reaching out, dragging him back into sunlight. Less Hill, the sudden terrifying immensity of the dark night sky. Crushed helpless insignificance. Then again, Marsh's hand. Always until now it had been there when he needed it, more under-standing than words, more comforting. Across the gap of miles he held it in his.

IX

November brought the first snow, drifting snow petals covering the bare earth. Then cold, sharp as an icicle. The wizened mesemberrhies were drops of warm blood, the trees a network of bare branches against the far pale sky.

College had settled into a vague jerky rhythm, a pattern, bright splashes of color against a drab background. An hour with Mr. Holt. He had talked most of the time and Brand had listened. College. The purpose of college. Was it worth while? That depended on what you put into it, didn't it? Yes, he supposed so, but what had he to put? More than he knew perhaps. Perhaps. But when you're pulled twenty ways. Other things seemed more important than study somehow. Other things? Oh playing around with the bunch. Generalities were safer. He couldn't tell him about Dix, the torturing fascination of Dix, like a fire, like a flame. He had left abruptly, "I'll dash in again sometime," and had gone in search of Dix. Then at the door of the fraternity house he had turned away and tramped off alone across the snow-bright fields.

There were other hours. Richard Fernald. Long wandering talks, moments of clear contact. And then bored suddenly flinging it all aside for a bull session at the house, the clattering thrash of jazz, Dix Templeton's lazy flickering laughter.
The week drifted on. December and the first quarter almost over.

Soon he would be home again. But home seemed far away, his mother and Marsh and John far away all of them. Sometimes an impression, a flitting clear blue picture. The wind in the poplar trees and the leaves shining, pools of sunlight on the bare dark table, John in his old red sweater fussing with chemicals, the glint of sunlight on Marsh's hair. They were gone before he could capture them.

And suddenly it was exam week. A breathless period of cramming facts that should have been learned months before, a desperate attempt to remember things half heard and long forgotten. He had to get thru, he had to make a decent showing. It was the most important thing in life suddenly, nothing else mattered. The library claimed him. Dix was only a bright flame of hair across the room. The world began and ended with French verbs and the movement of troops upon a battlefield.

The gymnasium was stuffy, creaking of chairs, vague rustlings, the scuffle of paper. He sat for a moment holding his blue book closed. Panic. He dared not look at the questions. History was deniable, a machine-like marshalling of facts that he could not master. His mind was as empty as a sieve. Suppose he should flunk. He saw himself at home — "I flunked out." John's distressed eyes, his mother's. He had to get thru somehow. And the next quarter he'd work like the devil. No more waste hours. Work. Slowly he opened his book and looked at the first question. And it was easy! Suddenly as tho a secret tap had been turned on facts flowed into his mind; his pen moved over the paper unfaltering.

The creaking and scuffling went on. The boy next to him stretched out his leg and yawned. Proctors moved up and down the aisles or grouped themselves at the end of the room whispering. Henry of Navarre leading his troops at the battle of Ivry. His white plume was a challenge to bombardice. The flick of a blue dress, a proctor passing. Charlemagne knelt before the P. The candles were brief wavering tongues of flame.
in the dusk of the great cathedral. He saw history suddenly, a pagaent, a procession, stiff flags; in a cold wind, the voices of soldiers talking.

Time whirled by. One hour. Two. And there was still so much to be told. Would he ever come to the end of it? He bent above his paper with fierce concentration.

It was ever. He walked across the campus with Tom Hardwick and Murray Keith, frat brothers of his, both in History 13a. "Did you think it was hard?"

"No, a snap."

"That third question got me down. Who in the devil was Claudius? What did he do?"

"Emperor of Rome. The first Roman settlement in England."

"Oh lord, I diu pull a boner, said he was one of the renaissance painters."

"That's a hot one."

He saw Dix lolling in the late sunlight before the Students' Store. "Hi, Barney, how'd you make out?"

They went in and had a milk shake. "I could stand something stronger than this. What do you say? Let's go on a regular old bat."

"I've get to study. French tomorrow."

"Forget it. It's damn foolish to cram for exams. Let's get a coupl of oozies and hit the sky. I flunked math. Want to celebrate."

"Oh all right. Who'll we get?" Queer, but he didn't know many girs. He'd fought clear of them. Girls cost money and he'd promised John--

When he'd get into an orchestra and had bought a tux, -- "Who'll we get?"

"How about Maybelle Bower and the kid she rooms with? neat little tricks."

Silver-fair hair, an easy mouth. Maybelle s o.k. Ring her up."

Dix came back from the phone grinning. "She's all for it. Be ready at eight. Let's ankle over to the house and get the wreck. Drive down to
Mike's and warm up. This'll be one last night."

They walk down University Avenue arm in arm. The sun had dropped behind the mountains, gnawed edges of mountains black against the pale sky. Lights were coming on in the houses, a group of students passed them their cigarette points cats' eyes in the darkness. "I say, Dix, I really ought to study. I don't know a darn thing."

"Oh pipe down. What'd you come to college for anyway---study?"

What did you come to college for anyway? French verbs, a jiggled mass. No use trying to learn them now. Better to take a night off and forget about them. In the morning they'd straighten themselves out.

Oh he'd get thru. Brand Barnett always get thru. Just one real tear at the end of the quarter. The windy sunlit station platform, his mother's arms about him---"Be a good boy."---But just one tear. Surely no one could call that not being good. Most college men---What did you come to college for anyway?

X

"In the Luxemburg Garden there are many beautiful flowers." Words blurred before his eyes, disappeared in a gray pain--shat mist. If only his head wouldn't burst and be done with it. Throbbing heaviness, curving lin of pain. "In the Luxemburg Garden---" Au jardin, dans le jardin, put dawn anything it didn't matter. "There are"--how did you say that?

There weren't any such words in French. He knew all the French words. A stupid trick, leave it out. 'Many beautiful flowers'---beaucoup de, beaucoup--'If while walking in a garden, picking flowers all wet with dew, I should tell you that I loved you---' Had he told Maybelle that? What had he told Maybelle? Thousand of things, idiotic, absurd. But he couldn't remember. 'If while walking in a garden'; it dropped a note ther. But it hadn't been a garden. A car with the side curtains up? Dix a long
way off in the front seat, and Maybelle.— His mind switched back to the paper before him. 'In the Luxemburg Garden—' Pain crawling wormlike, writhing behind his eyes. He slammed the book shut and stood up.

"I won't waste another damn minute!"

A hand gripped his arm, a voice like the edge of a knife—"Sit down and get to work." Hilt's face, the snap of Hilt's eyes. He had seen it last night, somewhere, somewhere. Frested lights along Fifth Street, the pavement like a glass floor slipping away from him. Maybelle's high laughter, and Hilt stepping in a shag door to light a cigarette. "Oh there's Hilt. Hello, Hilt, hello, hello." "How do you do, Barnett." He flinched suddenly from Hilt's hand. "I can't write, I tell you. Please, Mr. Hilt, I'm sick. My head's ready to blow up. Please."

The sharp impact of Hilt's eyes held his. "Leave your things there and come with me."

Students raised their heads to watch them pass, Richard Fernald's face suddenly clear in the confused blur, questioning, distressed. The frosty air was a cool hand upon his forehead. The campus was deserted, a stretch of snow and trees and chill silence. Snow crackled beneath the feet. There was a little restaurant half a block off the campus. Hilt ordered a Bromo-Seltzer. "Drink that." He obeyed weakly. The stuff sizzled, bubbles of salty foam, he drained the glass."Now a cup of black coffee." It was hot and strong, already his head was clearing. He stood up, but Hilt pushed him back into the chair again. "You're to stay here ten minutes. Keep your eyes closed and rest. Then walk around the oval as fast as you can. Remember, walk fast. By that time you'll be ready to go on."

"Yes, sir. Thanks a lot." What unholy meekness. Weak passivity. But he had to pull thru. He smiled at Hilt, wry-mouthed, I'll obey orders.

Hilt's grin, crooked too. "You colossal young fool." He swung about on his heel and left him.
Fifteen minutes later Brand came back into the gym. The boys across the aisle looked up curiously. "What's the idea, recess?"

"Headache."

"That's a hot one. Guess I'll sprain my thumb."

Silence as a proctor passed. Brand bent above his blue-book.

"In the Luxembourg Garden—" Chaotic assembled, fell into a pattern.

"Au Jardin de Luxembourg" His pen flew across the page.

XI

It was just as it had always been. He might never have left it, never have gone thru all the queer conflicting experiences of college. The dim quiet shabby living room, the carpet sprouting grassy fringes, sun-light seeping thru curtains the color of old mulled wine.

"Turn around and let me look at you darling. Just the same, a little thinner perhaps." His mother's fluttering eager hands, little quick loving caresses. "He's just the same, isn't he, children? I've kept wondering."

"Looks the same to me." John, as big as ever, beautiful muscular bigness. Square powerful shoulders, narrow hips. Still a little untidy, a little slow. It was good to see John again.

Marsh's voice was a still stream flowing quietly beneath green bough.

"I think he looks a little different."

He turned to him quickly. Different? Of course he was different. Strange that the others had not seen it, but then Marsh was always the same, groping beneath the surface, seeking the inexplicable, the undefined.

He smiled at her.

"How am I different?"

"Oh I don't know yet." The same little puzzled screwing of the forehead. "You've been here such a short time. Perhaps I can tell later on."
"But I want to know now." He stretched out his hands to pull her toward him but she slipped thru his fingers laughing. "No, new now, not n
Cool. Exquisite. There were a hundred words to describe her and y
none of them the right word. He had never realized this beauty until now.
It was only by coming back from very far away, coming back and seeing her anew. His eyes followed her. A narrow painted face, hair dark and alive, the curving arch of brow above clear eyes. A pool in the forest, unstirred, untroubled.

Life fell into its old remembered pattern. Breakfast long after Jean had gone out to work. His mother sipping a second cup of coffee to k
him company. "Another piece of toast, dear?" She watched him, loving him with her eyes. Drifting blue and white days, frosted with ice crystal
Idle hours before the fire or in the deep windowseat watching the play of shadows across the snow. Dreaming. Books to be tasted, the flavor
and scent of words. "A pleasant land of drawsy head it was," or perhaps,
'Here life has death for neighbor and from eye or ear--"' Then a changes,
a quickening, the beat of a new rhythm, 'Torcklight crimson on the copper
kettle drums--'

Christmas was a tinselled tree, the fragrance of pine boughs,
polished Kelly branches swinging, the bells played for them, husked
chords and Marl sang, lifting her voice, letting it go free. 'Good King
Wenceslaus looked out on the feast of Stephen.' Suddenly he wearied of it
"Listen to this." Atattered gysy tune, lapsed, ragged.
"What's that anyway?" Jean watched his flying fingers.

"Oh, nothing much. A muddle of all jazz I've heard this year and
my own fee sliness."

"Crazy."

"Sure, I know. Let's all be crazy. Leen- mad." He that of Dix.
The lazy drawl of Dix' voices;

"Show me the way to go home
Biddy was the same, a little lighter perhaps freed from Lee's lumbering shadow, but still coltish, still untaned. She cared more about facts than reality. To her, facts were reality. The old antagonism between them was reborn.

"Three month at the U and you don't even know the name of the coach."

"Well, what of it? There's more to college than athletic hokum."

"Athletics aren't hokum. They develop---"

"Brawn not brain. I guess I know. There's an athlete in our frat."

The perfect moron. Never thinks about the belt."

"Well, it's better to think there than not at all."

"Yes, I guess you're a good judge of that."

"Oh, is that so. I was thinking of you."

"How nice of you to think of me. Exhausting and so futile. Mental gymnastics are not your style." He had got the last word. He always got the last word, but it left him quivering with anger, all raw edges:

For relief he turned to Marsh, a quiet haven, a still pool.

He had followed his mother to the kitchen. She was baking a cake. Her sleeves were rolled back and there was a dust of flour across one check.

"I wish you hadn't had to let 'Lissa go," he said.

"Oh, Marsh and I manage all right."

"Yes, but---"

She paused to pin a lock of hair out of her eyes. "You grow more like your father every day."

"Oh I know I look like him." He saw the pictured face of his father clearly, the poise of his head, heavy-lidded eyes, the soft fullness of his lip.
In a week he would see Dix again, a quick stirring of desire. "But I'm thru with Dix." Better to stick to Richard Fernald and his sort. Richard got the right angle on college."

John's gift was a check for fifty dollars. "But, John, it's too much. I don't need it." The money he had thrown away that one night. The money he had squandered for a few dazed hour and a headache. John worked so hard. He had given up college for him. He thrust the check toward him. "I won't take it."

"Don't be an idiot. Guess I know what I can afford. It's for a tux."

Never a word about the orchestra. That was like John, never a word. And he had promised. He began to explain eagerly. "I haven't got a job yet, but I play a lot. I'm getting known. There's a fellow at the house who plays the banjo. We thought—but he couldn't play with Dix any more. He knew what it would mean. "Come on Barney, just a little drink to warm us up." Men in orchestra always went that way, a bunch of wasters. Why not explain it to John? There were no words.

"I knew," said John, "Getting settle and all. There isn't time. Don't try it this year."

"But I can handle it now. I knew the ropes. It's time I was earning something." He could do it if he tried. He could keep straight and do it. No need to go in with Dix. There were other fellows.
"I wasn't thinking about that."

"What then?"

"It's the way you act. Your father was always sorry when I had to work hard but," she laughed tremulously, "I didn't do much to keep me from working. I shouldn't have said that I suppose. I wouldn't have only I don't want you to do as I did, Brand. Waste your talents and let other people shoulder the responsibility.

"If you feel that way about it I can drop out of college. If you -"

"Nonsense," she said shortly, "what I really want is to see you do good work. Find what you like to do and stick to it."

"Well I have, more or less." But chiefly less, wasted hours, wasted money Haybelle and Dix and -- "It's taken me a quarter to get adjusted," he said, "but now I can settle down to study in earnest."

"I hope so. you see," she said, "your grades came this morning, they weren't good."

He flushed. "I know, I get them too. I didn't realize they sent you a copy."

"And so you weren't going to tell me?"

"Yes I was, when I had nerve enough. They were pretty bad, weren't they?"

"Pretty bad."

"You see, he explained, "there was so much I didn't understand. Everything all a jumble. All sorts of people and things to distract me."

That was part but not all. He couldn't tell all. "I'll do better next quarter," he said.

She poured the cake into the butter pan, frothy yellow butter.

"I shall expect you to. If John is staying home from college on your account you've got to prove worth his sacrifice."
"Oh gee whiz, Mother, you make me feel like a perfect beast. Please don't scold any more."

"I wasn't scolding, I was simply stating plain facts."

"Well--"

"Well, I'll stop now." She looked up at him smiling. "Run out to the shed and bring in an arm-load of wood if you want to help me."

He stepped out into the cool air. The trees stood up black and leafless against the gray sky. A solitary snowflake floated slowly to the earth. "I got what was coming to me that time," he thought, "Only--"

XIV

It was his last day at home. He and Marsh and John went for a walk. A warm wind from the south had come up in the night. Water dripped from the black wet branches of the trees; patches of earth showed between dwindling banks of snow. They took the Rolling Road over the hills, turned into a narrow lane and then leaving the lane followed the crooked trail of a snake-line fence until they came to a stile. "Let's sit here." Marsh dropped down and pulled off her scarlet cap, pushing her hair back from her forehead.

"Oh, let's not." John moved restlessly.

"What's the matter, John-John? Want to do your five miles before lunch?"

"I'm not tired."

"Well I am," Brand sprang to the top step. "Come on, be docile."

John yielded. He sat uncomfortably huddled, his arms wrapped about his knees. Suddenly he leaned back against Brand and closed his eyes. His hair in the sunlight was bright gold, wind-touselled. Marsh's hair darker, quieter, curved against her cheek.
"How long is it here," said Brand, "You can see to the end of the world." Beyond the farthest mill was college, brick buildings, narrow echoing halls, kaleidoscopic patterns of men and girls. Here was certainty and peace and quiet living. There—

"It depends on the point of view," said John, "to the end of the world or the end of your nose. I can't get beyond that somehow."

They were silent a moment, then Brand spoke. "I get my grades yesterday."

"How did you make out?" John twisted about to look at him, Marsha turned her head slightly, waiting.

"Ok fair. I get an A in camp." Better to tell the best first. Or was it better? If he had saved it till the last—

"Did you Brand? I'm so glad."

"Oh, that's great."

They were excited, happy over his success, eager to share it with him as they shared other things." He reached out and put his hand on John's shoulder. "I didn't do so well in the rest. C in history, that's average. I did think I'd get more."

"That's not bad at all."

"Ok I suppose not,-- I got D in French."

"Well I guess you couldn't help it. It's hard the first first quarter, I guess."

"It must be much harder." Marsha's voice was a silver-firm cord to cling to. Why did they try to make it easier for him? He did not deserve it. Their love had been like that always, a free giving, asking nothing in return. His mother was the only one who did not find excuses. "No, he said slowly. "I didn't deserve more. I got what was coming to me. Maybe a little better. To be fair. To tell them everything. "I went late before exam.}
I'd have flunked flat if it hadn't been for Halt. You know I've told you
was Halt is. Damned decent. He pulled me taru."

He waited for them to question him. It was their right. They could
strip him bare, pull away the enfolding protective sheath that covered him
until he lay stretched and quivering, pitilessly exposed.

He had not realized their unfailing kindness. Not a question. No
word of criticism. Only a simple reaching out of hands to him. They
wanted no more than he could tell. He thanked them with a quick pressure
of his fingers.

Back at the house he and. Marsak were alone for a few moments, in
the living room. The fire leaped to welcome them. They spread their hands
to it, laughing and cold. "It was a good walk, wasn't it?" I'll remember
it back at college." The beat of the fire brought the warm blood stinging
beneath his skin. "I have a mind like a kodak book. Pictures of home, some
of them sharp, some fagged, blurry. Some I didn't even know I had, and
then* pop, there they are."

He dropped down on the rug and lay on his stomach with his head
propped in his hands. Lazy warmth. Color sprang out at him from dark
corners. The paisley shawl flung across the piano, deep- glowing, rich as
autumn foliage, the sheen of holly berries catching the fire light. The
firelight, the bright backs of books. He smiled at Marsak sleepily. "You
promised to tell me something before I left."

"I know, about you, how you've changed. Perhaps I can now." There
was no hesitation, no pretense at misunderstanding. "It's been rather hard
because in some ways it's indefinable." Her deep-shadowed eyes looked into
his seriously. "It's so hard to tell what's happened inside other people
when we can see only the outside."
"Isn't it tho! The eagerness of his reply brought him upright on the rug facing her. "I wrote a theme about that. About never getting underneath, and afterward Holt said—" He broke off abruptly. "I'll tell you about that later, go on. What's happened to me as you see it?"

"Oh lots of things. Being off by yourself, I guess. Not being very important. Having to do things you didn't like. Most people—"

"Go on." How clearly she could see the things that had happened to him when she was not there. More clearly than he had seen them himself until now. "Go on."

"Well it's made you different. Things of that sort are bound to, aren't they?" She went on unanswered. "A lot of you is still the same. A little of you is changed. You seem older somehow, and oh—more tolerant. It's as if you'd suddenly realized that there were other people besides you mattered. No, that's not it exactly. It's—" She hesitated a moment. "It's finding that what other people think of you really matters, isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess so." To acknowledge this even to Marsh Kurt, a painful baring of motives. But it fascinated him too. "And what else?"

"Well it's made you nicer. I mean—not nicer than you are really, but on top."

"How about Bid?"

She was silent an instant thinking. "I guess I don't know. You and Bi never did seem to get along awfully well. Perhaps— Maybe you both—"

"Maybe we neither of us care a damn what the other thinks of us and so we act natural." He forced his eyes into a twinkle to hide the pain.

She shook her head, "Now your making fun."

"No I wasn't, really. It's just that you make me squirm. Don't steal my poor little defense please."
"I like you better without it, like you were today."

To be utterly without defenses. He saw himself suddenly like an oyster pried loose from its shell, an inert formless mass to be probed and predded. No, never. Not even with Marsh. "Like I was today?"

"Yes, on the stile, taking the blame for your bad grades and all. Telling us why."

He sprang to his feet laughing. "Stupid!" From the top of his slim tallness he looked down on her. "That was my most subtle defense. I told you a little bit as you'd be sorry for me and wouldn't ask more. I poked my head out of my shell a minute and then drew it back again. It made you think what a decent honest fellow I was and I saved the shell." He stooped and caught Marsh's face between his hands bending her head back until he could look into her eyes. "Even you don't know the depths of my iniquity, Marshie; even you."

XV

He went thru the next quarter holding himself a little aloof from the group at the fraternity house. He saw more of Richard Pernald, more of Leonard Holt. There were long hours in the library, short intense period of study. His work began to interest him. Even elementary zoology. Lab. classes were a bore and yet— Gradually the petty unimportant details shaped themselves to a meaning, assumed significance. An amoeba was a shapeless bit of protoplasm, an earthworm had five pairs of hearts. Unimportant in themselves but in the ascending scale of life they had their place. He saw life as a gradual unfolding, a development, following definite unchanging laws. A growing complexity, the intricate fine net work of the nerves, the vague half-formed dreams of men. The realization fascinated and terrified him.
Man was as infinitesimal a point in the gigantic pattern of life. Individual man a flutter of useless wings, unnoticed, gone before he had been heard, whirled away in a spinning immensity of sound and growth. Fear was an icy hand at his throat. "If Dix were here I'd go out and get good and drunk. 'Tight as a hinge' Dix parsed. "Drink's a sort of release," Dix had said. "When things get too black a good brawl's the only thing that put me on my feet again." Perhaps Dix was right. And yet that was a coward's course, an escape from reality. The real test was to face fear and win. Still he played with the idea. But without Dix -- He put it from him definitely. Without Dix it was meaningless, with no potency or worth.

And Dix was not there. Brand had found a letter from him when he returned to college, a sprawling erratic hand:

"Dear Barney: I've flunked out for a quarter. That means three montes of eating musks, or whatever it was the prodigal son fed on. It won't be a fatted calf in my case. Mother's been a good egg. Dad but resigned and darned glad to have me around at any cost. Dad went wild and gave me a lecture on wasted opportunities, 'If I'd had your advantages, you man!' You know the rest. I suggested discreetly that I could get a job in an orkestra and relieve him of further responsibility. He went off like a fire cracker. A jazz orkestra: Family tradition. Journalism's bad enough, what with all the preackers and such' sprouting on our family tree. But I stuck firm in that. A hell of a preacher I'd make, wouldn't I. A tabloid's mere my style. I seem to have a nose for dirt.

By the way, I left my banjo at the house. God knows what will happen to it if it isn't rescued. So cart it over to your room, will you, and keep it for me? I'll be back in the spring, chastened and reformed, temporarily. Perhaps I'll develop a conscience and hit the books. Who knows?

Dix!"
The banjo in its gray canvas case stood in the corner of Brand's room. A part of Dix. A constant reminder. Dix sprawled on the davenport before the unlighted fire. "Where's Barney?" His head popped up like a torch from behind the low back davenport. "Oh, there you are. Let's do something. What shall we do? "Know any new voices?" Dix cutting across the campus ten minutes late for class, stopping to talk. "Oh well, I'm late already." Dix—Time to get down to study. He was thru with Dix. When he got back he'd tell him.

He went in search of Richard. "Let's do our zoo together."

"All right."

Gradually the memory of Dix faded. The banjo was dust-covered leaning lonely and a little lop-sided against the wall.

XVI

Spike Regan was on final probation. He had flunked Freshman Comp. He scowled at Brand when he met him a curt nod. "Not that I give a damn," Brand told himself. And yet, Spike was important on the Campus. It had been Spike playing that had won the game against the A. G. The men at the house was proud of him. "We've got to keep him in school somehow. He's the best football man we've had in years," As if that had mattered, as if football was worth a tinker's damn in the final analysis. But Brand had learned to keep quiet, to act one way and think another. He could go it without half trying. Thank God, mind-reading was impossible.

They were in the living room at the house. Chippy Graham was talking. Halfway thru the sentence Brand's mind came back. "-----wait till spring and then take it. He's got to make grade points this quarter. In the spring, well, one of you fellows who write will have to help him. Barnett here—You write, don't you?"
"Rotten."

"That don't go. You got an A from Holt."

"Well, what of it?"

"Oh nothing, you'll find out later."

So that was it, was it? Trying to rope him in, expecting him to pull Spike thru. They'd picked the wrong man for the job. He'd hand in his pin before he'd do a trick like that.

XVII

Winter passed in a glitter of snow crystals. Trees were brittle, fantastic ornaments carved from glass. The cold burned. Shadows were blue against the snow. Then in a week it was gone, all the pure shining loveliness. The earth was spongy, wet leaves matted together about the scrawled roots of trees. Brand's leather jacket dragged upon his shoulders, a warm wind ruffled his hair.

The quarter was almost over. He had done well and he was proud of it. Not that grades mattered. They were only labels, sometimes incorrect. But he had learned something. Not in classes alone, not wholly in books. It went deeper than that. He could think more clearly. There were moments when he could step outside himself almost, could analyze and judge with some degree of fairness. If college taught him no more than that it was worth while. To understand other people even dimly made his own motives and actions more clear. They grew together, leaf and branch, blossom and fruit. No one thing stood alone in life. Nothing had meaning except in its relation to something else. He was beginning to realize this. A thread to cling to in an intricate twisting labyrinth. Stars in a black sky.

XVIII

He had been helping Spike with his themes for two months. He had
held off as long as possible and then in the end succumbed. The president of the house had come after him. "We've got to pull him thru, Barnett. The U needs Spike, but you couldn't show Moore that. He doesn' give a damn about football."

Neither do I. Neither do I. It was one of the things you kept quiet about.

"Just what am I supposed to do?"

Chippy fidgeted, his eyes under his thatch of hair squirmed away from Brand's. "Oh, help him with his themes. You don't have to write them for him. Just straighten them out, give 'em a flourish."

--Curling the hair of a mongrel dog, tying a blue ribbon about its neck. Still a mongrel. Doubly a mongrel.

"I don't see that that's cheating," said Chippy. "It's just giving a brother a lift."

It was so easy to twist the truth to fit one's needs. "Oh all right I'll do what I can but it's a darn good thing there's no exam in comp. or we'd never get by with it."

"Good fellow," said Chippy. "For the honor of the Delta Phis and all that."

"Honor," said Brand softly, "'I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath.'"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"Oh nothing." A wave of the hand, a quick gesture. "There was once a man named Falstaff who thought honor was a mere word, a puff of air. But that was long ago, Chippy, hundreds of years."

He did his best with Spike's themes, straightening out the tangled mess of sentences, adding a phrase, the curve of a bright plume on a dingy bonnet. Spike was coming through. "I think I can pull a C. Jeez, if I can do that I'm good for another quarter."
"Yes," said Brand, "if you can do that." He was damned sick of the job, having Spike lumber into his room at all hours, mulling over his senseless papers. If it wasn't for Dix he'd tell him to go to hell, fraternity or no fraternity. But Dix was back. The old tangling fascination. Dix, working a little, just enough to get by. "Why make an effort, Barney? It's so damn much more pleasant to drift. And you're just as dead in the end, one way or another."

"I don't know why, unless— Oh, there's a sort of kick in doing something well. Inflates the ego, I guess. I've got an ego like a balloon. One little puff of praise and it's round as an apple. Two puffs and it's so full of air it could hit the sky."

Dix looked at him curiously. Then he threw back his head and laughed, easy silent laughter as if the joke were a secret thing too good to share. "Watch out," he said, "or you'll hit a star. One of the five points. Then poof, where's your ego? Can this be it?" He held out his empty palm still laughing. "Poor little shrivelled pea," he said.

Spike had brot in another theme. Worse than the last one, worse that the one before that. "Good lord, it's hopeless."

"What's the matter with it anyway?"

"Matter with it!" Brand read a sentence. "People who are not athletes are always sick a lot with stomach trouble and little colds and such things." He looked at Spike solemnly. "It must be an awful nuisance for you having me snuffling around."

"Snuffling around? I don't get you."

"One of those little colds, you know. I'm never rid of it. Sneezing all over the place and my nose is a faucet."

"Well, gee whiz!"

"Sure, I know. I ought to go in for athletics, develop into a big strong husky man." He suddenly flung the paper from him. "That's too ba
to fool with. It would take me a week to work it over."

"But I've got to have a theme tomorrow, and I couldn't do any better, honest, Brand. What'll I do?"

There was something pathetic about Spike, a clumsy Newfoundland dog begging for a bone. "I'll give you one of my old themes."

"Won't Moore catch on?"

"Not a chance, I'll maul it up a bit. Wait a minute, I've got them around somewhere." He found his bundle of themes among his shirts in the bottom bureau drawer. These were none of them bad enough. But there was one he had written in class, worse than the others. 'Sociological Spike might possibly have chosen such a subject. His imagination stretched like a rubber band to include this supposition. He ran thru the theme quickly, striking out a phrase, turning a sentence upside down. "There," he said at the end of five minutes, "Go along and copy it. It'll get by all right.

After Spike had gone he flung himself on the bed and lay quiet with his cheek pressed against the pillow. Honor was a word, as thin as air, a intangible as a shadow. Wipe it out of your vocabulary, forget it. If other fellows did such things why shouldn't he. Just another lesson that college taught you. Conscience like honor was a word that had gone by the board. It would have taken him an hour or more to have worked over that fool theme and even then— "People who are not athletes always have little colds." He laughed suddenly and sat up. The whole world snuffling an accompaniment to athletic victories. Three sniffs for the team, fellows. Make it snappy. Wait until he told Dix. Extravagance piled on extravagance until it toppled sky high. He slid into his top-coat and started for the door. He would find Dix now and tell him. Perhaps Dix knew what he was talking about after all. Drifting was so easy. Pleasant too, once you grew used to it and learned to steer away from the sharp rocks of honor and conscience.
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XIX

The days lengthened. The sun moved across the sky slowly as tho reluctant to leave this new bright world reborn from gray mists, from dwindling snow, from the heavy ceaseless fall of spring rain.

Dix and Brand were always together. Siamese twins, the boys at the house called them. Other people were thin shadows without substance or reality. Richard Pernald. Brand wondered what he had ever seen in him, a dull boy lacking wit and charm, striving doggedly to achieve the impossible. Of course there was still Holt. One could not dismiss Holt with a gesture. One could not relegate him to a shadowy world. He was too vivid, too alive. But Holt after all was a professor; a line of division separated him from the light-hearted carefree realm to which Dix and Brand belonged. A line invisible at times perhaps but still there.

And always there was Dix. "Meet me at the hut at five, Barney. I've got to get that damn copy out. Must be developing a conscience or something, I'm so strong on doing my duty."

The journalism hut was a low-ceilinged stuffy place, blue with cigarette smoke, deafening with the clack of typewriters. Journalism students were an irresponsible bunch most of them, shouting at pointless jokes, treating each other with careless familiarity. Boys and girls were scrambled together, equally discourteous, and equally frank. "Where the hell is that Regan cut, Large?" "God lord, how do I know? Ask Mac, that's his job."

"Why don't you switch over into journalism?" Dix asked him. "It's a darn sight more practical than English. Where's English going to get you anyway?"

"I don't know. I want to be a literary critic and Holt says English will give me a better background for that sort of thing than journalism. Holt was on the Sun five years; he ought to know."
"Well you'll probably have to start in as a cub anyway. I should think journalism—"

"Oh I'm going to take some courses in journalism, but I guess I need the other more for my sort of work."

"It's your funeral."

Queer the way he stuck to his plan. And yet, not so queer after all.
The journalism students were not his sort, and tumble, painfully intimate. Their way was not his way, their kind not his kind. Except Dix Dix was interwoven into his life, an undefined craving, an unappeased desire. A drink that was bitter and sweet and did not quench the thirst.

Alone at night facing the darkness and the quiet he tried to analyze the relationship. "I don't know what it is. I've never felt like this about anyone before. It's not his cleverness; there are lots of fellows here who are cleverer. It's not because he's good looking or—Dix' twisty smile, his sudden careless indifference. "Perhaps that's it. I'm never sure of him. I've always been sure of people before, people I cared about." Marsh and his mother and John, Richard Fernald, even Holt. He felt so sure of them, their permanency, their unfailing friendship. But Dix— at any moment he might vanish. At any moment he might turn away a new face, a new voice, turn away and forget, carelessly, casually, never looking back, never remembering, was it this impermanence that held him, this insecurity? Others had felt that way about him perhaps. There was Claire. There was Richard Fernald, he had cast them aside so lightly.

In any relationship there is always one who cares more. He had read that somewhere and found it pleasant. Until now he had always been the one who had cared less. And now— He turned restlessly, flung his arms out in the darkness. Now he was caught in his own web, and Dix blew free as a paper scrap before the wind.
Holt had sent for him. "How did James Regan get this paper?" he asked. No preamble, he went straight to the point. "How did James get this paper?"

Brand knew what it was without looking at it. He knew that fencing was useless.

"I gave it to him."

"May I ask why?"

Why? There were a dozen reasons. The boys at the house. Chippy Graham talking. Spike's lumbering doglike pathos. His own inertia. But what right had Holt to demand explanations? "Because I wanted to."

"Excellent reason. But one wonders why you wanted to."

"Because." A silly meaningless answer that told nothing.

There was an uncomfortable silence weighted with unsaid words. Then Holt sighed and ran his hand along his cheek. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," he said. "I know of course. This isn't the first case of this sort I've run into. Pressure at the house. Duty to the fraternity and to the school. Oh I know the sort of talk they handed you. Perverted ethics, cheap school spirit. And you fell for it." He looked away out of the window.

"That's the thing that surprised me, he said slowly. "I didn't think your price was so low."

His word were the prick of a spur on bare flesh. "If you'd been thru it once you'd know. Always after you. Twisting it around so that it looked like the only decent thing to do. Criticizing—"

"The disapproval of little men," said Holt softly. What a potent force it is after all. One sells one's soul for approbation."

"I didn't at first. Then after a while I said I'd work over his themes with him. Senseless muddles. It took hours straightening them out. And he didn't seem to learn a thing from it. Each was worse than the last. I got so darn tired—"
"Yes," said Holt, "so darn tired?"

"It was easier to give him one of mine than to fool with the things."

"It's always easier going down hill of course."

"Well." A sudden flare of defiance. If he was going to take it like that let him. It was so easy to see right and wrong from an ivory tower, but down in the street, jostled by the crowd, jerked a dozen ways, values shifted, merged. There was no clear dividing line.

Holt's eyes narrowed on him. "I suppose you realize what this means," he said. "Regan fails the course. With his present record it means that he flunked out of school. A good thing in its way. He doesn't belong here. But, well-- a bad method to attain a good result. As for you--" He began to draw on the corner of the desk blotter an intricate design of squares and triangles. "As for you, there's nothing we can do, of course. You go scott free as far as we're concerned. Whether or not you profit by the experience depends on you entirely. I can only say that I'm sorry, and disappointed. I credited you with more stamina than you deserved. A mistake in moral bookkeeping. The loss is mine as well as yours."

He swung about in his chair, a gesture of dismissal.

Brand paused a moment outside the closed door. Mental barbs, how they stung the flesh making it ache and burn. Holt had only one side, the upper surface bared to the light. But there was another side. If he turned it over:

"The disapproval of little men." was that true? Yes, a little, but there was more. Spike's clumsy pathos. He had wanted to help him-- but the easiest way. He started back toward the door, hesitated a moment with his hand outstretched, then turned quickly and walked down the corridor. He would not humble himself. He would not stoop again to explanations. For get about Holt. Shake him loose. Be free of him forever. "A mistake in moral bookkeeping."

Well let him balance the ledgers as best he could; he was through.

Across the campus he saw Dix coming toward him walking lazily with the
on his hair. But he could not meet Dix now. Not now. He must straighten out his face first. Stop this damn shivering. He ducked around the corner of a building out of sight. It was funny, wasn't it? All this solemnity about a silly theme. If he could see it that way. If he could laugh. He forced his mouth into a smile, held it a moment wavering. Then it went out. Awfully damn funny. He ran the back of his hand across his eyes and bit into his under-lip fiercely to stop its quivering.

XXI

Three assignments to finish before five o'clock. Then after supper back again, another two hours to get out the paper. No time to write carefully. No time to smooth a sentence, to turn a phrase. Put in the five w's, round them out a little, write 'thirty' at the bottom, then on to the next one. Good god, what a senseless grind. His typewriter snapped, letters jumped into place to form a sentence. There, he had finished at last. He flung his paper on the copy desk and went out of the room without a backward glance. A voice followed him, Peg Lehson, shouting above the noise of the typewriters. "What's eating Brand anyway? He looks like the wrath of God." Dix's answer, indistinct, half drowned, "---just--- sub basement mood--- day after the big night. He---"

The campus was a stretch of darkness, dry leaves underfoot, the still reaches of the sky. A light in Holt's office. He'd like to drop in and talk to him. A sudden aching need. But he walked by, digging his hands deep in his pockets and turning away his head. He had finished with Holt six months ago. Wiped him off the slate and chalked down new numbers. Journalism. Dix and the gang in the orchestra. Marge Porter and her kind. Good eggs all of them, always something doing, always a bunch around, no time to grope for hidden motives. This was living wisely, and yet---

Richard Fernald was coming toward him; he saw him too late to duck. "Hello Brand."

"'Lo Richard."
"Mind if I walk with you?"
"No, come along. I'm in a sort of rush." They started off together down the avenue.
"You're always in a rush lately, Brand. I never see you."
"I know. Journalism keeps me on the jump, and then with the orchestra—"
"Are you glad you switched majors?"
"Yes, there's a live bunch in journalism. We have great old times."
"Have you stopped writing altogether?"
"Good lord, no. I have to get in six or eight stories a week for the paper. And then there's feature writing."
"It isn't quite the same, is it?"
"What do you mean?"
"Oh, journalistic writing. It isn't, well, creative. It's more putting down facts in a hurry and rushing them thru, isn't it?"

The five W's. Little trite terse sentences. Hurry. Hurry. "Oh I don't know. It's good training. It teaches you to think fast and it has practical value."

"Yes I suppose so. The trouble with me is I can't learn to be practical. It never seems awfully important to me. Not as important as other things." He put his hand on Brand's arm suddenly, a quick shy pressure. "I'm sorry you changed, Brand. I didn't—"

His mother's words. John's. But he knew better than anyone else what he needed. "He couldn't sput hinsightfully. He pulled away abruptly. "I turn in here." The lights from the house made clear pools of gold on the bare earth. "Well so long."

Richard had not moved. "Come and see me sometime, won't you? This is my last quarter. I'd like to see something of you before—"

"All right I will." Easy to say, easy to forget. "I'll drop around some-
John and his mother and Marsh at home living their own separate and distinct lives apart from his. It was hard to realize at times. He thought of them as existing only in his mind, dying a transitory death during his absence, born anew at his return. And yet for them as for him life went on weaving its pattern of sun and shadow, of day and night.

The summer had gone by almost before it had begun. Only a memory of hours when he had helped John in the fields, of long quiet-colored evenings on the tennis court, of picnics and dances and sudden overwhelming periods of boredom. He remembered the day when he had told his mother of his decision to change majors.

"I think it's rather foolish," she had said.

"I don't see why. It's a whole lot more practical."

"That may be true, but you started out in English. I'd like to see you finish one thing you started."

"But golly, Mother, when you find you've made a mistake you've got to rectify it somehow."

"Yes, if you're sure it a mistake and not just a silly notion. I'm afraid you're keeping something back, Brand. Some other reason."

He had flinched at that and laughed. "Well if there's another reason it's a good enough one for sure."

"I wonder," she said.

He also wondered when he let himself, but that was not often. There were too many other things to think about. His days were crammed full. Even if he wasn't getting anywhere he was moving and that was something.

John had not come to college. He had given it up definitely. Slowly he was turning Pleasant Meadows into a dairy farm. "Ther's twice as much money in it as in ordinary farming," he told Brand. "And I like it lots better. I always was keen about stock breeding. Once I get on my feet and can begin to buy pedigreed cattle..."
"But what about college? Will you turn the place over to Frank and let him run it later on?"

John snorted. "Youth, I'll get everything in good shape and then hand it over to Frank as he can put it right back where it was. Look at his place. He had to sell another twenty-five acres this spring. He's scared to try anything that his great-great-grandfather didn't do."

"You talk as though you planned on giving up college altogether," said Brand slowly. "You don't have to do that. We can sell the place." Before John could reply he added hastily, "Oh I know I put a kick when you suggested it two years ago, but that was just my damn selfishness. If you want to, go ahead."

"Do you want to?"

"No, but---"

"I don't either. I decided that last year. The place belongs in the family sort of. I didn't care about that a while ago but I do now. Since I've been working at it I've kind of got the feel of the thing. I'm a Tyler all right, college isn't for me."

"What difference does that make? Being a Tyler, I mean."

"Oh, all the Tylers were farmers, and—well, making a success here is just about as important in its way as chemistry. The sort of work I could do in chemistry. It's kind of creative. That's what counts, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." Brand had hesitated watching him from between half closed lids. "But you were so keen on chemistry. It seems a shame. You know I'll be able to look out for myself as soon as we get the Orchestra running in the fall."

"Sure you will. That will help a lot too. But don't worry about the money. I'll send it right along as long as you need it."

That had been four months ago. Each month had brought a check from John. The orchestra was doing better than Brand and Dix had hoped. They had more openings than they could possibly handle, more money than they had dreamed of.
Brand's share was sometimes thirty dollars a week, sometimes forty. But it slipped thru his fingers like water. The grind of six hours' playing, wrenched nerves, aching muscles. He had to find release somehow.

"How about a little drink, fellows?" A few golden hours when the world was his plaything, a luminous iridescent bubble blown from his lips. Then more drinks to free him from the bitterness of awakening. Money was quicksilver gone before he could grasp it.

Marsh was at home this year. She would be eighteen. Then she would have a little money of her own, left her by her mother. Perhaps she would study kindergartening. "I haven't any talents, she had told Brand wistfully; "But I guess I'll have to do something. I'd like working with children, I think. They're so helpless. Perhaps they need me a little."

Marsh was like that, always the helpless, the weak. Perhaps that was why he blotted out the thought. "Why do you wait a year?" She had looked up at him, her eyes deep and dark in the shadow of her wide hat. "I can help here," she said, "Until John gets on his feet. Cousin Edith---" she paused.

"Yes?" he said impatiently.

"She's not awfully strong, Brannie." At his sudden strained tenseness she had put out her hand reassuringly. "Oh, I don't mean she's sick. It's just---she's worked hard and she's tired, and running the house is too much for her alone."

"I see." His own voice sound bitter and strained. "I see. You're all struggling away here trying to grow figs from thistles and I---well, I'm one of the thistles, the biggest one."

She had laugh suddenly, a thin curl of sound. "Don't be silly. You're working too, getting somewhere? I don't know. Where is some---where Marsh, anyway?"
Brand moved into the fraternity house that year. At first he enjoyed it. The freedom to come and go as he liked. After the restrictions of the dormitory it was undeniably pleasant to live without constant supervision.

But he missed his own room. There was never a moment when he could be sure of privacy. And the endless bull sessions ate up his time. Whenever two or three boys got together there was talk. It ran invariably to the same topics. Women, Drinks, The professors.

"You'd think to hear Doc. Seamon's line that chemistry was the only damn thing that mattered." "Well, he's a damn lot nearer right than some of those other birds. Look what they've done in chemistry, in the poison gases and things they've discovered." "Sure that's true, but I don't know as it helps much, finding stuff to blow people up or burn their insides out." "Well we got to have war I guess. There's too many people in the world as it is." "They'd better spend their time teaching birth control methods." "Say, you could get a job at that., That's one subject you have all the dope on."

From there the talk wandered into a muddle of sex, and sex always led in some way to drinks. "Did you ever try nitre fizzes? They sure knock you cold."
"I know something that hits harder---"

The voices eddied about Brand. Sometimes his own voice chimed in only to lost in the general clamor. Dix had a story to tell, one of his innumerable shady anecdotes. "It's God's truth as straight as I'm sitting here." He grinned across at Brand. "Ask Barney if I'm stringing you." When they broke up at last it was long after midnight, too late to study. "I'll get down to work tomorrow." But tomorrow was the same and the next day. One got by somehow without studying. The fellows who worked missed half the fun of college. Stupid grinds.
Biddy was at the U studying botany. She had flung herself into it as she did into everything she undertook. She had no time for sororities, no time for light casual contacts. Brand met her sometime cuttin across the campus with a tin pail swinging from her hand. "Off after specimens, want to come along?"

"No thank you."

"Lazy as ever, aren't you?"

Always rubbing it in. Would she never make an end to it. "I suppose tearing flowers apart to see their insides is your idea of being busy."

"Well it's just as good as banging jazz."

"I don't ask you to listen."

"I wouldn't if you did, you know that?" Biddy's eyes suddenly danced with laughter.

"What so darn funny?"

"Oh nothing much. Just you and me scrapping as usual."

"What's the joke in that?"

"There isn't any joke if you don't see it." She turned away from him.

"Go bang out your jazz," she called over her shoulder. "I'll collect my plants."

He watched her stride off across the campus, wind-touselled, independent. The set of her shoulders, the upward lift of her little chin. Suddenly she turned and came back. "Have you heard from John?" She shot the question at him.

"Why yes. He's all right, why?"

"Nothing," she said, "I just wondered. He hasn't written." Her eyes looked into his an instant stretched wide to show the thin white line against the blue. Then a slow flush mounted from her throat creeping painfully upward to the roots of her yellow hair. She turned away. "Well, so
long, see you later."

He stood bewildered looking after her. What had it meant, that sudden
question, that slow flush? John. John and Biddy. Good lord, no! And yet
why not after all? How absolutely right it was when you stopped to think
about it. Between them they would remake Pleasant Meadow. John's
perseverance. Biddy's driving force. There'd be kids of course, sturdy little
ruffians tumbling about underfoot. Youngsters for Marsh to care for. He
saw Marsh and himself meeting there year after year, coming back from far pla
for a week, a month, going off again each his separate way. And Biddy and
John like two trees with their roots deep in the soil waiting always to welcome
them home.

XXV

He was alone at the house. He had been rehearsing for two hours. Now
the boys had gone. "Come along, Barney. Let's go down town." "No, I'm
tired." They had drifted out leaving him in the empty room. Faintly he could
hear the sputtering protesting cough of Dix! Ford growing more remote, dying
away.

He sat on the plane bench with his hands locked about his knee. He was
suddenly lonely. Why hadn't he gone with the bunch? An aimless wandering
up and down the streets of the town, shouts at passersby, loud idle talk.
It got you nowhere, but where was there to get? At least it ate up dragging
time. He moved restlessly, searched for a cigarette. Lighting it he
watched the smoke curve upward faintly blue. The taste of tobacco was bitter
in his mouth. Suddenly he flung the cigarette from him and spread his fingers
along the keys. A dim stirring of sound, a lost wandering. He stumbled,
went back, tired again. It was so long since he had really played, since
stubborn and unwieldy. But music— an expression of the inexpressible born of changing sounds. A tortured soul cried out beneath his fingers.

The room was growing dark; long shadows crept out of the corners; hungry shadow-mouths opened to engulf objects. He played on. If only he knew more about music. If only he had studied. Even jazz. More to it than people imagined. The voice of the new America, restless, swaggering, sentimental. George Gershwin had seen that. What else was his Hapsody in Blue but such an interpretation, the shaping of discords into an articulate cry, heartbreaking nerve wrenching blues weaving itself thru discordant sounds to definite significance? If he could do that. But there was so much he did not know, so much.

XXVI

The room was full of boys when Brand came in. He saw them dimly thru a haze of cigarette smoke. Their heads seemed to rise and fall with the smoke waves, to float on an undulating sea of smoke. Their voices were choked, muffled in a blue mist. He groped for a chair and sprawled, legs stretched to the fire.

"God, what a night. What a night. What a hot night."

Dix' bright head detached itself from the haze, a candle in a dim room. No use to stretch your cold hands to it, light without heat. "You're back early Barney. What's the idea?"

"There isn't any idea. There isn't any idea for anything." Portentiously wise, portentiously solemn, from the far reaches of the upper air he looked down on them. "Isn't any idea for anything."

Murray Keith came out of the mist now, a wavering bodiless head. "Couldn't miss the little bull session. Dropped your wench and came home to settle world problems. That's it."

"Yes, that's it, tha's it." His tongue slurred over the letters. He
tried again. "That's it."

"Tight as a hinge," said Murray sorrowfully. "Sure sign if you can't say 'that's it.'"

Brand laugh. The sound seemed to leap away from his lips, to be caught in a swirl of smoke. It floated away from him and came back slapping against his ears, floating away. Catch it the next time. Hold it. He stretched out his hand but clutched air.

"What are you grabbing after anyhow?" Dix, again. A drawling inquiry.

"Got away from me. Lost it that time."

"What?"

"Oh nothing. Nothing you fellows'd understand. Lots of things you fellows wouldn't understand at all." The top of the world, dim, whirling faces in the mist below. A moment of startled clairvoyance. "How awfully drunk I must be." Then the mist and faces appearing, disappearing. He laughed again.

"Well, let's have the joke." One of the faces had spoken out of the smoky fog.

"Isn't any joke. Don't know any jokes."

"Where'd you go tonight?"

He pressed his hand to his forehead trying to remember. The rattle of Dix' Ford. "How'd I get it? How'd I get Dix' wreck anyway?" A road winding and turning, leaping out of the darkness beneath the bright lights of the car. A girl with a white face, a smooth body. Struggling conflicting desires. A pulse like a drum beat in the pit of his stomach. Somewhere green boughs above a still pool. The pure translucent depths of water. Something to drink almost, amber-clear, burning. The green boughs grew dream-like, faded. The girls thin wrists between his hands were the only true reali
"Oh 'round." He waved his arm in a vague inclusive half-circle.

"Who'd you have along."

"Estelle. Think that's her name. Yes, that's her name. We want 'round. 'Round and 'round."

"Got you kind of dizzy, didn't it?"

Stars spinning thru space, spark of light leaping in the darkness.

"Just a little. Nothing to speak of. Don't let's speak of it."

"Oh all right, tell us about Estelle."

"Nothing to tell. What do you want to know for anyway?"

"Who is she?" What was the matter with Dix? Question after question tugging him back from his serene high point in the sun. "Oh I don't know." Who was Estelle, a face without depth or meaning in the darkness. A warm smooth body. "Little bit of thing. Little girl. Comes about since."

His hand wandered toward his shoulder, missed and tried again.

"Oh my God, my God," groaned Dix. "You know her, fellows. Estelle Collins. The kid who ran around with Bud Johnson. Pure as Ivory Soap. 99.44/100%.

"Full red passionate mouth," said Brand slowly. He fitted the words carefully into the phrase, "Full red pas-

"Sure we know all about that. Did you try kissing it?"

"Try," his lips twitched, "I did."

"The original Don Juan," "The first kiss." "Brand the seducer."

A babble of voices, bursting laughter. "What happened? Go on Go on."

"Nothing happened." He stretched out his legs again and watched them disappear in a haze.

"You don't mean--?"

"No!" Brand stood up waveringly holding himself erect by his coat lapels. "Nothing happened. Just nothing." He groped for a cigarette, spilled half a dozen on the floor. But they were too far away, lost at the bottom of a black abyss. "I haven't any cigs. I've lost--"
"Here," Fritz Bergen thrust his own half-smoked one between Brand's lips. "Now tell us the worst." He turned toward the boys. Brand's sure a hot one when he's stiff. Worth all the grief he gives us just seeing him like this."

The words traced a pattern thru Brand's dim dream. "Must remember that. Make a note of that. Item one: Hot when stiff. Must remember.

"What's she like when you get her alone?" The voice out thru the eddying smoke.

"She's like-- she's like--" Brand hesitated studying the tip of his cigarette. "She's like----" He looked about him seriously and shook his head. "Tell you a little secret," he said, "Just between us. Little secret." He leaned toward Dix. "She's a mermaid, he whispered "She's a mermaid from the waist down. I know."

Laughter, a gathering, overwhelming roar. "Not so bad! Mermaid from the waist down. Tell it to the deaaa."

He tried to bow, toppled and caught hold of the chair back straightening himself with difficulty. "Must remember that. Not so bad. Make a note of that. Item two: A mermaid----" He started toward the door. "Going to Siberia," he called over his shoulder, "Sleepy. So damn sleepy. 'night."

The door wavered and slid away from him. He went after it, captured it and gained the hall.

Siberia was the top floor of the fraternity house, icy in the winter, sickeningly hot in the late spring days. Rows of cots lined the walls, tumbled, unmade. Brand crawled out of his clothes in the dark leaving them in an untidy heap on the floor. The sheet was cool. His hot body soaked up their cool smoothness. A chill spring wind smelling of the new leaves blew across his face. He lay very still feeling the rock and sweep of the wind. He was on a cloud drifting far above the world, floating in a serenity of blue air.
The boy on the next cot snored and muttered angrily in his sleep, but far away, far away, only a tremulous pulse in the moving quiet. God must feel like this, Brand thought dreamily, undisturbed by human perplexities, unagitated by human doubts and fears, detached, omnipotent.

He fell to sleep almost at once, his arms outstretched, his face turned to the wind. For a time he slept quietly lost in a void without sound or color. Then a dream, light and movement reborn. A struggle upward through darkness into a strange reality. He was laying in his bed at home. And yet it was not home—a strange room filled with familiar things. Pale moonlight patterned the floor with black and silver. He had awakened suddenly to the stillness and lay stiff with terror looking into eternity. It stretched before and behind him an immensity of space, an immensity of time, unending, incomputable. He cried out in a thin high voice, "Marsh! Marsh!" And then he realized that she had been there all the while. Just out of hand reach. A little pale girl in a white nightgown, a tumble of curls about her shoulders. He was filled with a sudden singing relief and stretched out his arms to her. But she drew away, holding her gown about her slight childish body. He could see the outline of her narrow hips, her small thighs. "Marsh! Marsh!" His voice shattered itself against the darkness. He tried again, stretching from the bed with outstretched hands, "Come close. Please, come close." But she moved away back into the shadow. "No, oh no!" Her voice broke, anguished horrorstricken. And then, following her wide terror—stretched eyes to his own body he saw. A gray scummy corruption oozed from his pores. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, like nothing describable. Loathsome. Unclean. He wrench himself up-right. To touch her, he would be clean again. But she had vanished, only her enormous haunted eyes floating in the darkness seemed unable to tear themselves away from a fascinated contemplation of his sick body.
He woke into stark consciousness. The gray light of dawn silvered
the room. Attree branch was cryptic scrawl against the windowpane. What
had he been dreaming? Something horrible. Something—Remembrance engulfed
him like a mounting wave. He felt of his body with shaking hands. It was
clammy with sweat, but no more. Only a dream, that sizzling vulgarity. only
a dream. And yet, a truth beneath the shadowy surface. "I'm no good, I'm
no good."

Memories of the night before crowded back startlingly clear. Dix'
drawling contempt. "You're so damn pure, Barney. An unsullied virgin.
There's nothing more tiresome than chastity." He had grinned at Brand
scornfully. "Afraid, aren't you? Just plain scared."

"I am not." He had swaggered out. Afraid! No one could say that about
him and get away with it. He'd show Dix. Then an instinctive fastidious
withdrawal. "I can't. It's dirty. I don't care what Dix thinks. Oh, I do
care. I do care." He must hold on to Dix at any cost. His need of Dix was
a slow persistent thirst, unquenched, unquenchable.

Other memories. Dix' car outside the house. A rattling clatter as he
swung it into the street. A drink to pull him thru. Another. Drink cut down
barriers of restraint, lowered resistance. How had he got Estelle. He
didn't remember, but she was there beside him, close, closer. Her body was
soft, yielding to the strength of his arms. Their two faces were pallid
blurs in the darkness, meeting. A sudden stiffening. "Brand, don't. Let's
go home, Brand." "No, no," He could not go back now. He could not go back
He was strength to her weakness, fire to her ice. Fire melted ice. In
another moment--- What was it that caught him up so sharply, turned him
about? Two memories born simultaneously, Marsh's quiet-wide-eyes face,
Biddy's laughter. Each an insurmountable barrier between him and Estelle.
His arms went around her again but it was no use. A shrinking disgust.
Dirty.

He had swung the car into the road to town. That had happened after the
he was not sure. He had swaggered thru somehow. And then, the dream, the
awakening to bleak consciousness. He stretched his arms above his head in
the gray light, his fingers curled under biting the palms. What a dam mess
he was making of his life, he thought drearily. Never courage enough to do the
things he wanted to do. Pretending to be bad, pretending to be good.
Wanting to be all things to all men and nothing to himself. Always tangled
lies, putting up screens between himself and reality. Could he break away
from it now, make a new start? Holt would help. If he went to Holt and
told him. But he could not do it. Marsh was the only one he could tell
and Marsh was not there. He pressed his fingers against his mouth to stop it
quivering. "I'm no good. I'm no good. But I can't help it. It's my
temperament. I guess when I was made something was left out. I can't be
blamed if something was forgotten, can I? It's not my fault."

XXVII

He did not go home that summer. He had a chance to play in a ship's
orchestra, to make more money, to spend more money. He had written home about
it and they had written back. His mother's letter, "Of course we are sorry,
dear, for our own sakes. But we feel it is a splendid opportunity for you to
new countries and make fresh contacts. We hope you will make the most of it.
In your work it will be invaluable." In his work. What was his work?
Drumming cheap music evidently. It was the only thing he stuck to. Lesson
had faded into unimportant nuisances to be neglected and forgotten. The last
week of school he crammed, learning just enough to get thru the exams.
He felt fairly safe. No one ever failed in Journalism. It was an accepted fact at the University.

He saw Biddy before he left, the first time in weeks. She caught up with him on the campus one day and walked beside him in the sunflecked shadows beneath the trees. "Marsh wrote me you're not coming home this summer."

"No, our orchestra's signed up with the star line. The Mediterranean trip."

"I should think you'd go home and help..." What business of hers was it? If she thought she could run his life for him— "I imagine I'm old enough to decide that."

"Are you?"

He turned away from her clear searching eyes "I'm almost twenty-one. I want the experience." What had made him say that? A childish attempt to explain, to excuse himself.

"Haven't you had enough of your sort of experience?" Beneath her words undercurrent of meaning. An implication. What did she know about him? What had she heard? The campus was so small after all, people talked. "What are you hinting at?" he asked, angrily.

They were under a giant lost tree sweet with hanging creamy blossoms. Biddy followed the tracery of the rough bark with her finger nails, down one line and up another, before she answered. Then she looked at him. "Do you really want to know?"

No, never. Never. Let the words stay unspoken. Bury them deep. Forget them. Better the implication, the innuendo. One could twist that to fit one's desires. But words once spoken were rocks in the path to tumble over, sharp, unavoidable. He turned away from her. "No," he said, "I'm not interested. His voice was thin and flat, ironed smooth of all expression. "I'm not in the least interested."
XXVIII

The trip was something to be remembered and something to be forgotten. Dix and the gang, windy days at the sea, still black nights when the dancing was over and he had moments alone on deck. The sting of flying spume against his checks, a wheeling immensity of space. He was lonely suddenly and raced for the lights of the cabin and Dix' slow laughter. There was always plenty to drink, Dix saw to that. Strange new drinks that made you reach for the stars and then brought you down to earth suddenly to a wrenched bemused awakening. Days in port, a confused memory of narrow streets, of dark girls in each port. He returned to the ship with tall stories of his conquests. "These French women know more about sex than American girls ever dreamed of. They make a art of it."

"A business rather," said Brand abruptly.

"A hell of a lot you know about it," Dix laughed. "You run back and hide in your stateroom whenever things begin to get hot."

"It was true of course. He never was able to see it thru. "It's so damn dirty." Always that inner cry of repulsion. Easier to face Dix' disgust, to be scorned and ridiculed, than to yield to the submerging horror. But he felt Dix slipping away from him, A new indifference that twisted his heart. Oh, he must hold on to Dix, show him that he was not a person to be flung aside lightly. He could carry his liquor better than any man in the crowd, better than Dix himself. Perhaps he carried it too well, if he could only get drunk enough to forget everything, a body without a mind, caught in a blind thought less pursuit of primitive desires. But it was impossible.

The cruise ended at last and he was back at school. The beginning of his third year.
He had never grown used to life in the fraternity house. He had never been able to accept it casually. The close contacts, the physical intimacies the utter lack of privacy. He had moments of rebellion and cold withdrawals, "Brand's God-Almighty mood" the boys called it. They did not like him. He knew that. But they put up with him because of Dix. He was Dix' friend and Dix was the most popular man in the house. If it were not for Dix he would have given it up long before and handed in his pin. But he must stay near Dix. An unprofitable dream perhaps, but a dream nevertheless, gripping, entangling.

And he was losing Dix. Slowly the cords that bound them were being severed. Dix was shaking himself free of them, turning away. There was a new boy at the house. Stephen Merrill. A delicate thin face, thick blond hair that waved back from a high forehead. His hands were white and effeminate, finely molded. His voice was soft and rather weak. It was to him that Dix had turned, a possessive arm flung about Stephen's shoulders, low-voiced conversation that did not include Brand. He was caught up in a new intimacy and Brand was outside. It was only a careless forgetting that was more painful, more heartbreaking than pointed cruelty because of its very casualness.

To forget Dix, that was the thing to do. To plunge into his lessons, work hard, make a decent showing again. What was Dix after all? A waster with a crooked mind, a drifter with no code, no philosophy. If he could be done with him forever. But there was no wall high enough to spin a web of forgetfulness. Dix had only to speak suddenly after weeks of neglect, "Oh Barney, going down town, want to come?" A careless word flung over his shoulder and Brand dropped whatever he was doing to go with him, to tag along.
He had gone to see Biddy. It was late in the evening and he was lonely, a sudden aching nostalgia. Biddy could tell him about home, about familiar things. Perhaps she would make him see it again clearly, would bring dim lost faces back into life, reshape for him the forgotten curve of hills.

Biddy had an apartment with another girl near the University. He had promised to run in and see her but that was all long time ago and he had never done it. Perhaps she would not be home; perhaps she would be glad to see him. It had been so long.

He found the house at last. A woman answered the bell and sent him up a dark steep stair to the top floor. He knocked at the door and waited. A scurrying rush of footsteps, a hesitating pause. Two people faced each other with the wooden panel between them. Then the door opened. The girl before him was not Biddy.

"Oh," he said "I'm sorry. I'm looking for Frances Kemp."

She held onto the door with both hands and smiled up at him, a tremulous flickering smile like blown shadows over grasses. "She isn't here right now. She went to the library but she ought to be back any minute. Won't you come in?" She stepped aside with a little half gesture of welcome.

"No thank you," he said, "I just--" And then the light fell across her face bringing it out in sharp relief against the dark panel of the door. "Well, if you don't mind."

Sitting across the small crowded room he looked at her, narrowing his eyes to study more closely her childish face. A thin young girl in a blue sweater. Her hair was a light indefinite brown cut short about her ears, brushed back from her low forehead. A sensitive face, changing quickly, a small mouth, hazel eyes a little pointed at the corners as though
invisible hands drew them upward, a fine-cut delicate nose with lifted nostrils.

"I know you," she said, "Biddy's told me all about you, and about Pleasant Meadows and John and Marsh. I'm glad you came. I've wanted to meet you only I was a little afraid." She was shy, a shy child trying to be nice to a grown person and not quite knowing how. Her narrow hands pulled at her handkerchief, smoothing it out flat and straight across her knee, rolling it into a crumpled ball. None of Biddy's brisk friendliness, of Marsh's clear cool serenity. A pool perhaps, but a pool in the sunlight, stirred by passing winds, darkened by clouds, mobile, changing.

"Afraid," he asked, what of?

"Of I don't know, you seemed different," her voice wavered, "Afraid you wouldn't like me I guess."

"Why I liked you the minute I saw you. Who wouldn't?" and then laughing, "Here you know all about me and I don't even know your name, That's not fair, is it?"

"It's Sherril," she said "Sherril Paige."

"Sherril. Such a nice name, like leaves whispering together. It suits you." He wanted to be nice to her suddenly, to put her at her ease. In his mind his arm curved about her protectively, a strange feeling, a new feeling.

"It was my mother's name—Margaret Sherril." She glanced at him quickly and away. Her eyes were like dancing water over stones, clear and shallow. What strange things eyes were, letting you peer a little way into unfathomed depths, giving you a hint, a suggestion of the unknown world they guarded.

"Tell me about your self," he said. He was surprised by his own eagerness. What could she tell him that would interest him? Knowing about her
would never end his own ceaseless inward groping. And yet he must know.

"Please."

"There is so little to tell. I mean—I'm just Sherril."

Just Sherril. A dim voice, an oval face, pale, softly molded, thin small feet in childish sandals with flat heels. Just Sherril, but was that not enough, complete and perfect in itself?

What had she told him? Afterwards he tried to remember. There was something about her life at home, her mother. "She is like this," she said. She drew her mouth together, pointed corners, a thin straight line. Her face was suddenly as flat and blank as a stone. "And she's like this! A swift change, a breaking up of smooth surfaces. "I love my mother," she said, "And I hate her. She's— She broke off abruptly and her thin nervous fingers twisted the handkerchief, made of it a living tortured thing between her hands.

Biddy had told him more. She met him at the door as he was leaving and walked along with him almost to the house. "How did you and Sherril get along?" she asked.

"Oh all right. She's a nice little thing. Tell me about her."

Biddy slipped her arm thru his. "I haven't quite made her out yet, Brand. She's awfully quiet most of the time. Awfully queer sort of—"

"How did you happen to meet her?"

"She was in lab. class with me. We worked together. And she couldn't do the experiments. I thot she wasn't trying and got mad. Bawled her out."

She paused a moment. "I guess I was pretty rough. Any-way it scared her and she cried. It's awfull to make people cry, Brand. They break up so. It was awfuller with her because she didn't make a sound, just sat and looked up at me with the tears running down her checks and her chin shaking. I almost cried myself I felt like a brute."
"I took her home with me and made her some cocoa."

He could almost laugh at that. It was so like Biddy. Cocoa—an unfailing panacea for all ills. "And of course that made everything all right."

Biddy looked up at him suddenly defiant. "Well it helped a lot. The mind and the body work together, don't they?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Go on."

They walked a few steps in silence. Then Biddy continued. "After she'd rested a little while we talked and I found out things about her. Not so much that time but enough to get me interested. You see, I'm taking abnormal psych. and she seemed like a case—"

At Brand's instinctive stiffening she hurried on. "Oh, not anything awful. But a case—" Labelled and ticketed, filed away for reference. Sherrill; "A case of maladjustment. She was unhappy and she couldn't do the work and everything was all tangled up. She was living in the dorm and it nearly drove her crazy. Some of the girls weren't nice to her. She's so awfully sensitive."

Sensitive. He knew what that meant. The stinging ache, the quick withdrawal into a hard crystal shell. But Sherrill had no shell, no place within her self to go. "Poor Kid," he said.

"I knew. It was awful. I got her to come and live with me. I went to see the Dean and she was willing to let me try it. That was two months ago. She's better now and getting along in her lessens, but—"

"But what?"

Biddy stopped to button her coat. "It's getting colder, isn't it?"

"Yes go on."

"Well,— Why was she so maddeningly deliberate— "Oh I don't know how to explain it," she said. "There's something queer about her that I can't get at. She gentle and sweet and sensitive. That's one side of her."
But the other side. It's as tho she were divided in halves and the two parts didn't work together. Sometime she's absolutely wild. It's what psychologists call a divided personality. She does the queerest things."

"What sort of things?"

"Cheap things, running after men. The wrong sort of men. She makes a fool of herself, and then goes all to pieces about it and wishes she were dead."

"Oh I knew," he said bitterly.

He could feel Biddy's eyes searching out his in the darkness. "Yes she is like you a little, but different too."

"In what way?

"I don't know exactly. It's-- Oh, Sherril rushes ahead. She jumps in with her eyes shut and forgets everything else. It's only when it's over that she remembers. It's as though-- as though--" Biddy fumbled for words.

"As though there was a door between the two sides of her and it's locked most of the time, is that it?"

"Yes, that's it, I guess."

"But what about me? I mean, how am I different?"

"You?" Biddy hesitated, "I" can't explain it exactly. I feel it sort of but it's only a feeling."

He did not need Biddy's explanation. He saw the difference himself clearly enough. "I know I'm doing fool things even while I'm doing them," he thought, "I rationalize about them and make them right somehow. Sherril doesn't."

"I know what I'm doing but Sherril doesn't." The word stayed with him along after he had left Biddy. They were the black tracery of apple branches against his window, the whispering of wind against the pane. 'Which is better, he wondered, 'to know what you're doing and keep on anyway, or not to know? Which is better? Which is better?' Two cases for Biddy to analyze, to label and define.
Funny wasn't it? Damn funny. And yet— oh Sherril, Sherril. What was there about that pale tremulous face, those thin childish shoulders that made him curve his arms in the darkness in awkward protective gesture strangely?

XXXI

The first warm Sunday of spring. He and Sherril had gone for a walk. She moved along by his side lightly, darted a few paces ahead of him, came back again to slip her hand in his. The patch followed the blue curve of the lake under softly budding trees. The earth was brown and damp smelling of spring. Suddenly she stooped and ran her fingers thru the dead last year's leaves. Her thin shoulder blades struck out of her blue sweater, her pale indefinite-colored hair was rumpled in the back, curling in loose childish rings.

"Look, Brand," she said, "Look, the first anemone." She held it up for him to see, delicately veined translucent petals, a fine threadlike stalk. He caught her outstretched hands and pulled her erect. They stood facing each other, her hand holding the flower curled between his. "Isn't it a darling, Brand?"

"A darling," he repeated, "Like you, Sherril." And then softly, "Sherril, Sherril."

She looked up at him wondering. "Why do you say my name like that, Sherril, Sherril?"

"Because it's yours, Brand. Because I like it."

"Do you really?"

"Yes, really."

They walked on hand in hand, following a path that lost itself between tree trunks, then came out suddenly by the lake side.

"I'm tired," said Sherril. "Let's rest awhile."

A warm hollow between the sprawled roots of old trees, the soft
lapping of water against the shore. She sat beside him still keeping her hand in his. "It's so still, isn't it?" she said dreamily.

"So still," he had been there before. When was it? The remembered smell of wet grasses, the remembered sound of sucking water. But darker, colder. The chill of mist against his cheeks, voices talking quietly out of the darkness. He remembered suddenly, Richard Pernald. Long ago, long, long ago. His fingers tightened about Sherril's.

"What is it Brandt?"

"Nothing," he said, "Nothing and everything, Sherry."

"You're not happy," a little plaintive voice. "I'm making you unhappy."

"Oh, no, no, it isn't you, darling. It's just--" "It's"

"Just?"

Were there words to tell her? Could he make her understand? The unprofitable dream that he had followed. The gray waste places that he had wandered thru lost and bewildered.

"How old are you Sherril."

"Eighteen."

"What a baby you are,"

She pulled her self free and sat erect. "I'm not such a baby as you think," she said defiantly. "Just because you're three years older than I. It isn't years make you old or young, it's what happens to you in those years."

Her face broke up into soft quiverings and she turned away from him, bending her head above a handful of dry sand, watching it slip thru her fingers.

It's what happens to you in those years. How true that was. The last three years, what had they done to him, how had they changed him? He had been such a child when he came to college, as ignorant as a child, as cocksure. He had found a path and lost it following an echo thru a lonely woods. Dix.

At the remembrance of Dix his nerves tightened, a painful electric shock.
Oh, would he never be done with Dix? His breath came out from between his teeth sharply. But now there was Sherril. Someone who needed him. New and strangely sweet that need. Until now he had always been the dependent one.

He stretched out his hand to her again. It was enough, this brief contact of hands, his folded about hers. He wanted no more. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean—" They were silent for a while then he said, "Can you tell me what happened to you in these years, Sherry? Would you like me to know?"

She looked up at him quickly then away. "I can't Brand, not now. It's just-- the way things went when I was little. Being tied down, being tied down so tight, and then coming to college and--" She paused poking her finger deep into the sand. "I went wild for a while and-- Oh I don't want to remember it. It's straightened out since I found you. Everything's all right as long as you're my friend."

"I'm always your friend, Sherry darling." Was that really true? Always was a long time, a very long time.

Her fingers clutched his desperately. "Promise it, Brand, no matter what. I'll do anything you want, anything, if you'll always--" Her voice drooped suddenly, tired, then rose again. "You don't know the awfully black places in my mind, the crawling darkness. Keep it back, please.

Why should Marsh's face come between them out of the blue lake water, out of the air? Marsh's face, the eyes bright with unshed tears in the shade of a wide hat. The hand that held Sherril's loosened a little.

"Promise. Promise." A child crying. His hand tightened again.

"I promise, dear, always." The face had gone, dissolved in the mist against the farther shore. For all his longing he could not bring it back.
It was strange to think about afterwards. He had turned to Sherril with his need and she had given him hers instead. He had forgotten his own absorbed completely in her desperate clinging anguish. Even now, away from her, her voice was still clear. Each word imprinted on his mind. "The awful black places, the crawling darkness." What had she meant by that? Would he ever know? Did he want to know? "Divided in halves," Biddy had said, "Absolutely wild—cheap things." Was it this she had not told him? Afraid. Oh but he would understand, an enfolding compassion born of his own groping conflicting desires that made theirs kinship stronger than blood.

XXXII

He had gone to see Holt. After two years he had gone back again. A hesitating moment outside the door, then he knocked. He was grateful to Holt for showing no surprise, only a slight tremor of the eyelids.

"Ah Barnett," he had stretched out his hand bridging the gap of misunderstanding with a single gesture. "I'm glad to see you."

"I want to come back," said Brand. He went straight to the point. "I got off the track for a while. The trees blotted out the woods, you know. The— the smoke obscured the fire," he laughed nervously. "Well, it's cleared away. I don't belong in journalism. It's not my line. I don't know where I do belong yet. But perhaps I'll find out over here. At least I'll be getting something that I want."

Holt smiled at him. "I knew you'd see your mistake sooner or later. I'm glad it's no later."

"So am I," he suddenly spread out his hands palm upward. "I've not been exactly happy these two years. All twisted and wrong. I've made a dam fool of myself. But that's over, for a while anyway." Why must he add that? A strange compelling homesty, a desire to fool himself no longer. Life would never be a smooth straight road for him but a crooked path lost in the undergrowth, coming out again into the sunlight. He would follow it as best he could.
"Well," he said, "When can I start in? Is it too late now to change?"

"That depends on you. You'll have three weeks' work to make up if you change this quarter."

"Can I do it?"

"You can if you want to."

"All right, I will." He paused drumming his knees with his clenched hands. "I'll have other things to make up. won't I? Courses I haven't taken. Requirements."

"Yes, you have that to think of. It will put you back a little. Let's see, you're a junior, aren't you?"

"I'll be a senior next fall."

"It will mean extra hours. Eighteen or twenty a quarter."

"Perhaps that's just as well," said Brand. "It won't give me time to run wild."

**

He told Sherril about it that evening. "I've switched back into English."

"Why?"

"Oh various reasons. To get away from the bunch I've been running with I guess. And-- I do want to find the sort of work I'm fitted for, Sherry. There are so many things I think I'd like to do and nothing I want to do badly enough to plug at it. It's because things come too easily for me, I suppose. I've never had to work really hard to get by passably well, even a little better than most people. Then when something really difficult comes I don't know how to work. I've no perseverance."

She turned her head toward him. "You're like me, a little. I mean, I don't know what I want to do either. Except--"

"Except what?" He waited for her to answer.

Except be with you always. I feel so safe with you, Brand. I've never felt like that with anyone before. It's liking getting out of the wind at last." She lifted her hands pressing them against her cheeks. "It's
so awful," she said, "Being caught in the wind and blown every way at once

Winds from the North, winds from the South, blowing, blowing. Always a whirling rush of air, a blind struggle. He had been thru it. A quiet pool under green boughs, Marsh. Marsh's lost face. A warm hollow between rocks. "Oh Sherry," he cried. "You can't be sure of me ever. I'm not even sure of myself."

Her hands dropped away from her face to lie in her lap: the fingers interlaced. "I've got to be sure of you, Brand," she said. "I've got to make you what I think you are. If I couldn't do that—"

"If you couldn't do that?" He repeated the words after her wearily.

"I don't know what would happen to me. All my life things have been happening to me. Different things. And when you're not here," she said, "I just wait for you, that's all."

"But suppose you should wait for me and I didn't come. Suppose you should wait and wait, what then?"

She looked up at him and he saw tears in her eyes, sudden and bright. "Oh I don't know," she cried, "I don't know. I'm afraid to think of it."

"Well then, let's not think of it," he said gently. "Let's never think of it again. It's living now that counts, isn't it? Each moment is enough in itself."

That was the way to live, holding each moment like a grape against the lips testing its bursting sweetness. If he could do that. But always there was the groping backward for hidden motives, the stumbling forward after vanishing desires.

"I've never been sure of anything in life," said Sherril, "I've got to be sure of you."

"But Sherril—" He must find some way to comfort her. "Do you know," he said, leaning toward her, "Do you know why I switched courses really?"

Her eyes looked up at him waiting.

"It was because of you," he said. "All the things I'd been doing
seemed ugly and sordid and futile after I met you. If I work hard it's for you Sherry. If I make something of myself, it's you."

Her lips trembled into a pleased smile. "You've been teasing me about not caring, about running away and not coming back."

"Of course I have, little idiot." But it was true. Perhaps he might run away some day, wearied suddenly of thin clinging arms, of an insatiable need. Terrified suddenly, shaking himself free. But not yet. Not yet.

The days were not long enough to hold his crowded hours. Hours with Sherril, hours with books. It was as tho he would press into a few weeks all that he had missed by following a blue vanishing mirage.

He saw Dix rarely now, during orchestra rehearsals or when they played for dances. Each was absorbed in his own world with only glancing moments of recognition. "As long as he forgets me I can forget him," Brand thought. But if he should remember suddenly— The weight of Dix' arm about his shoulder. Ther was nothing to keep them apart, not even Sherril, if he should turn.

For the rest of the year Brand was staying on at the fraternity house but that would end it. He would get a room somewhere, a place to be alone where he could read all the books he had missed, could write and play and think of Sherril. He looked forward to his last year, hard work perhaps, but worked that he loved. Talks with Holt. Orchestra? He still hated the grind of it. The cheap music. But it was a business now, a job. It meant independence. All the money that John had sent him—"I'll pay it back some day," he told himself, "I'm thru with being a parasite."

There was a new boy in the orchestra, Philip Whitelock. Very tall, very thin, brown eyes under a tumbled shock of light hair, big long-fingered hands. He played the saxophone making of it a plaintive wailing cry, a ribald laughter, a witty impudent voice. He was crazy about the new music. "It's got more possibilities than anyone's dreamed of," he told Brand.
"What about Gershwin?"

"Sure, Gershwin,' He's feeling after it but it's only a beginning. What I want is a American Theme, all of America in it. Everything!"

The flame of his enthusiasm kindled Brand's. Everything: bare wide plains scorching under the sun, the cool life of mountains against the sky, factory chimneys belching black smoke, the upward bulk of skyscrapers, bells jangling, horns shrieking, a woman singing to her self in a dark room. a man reeling to the stars on bootleg liquor. Green branches over still water, the restless eternal surge of the sea. There was no end to the catalogue of things that made America. The thundering rhythm of giant machines: airplanes with the sun on their burnished wings floating quietly in blue space, a policeman's shrill whistle, negro voices laughing. One could go on and on and never come to the end of it. Could one shape these confused noises, this conglomeration of motion and color into a design? Could one endow it with meaning and significance?

"If we could only do it."

"But we don't know enough, either of us. Not nearly enough."

Philip pounded his knee with his flattened palm.

"No, we don't know enough."

"I tell you what we might do," he swung toward Brand eagerly, "I've tried to put some new poetry to music. Sandburg's 'Chicago', you know. That brawling laughter, the cocksureness and the swagger and the awful hell-raising lot of fun it is." He paused a moment running his thumb along his chin, "But I can't get parts of it. I don't know how. Maybe if we worked at it together."

"All right, let's. When shall we start, tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow at two."

It was not his sort of music. He realized it almost immediately. Intellectually clever, sharply brilliant, an emotion perhaps beneath it all.
But it was not his emotion. His music must always be an individual groping, a digging beneath the surface of single mind, his own mind. He struggled with it for a week then gave it up. "It's not in me," he told Philip. "I like it intellectually. But it's not the sort of thing I can do."

"We, neither of us, know enough," said Philip.

That was partly it. That was true. But it went deeper than that. If there was only some medium to express the thing within him, the unborn thing that cried out ceaselessly for form and recognition. He went back to words again, watched them crawl across the paper shaping themselves to thought. But in the air about him there were always unwritten harmonies, unwritten discords that he could not reach.

XXXIII

The long bright-color spring days moved on to the end of the year. The end of the year. It meant leaving Sherril and it meant going home, a sadness and a springing joy. Would it be the same in the fall? Would it be the same again? Already across the bright surface of their days together a shadow of black wings hovered an instant then vanished.

The time he had gone to Sherril blindly holding out his hands. "I can't do anything, anything! There are no words for the things I want to say; there are no notes for the music I want to write."

She had not understood. She had pressed his head against her small curved breasts holding it there with her two hands. But she had not underst Suddenly she had caught his face and raised it to hers. "Aren't I enough, Brand? Aren't I enough?"

"Oh Sherry, it isn't that. No one's enough. No one person can be everything. It's--" His voice was torn from between his lips.
"I am enough, Brand. I am. I am." Why had she reiterated it so fiercely groping with her mouth along his cheeks and eyelids as tho she would draw him into herself? Passion? But passion was not for them, only a protective gentleness.

He jerked away from her suddenly, shook himself free. "Don't." he said, "don't."

He had walked across the campus with Maybelle Bower and she had kept talking on the library steps. He was to meet Sherril at five but time drifted by, five-ten, five-twenty. Maybelle's light frith of chatter swirled about him. He said at last, "I've got to go. I--" the sentence was never finished. Suddenly Sherril was there. Her face crooked with anger, her thin body tense and quivering. He would always remember Maybelle's blank surprise and then her little irrepressible giggle. "Poor Brand!"

He was alone with Sherril. It was unbelievable the things she accused him of, the mounting fury of her denunciation. A twisted mind, an ugly twisted mind warped beyond recognition. "But Sherril, Sherril." he had stumbled for word. Quickly he turned and walked away from her, making his face a smooth stone, his a blank place where no sound could penetrate. Oh shut it out. Shut it out. But Sherril was beside him her voice shrill and high cutting thru the enveloping darkness. He turned on her. "Keep quiet," he said fiercely, "Do you hear me? Shut up!" It was a sharp command. She faltered and looked about her, dazed and bewildered. Then her two arms were laced thru his and she was clinging to him. Tears ran down her cheeks washing away all the crooked lines of anger, smoothing them out. "Oh what did I say, Brand? I didn't mean it. Look at me, please, please. I didn't mean, I didn't mean."

"Oh all right, Sherry. Keep quiet now, for God's sake."

A group of boys across the campus was staring at them and laughing. He was never to forget the look of that bright day, falling sunlight on old brick buildings, sweep of long quiet shadows, and this distorted ugliness in the midst
of it. "I didn't mean it Brand. I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't help--"

"All right, all right!"

If she would only let him alone. Couldn't she see that he was wrench
and quivering, bleeding and raw? He shook his arm free. "I want to be alone
he said, "I've got to be alone."

"Oh no, no!" The same desperate hands curling about his arm, dragging h
down. Anything to be free of them. Anything. "It's all right. But I've
got to be alone now, please."

He felt her fingers loosen and slip away. "You'll come soon? Say
you will."

"Yes. Yes." He walked away from her with his arms stiff at his sides
his eyes staring in front of him at nothing, at everything. And he could see
her standing where he had left her looking after him. Her wet cheeks, her
trembling mouth, the washed surface of her eyes. But he did not look back.

In the end he had forgiven her. He could not bear her wretched pleadir
eyes. Her need of him was so real, so desperate. "I can't help it, Brand,
she told him, "I don't mean to. It just comes. But I shan't do it again
with you ever, ever."

He had smiled and kissed her lightly as one kisses a repentant child.
"Let's forget about it Sherry."

Forget. So easy to say, so difficult to do. Always between them
like the shadow of black wings the memory of that moment hovered.

***

They had met Murray Keith on the campus and stopped a minute. "Do
you know Murray, Sherrill?"

Murray grinned. "Sure we knew each other pretty well last fall,
didn't we? Remember the night of--?"
"Yes said Sherril, "I remember." She began to chatter breathlessly, a foolish jumble of words. And her eyes kept looking at Murray, sliding around to look at him.

Afterwards Brand asked her, "When did you know Keith? You never told me."

She answered lightly. "Oh it was when I first came. We were in class together, that's all." The quickly, "I had the funniest experience in lab today."

Why had she slipped away from the subject like that, giving him no chance to learn more? Biddy's words-- "Wild sort of-- running after--" The way her eyes slid away from Murray's, came back again. What did it mean? What did it mean anyhow? He did not want to know. And yet the memory tugged at the back of his mind, irritatingly persistent.

But there was other moment clear and shining, unforgettable too. Tranquil moments of happiness, bubble moments of light gayety and absurd nonsense. Sherril's small tremulous face breaking into laughter, her eager shy voice, her moods as changing as a summer landscape swept by clouds. He thought: "I do love her. It must be love the way I feel about her. And yet Oh, I don't know!"

There were only five more days, then he would be going home. He and Biddy and Sherril were on the front steps of the apartment house. A small green rectangle of lawn sloped down to the sidewalk. A sprinkler sent a thin spray of water into the air. It was warm for early June, a moist stuffy heat like a damp sponge against the throat. The trees stood up against the sky motionless, dust-feathered.

Brand lighted a cigarette and leaned back against the rail. "This time next week, Bid, a hammock and a lazy book."

Biddy yawned. "Bathing in the creek. That's what I'm looking forward Lake bathing's not the same. It's sort of flat and---"
"Tepid like weak tea." Brand finished the sentence. "What is there ab
that old brown stony creek that seems to get us all?" He paused to flick
an ash from his cigarette. "I wish I were in it now," he said, "Up to my
chin." He could shut his eyes and see it clearly, green willow branches
dropping above brown water, thirsty roots drinking in the moisture, the
bright washed color of stones on the creek bed. Slippery to stand on,
cool and slippery and perilous.

"Um," said Biddy, "It's going to be great to be home. I can hardly
wait. Real cream, strawberries, sugar corn, hot rolls."

"Glutton," Brand blew a puff of smoke toward her laughing, "Volup-
tuary."

"I suppose you think only of honest toil in the fields."

"And after toil comes rest. Cool sheets, iced drinks, a hammock under the
trees. Think of long lazy Sunday afternoons with nothing to do. No lessons,
no classes, nothing, nothing!" He quoted softly,

"In the afternoon they came unto land

'In which it seemed always afternoon.'

That's my idea of happiness," he said, "When I stop being an enterprising
young man that's what I'm going to do. Some place in the tropics under a
palm tree with a nigger to wait on me. All the rum and tobacco I want for
a dime a day. Talk about blue heavens, that's mine. Gauguin chucked
Paris for that. Oh wise man!"

"Gauguin worked," Biddy cut in. "I was looking at some copies of his
stuff up in the art department last week. I don't think much of it, but he
worked anyway."

"Oh well, I might work too with plenty of rum to keep me going."

He turned to Sherril, "How about it honey, want to come along? You can lie
on the sand and catch shell fish. Crack 'em open on the rocks and eat 'em
alive."
Her hand curled inside of his. "I wish we were going there now," she said wistfully, "I'd even eat shellfish and let you have all the rum if only—"

"If only what?"

"If only I didn't have to go home."

Above Sherril's head Biddy's eyes met his questionly. "But I thot you wanted to go home, Sherril? I thot you wanted to see your mother."

"Oh I do. I want to see my mother, but-- there are other things."

He knew so little about Sherril. It was queer when he stopped to think of it, her strange reticence. "My Mother is like this". A rumpling and smoothing of her face. That was all. The rest he had built up for himself out of nothing. A big dark city house crowded wih old furniture, a small quiet woman with white hands, Sherril's mother. He had formed a background against which Sherril moved like a white moth, a flutter of paper-frail wings in a walled garden.

Sherril was going on. "I don't like the city, all the noise and dirt and hurry. It's fun for a little while but not always. A farm must be nicer."

"Well you'll have a chance to find out this summer," said Biddy, "You're coming to visit me."

"I know, I'm so glad." Sherril's eyes looked into Brand's, a secret message. "It's you I'm coming to see of course. I'm visiting Biddy, but it's you, you."

He saw Sherril at Pleasant Meadows wandering thru the dim cool rooms, talking with Marsh in the sunlight, bathing in the creek, her thin childish body leaf shadowed. "They're sure to love her," he thot, "They couldn't help it." And yet, moment of wild abandonment, of brooding withdrawal. "Of course I'm glad she's coming, he told himself.
Biddy walked a little way with him thru the leaf-scented streets. Sherril had gone into study: "Two exams tomorrow and I haven't looked at them. She strained to Brand a moment in the hallway. "Oh Brand, Brand." Her arms were still about his neck as he walked by Biddy's side.

Biddy said abruptly. "Are you going to marry Sherril, Brand?"

"Am I going to marry Sherril?" He repeated the words slowly playing for time. "Marry Sherril? But he had never thought of it. Neither of them had thought of it. "Why I don't know," he said at last. "I'm not ready to marry yet, not for a long time."

"Oh, I know that," Biddy held a grass blade between her sharp teeth. "I never thought you were the marrying sort at all. Unless of course Marsh--"

Marsh. A quiet cove out of the wind. He strove again vainly for Marsh lost face.

Biddy kept on. "You'll make a rotten husband for anyone. I wouldn't marry you on a bet."

"Wait till you're asked to young lady."

Biddy laughed, "Well even if you did ask me, I wouldn't, but--"

The laughter had faded into the twilight, "It's different with Sherril. She's mad about you. And for some unknown reason you seem to be good for her. She's like a new person."

"In what ways?"

"Oh lots of ways. She's not boy-crazy anymore. Just you-crazy, and she doesn't go off at a tangent when you least expect it."

-A twisted distorted face, a strange high voice, was that a tangent? "I can't think of marrying for a long time yet." he said again weekly.

"I think you ought to think about it," Biddy's words were as definite as stones. "I don't know what would happen to Sherril if you turned her down. She depends on you completely."
"But Bid," he said desperately. "She shouldn't. I'm no sturdy oak. You know I'm not. I'm about as dependable as the weather."

"Just about," said Biddy, "And so is she except where you're concerned. But she's probably what you need. She'll be good for you. You'll have to take care of her. I guess nothing makes you stand on your own feet as much as responsibility."

"Oh good Lord." Responsibility, a gray stone around your neck, taut ropes about your ankles. Sherril. Sherril. A tremulous quicksilver face, poignantly thin shoulders. But marriage was so close, so intimate.

"I don't know," he cried, "I don't know what I'll do, bid, but I'll try to be good to Sherry!"

XXXV

Last minute impression. Holt's goodbye. "You've done well this quarter, Brand. Next year—" The firm grip of Holt's hand. "I'll be better next year, sir."

The fraternity house was an uproar, rubbish piled high in the hall, the thump of trunks on the stairs, voices shouting last minute goodbyes.

"Come and set on my trunk a sec, Barney. I can't shut the damn thing." Dix' curly red head butted against his knee. "There. God be praised. Oh lord, I've left out my top coat. Have to carry it I guess. That's two bags, a banjo, a slicker and a top coat. I'll have to have a drawing room. Here comes the groom without the bride."

Dix squatted back on his heels and grinned at Brand, the old twisty breath-taking grin. Suddenly his face straighten out. He put his hand on Brand's knee, "Haven't seen a thing of you lately, Barney. You're getting high-hat. Or is it that kid I saw you with, little skinny thing all eyes?"

A rasping constriction in Brand's throat, he put up his hand across his mouth that idiotic childish quivering
"Oh don't get sore," Dix' fingers tightened about his knee, "I didn't mean anything, only-- Women are all right once in awhile, but two fellows. We've had some high times, haven't we?"

Tell him now. "I'm thru, Dix. I'm thru with your sort of things." Make an end of it clean and sharp with no frayed edges. "Yes," he said, "Some high times."

"We'll have some more next fall. I've one more quarter to go. If they pass me--" He stood up suddenly and caught Brand's head between his hands, a rough passionate gesture. "Well, so long."

"So long, Dix."

He had gone. Brand sat alone on the bulging trunk staring with unseeing eyes at the gray canvas cover of Bix' banjo.

His last few moments with Sherril at the station. Her train left an hour before his. They walked up and down the dirty platform, her hand in the pocket of his coat, curled about his desperately. "I can't bear going away, I can't bear leaving you."

"It's only a month, Sherry. Then you'll come. A month's such a little while."

"A month's forever and ever when you're not there." Her mouth twisted suddenly.

"Oh don't cry, Sherry, for God's sake, not here. All those people--" She gulped back her tears, managed a gallant wavering smile. "You will write to me. If you didn't write--"

"Of course I'll write. They'll have to put on an extra force to carry letters."

The train at last, a hurried scramble, a snatched kiss in the vestibule. Then her brittle egg-white face at the window, her eyes all pupils holding his. She was trying to say something, struggling desperately to raise the grimy window. She sat back at last, conquered. Her mouth shaped itself into unintelligible words. He nodded holding his own mouth in a fixed smile.
The train was moving. He waved his hand and started to turn away but those dark wide-open eyes held his, that white face flattened against the pane. Long after, the train was only a dwindle of smoke far down the tracks it was still before him. He turned back to the waiting room with a sigh of relief. "Well, that's over," And then suddenly an aching loneliness, a vista of blank meaningless days without Sherril. "A month's forever and ever when you're not there."

XXVI

John met them at the station. "Hello, youngsters." He stretched out a hand to Biddy, caught Brand in a rough bear-hug, "You're looking great both of you." Lean and tanned and laughing he looked at them from under a mop of sun-bleached blond hair.

"You too, John."

"Come along." He picked up Biddy's bag and led the way to the back of the station. "Behold Elizabeth," he said. "A new Ford roadster, dust-gray, nickel-shining. "I made a raise and blew it all in on one grand splurge."

"Oh lord," groaned Brand, "I told you it would be a Ford."

John ran his hand along the engine hood caressingly. "Isn't she a sweet child?"

Awfully sweet." "A perfect lady." They laughed and admired and exclaimed jovously.

John flung open the door with a flourish, "Get in," he said, "You ain't seen the half of it yet."

"But where's my family?" asked Biddy. "Where's your's? Marsh and my mother?"

They're at home dressed up and waiting. Elizabeth wouldn't hold them all and I couldn't discriminate."
The car choked, rumbled like a cat purring, and then leaped forward. A smother of gray dust, the grinding of rubber on stone. The toy houses of the village slipped by, whitewashed fences along the road, fringed petals of daisies, the blur of pink clover. The dark wide-open mouth of a covered bridge swallowed them. Then they were out in the sunlight again and the gray-green wheat fields dipped to their passing.

In a few moment he would see Marsh. He would find again Marsh's lost face. He knew it all, line by line, feature by feature, the curve of the cheek and throat, the deep wide-apart gray eyes, but he couldn't see it. Strange to know a thing so well that it was a part of you and yet not be able to see it.

"Here we are," said John, "And there they are." He swerved the car into the driveway. A cluster of figures on the veranda, delicately pale summer colors.

"There's Mother," cried Biddy. She leaned from the car and waved frantically. "There's your mother and Marsh."

A blur of willow green, a darker blur of soft black hair. Suddenly Marsh's lost face was lost no longer.

XXVII

The long warm leafy summer days were almost over. The Golden rod had unfurled its sunbright plumes along the roadside, spiders wove shining silken patterns across the wet grasses.

Sherrill had come and gone. So sweet. He had never known her to be more gentle, more appealing, more tremulously pleased with everything. "I love it here, Brand. I love it. If only I could live here always. I feel so good. As if there wasn't any ugliness in me at all."
He held her small face cupped between his hands. "There isn't darling, really."

"Oh but there is. You don't know." She pressed his hands against her cheek holding them there. "If it wasn't for you, Brand, I think— I think I'd be not much better than a common slut."

"Oh Sherry, such a word; You ought to have your mouth washed out with soap." He had laughed, but there was a shrinking instinctive recoil. She shouldn't say such things even in fun. It dimmed the clear bright radiance of his happiness an instant.

"She's such a darling," said Marsh. "I love her. Nobody could help loving her, could they?" She sat beside Brand on the step, across the long shadowed lawn John swung Sherril in the hammock. She clung to the sides and laughed tilting her head back to him. Biddy squatted cross-legged on the grass near them. She looked from John to Sherril, from Sherril to John.

"I'm so glad Biddy had her down," said Marsh, "You have the feeling she's been starved for this;"

"Just what?" A cool clear pearl-color face, a tender mouth. He would never forget it again, never. Never. He had wandered so long without it. Sherril and Marsh, equally necessary, equally dear. And yet so different. Marsh was a still shadowed quiet, Sherril a little wandering breeze. Sherril turned to him for comfort and support; he turned to Marsh. A linked chain. "Just what?" he said again.

"Oh this, Marsh stretched out her hands, "The quietness and the peace the garden. John and Biddy like strong bread, and Cousin Edith being kind and gentle. You most of all, Brand."

"No you Marsh."

She shook her head. "It's you," she said.

"But why? I can't understand it. I'm weathercock, Marshie, I veer with every wind."
"It's because she loves you," said Marsh. "She's so utterly loving."

"But she shouldn't have picked me." The words rasped his throat like a file.

"Perhaps not, but she did." Marsh turned away from him. Her voice came to him over her shoulder as thin as a thread. "Are you— going to marry Sherril?"

Biddy's question. Why must they ask that, expecting an answer to the unanswerable. "Oh I don't know. I don't know."

***

He worked in the field with John. Long hours in the hot sun, the whir of the reaper, the shining back of the horses. He grew brown and taut and muscular. He ate ravenously, slept like a baby, a dreamless black void from night till morning. At times he hated it. His clothes were wet and sweat smelling. There were rough callouses on his hands. But he stuck at it and after a while he began to enjoy it. His body responded more quickly, his muscles no longer cried out in protest.

Sometimes Biddy came and perched on the fence watching them, blue faded overalls and freckled shining nose. Her eyes followed John up and down the fields. Brand paused now and then to talk to her. She was a good kid after all. He liked her better here than at college. She belonged here. At college she had seemed queer and crude and a little laughable.

"Hasn't John done wonders with this place?" he said, "You'd hardly know it."

"John would do wonders with anything. It's born in him. He just grits his teeth and jumps in and sticks."
"I know," said Brand. "He got all the good qualities."

Biddy pushed her straw hat back on her head and looked at him. "I used to think that too," she said. "But I don't know. You're developing."

"Thank you ma'am." He swept her a bow, one hand across his heart.

"Oh, now you're teasing."

John brought the horses to a halt and came over to them squinting his eyes in the sun. "What's the argument?"

"We're telling each other what a wonderful boy you are."

"That's nothing new. Can't you think of something original?"

"Well, Bid thinks I've a chance to make a man of myself. That's original enough, God knows."

"I've known that all along," said John.

A blind reaching out of the hand. Words unsaid. Words that never could be said. "You know what a fool I've made of myself time after time. You know that I'll never be done with making a fool of myself. That only at moments can I see out of both eyes clearly like this. And yet you say--"

Oh, there was no end to the goodness and the faith of John. He pressed his teeth into his underlip holding it firm.

Why at that moment of all moments should he think of Dix?

***

His mother seemed stronger, more rested. There was a soft flush on her cheek. Her eyes were bright, twinkling suddenly with fun. "I feel like gentlefolks again," she said. "I just fold my hands and do nothing. A darky in the kitchen. It's like it was before your grandfather died."

John lounged on the sofa. "We have a bumper crop this year. More corn and oats than we'll need for the stock, and we sell forty gallons of milk a day. That means I can buy a decent cream separator and that bull calf of Whitaker's..."
He has a pedigree as long as your arm. Next year we'll fix up the house.
Oh we'll be really on our feet before long."

"If you'd take my money," said Marsh, "You'd be there now."

"You know I couldn't, Marshie. It's yours. The income's enough to take
 care of you if anything happens--"

"But I'd rather. After all you've done--"

"Don't talk nonsense, child."

Brand at the window played with the curtain cord. "Next year you'll have
me off your hands. I'll get a job of some sort. Holt's going to help me.
I hope I can get on a magazine some day."

"What do you mean 'get off our hands'?" said John, "I didn't send you
a cent last Quarter, did I?"

That was true. He had made enough to take care of himself. It was one
thing of which he need not be ashamed. He had stuck to the orchestra even
while he hated it, and he'd gone straight. "You won't have to send me any
next year either. I'm going to look out for myself from now on."
"I wish you'd let me," said John. "I wish you'd cut out the orchestra.
You can't manage everything."

"I can manage that." The curtain slipped from Brand's hand and leaped
upward. The stick clattered against the window frame. "I've got to do it to
show myself--" He paused. Crowed dance halls smelling of damp flesh and
whiskey and perfume. The silly beat of jazz. Tilted girl faces, white
shoulders.

"She didn't say 'yes',
She didn't say 'no',
She only said 'maybe'."

The thought of it was brown and bitter like stale cigarettes.

"To show yourself what?" asked John.

"Oh things," he turned away from the window, "Things and things,"
he said.
Marsh was not going to school after all. "I suppose I should," she said. "Every woman should have a profession. That's all you read in the magazines nowadays, all you hear. But I don't know——" She looked from Brand to John. "I've got enough money to live on. I guess it's made me lazy. I'm so happy here. I don't want to go away ever."

"Well you don't have to," said John slowly. Brand caught the look between them, shining, happy-clear. He felt suddenly empty, an aching emptiness with no bottom.

"I don't know why she has to either." His voice was a taut banjo string vibrating.

Marsh's eyes came back to his, wide black pupils from which his own face looked out at him, dark mirrors filled with his own image. "Perhaps I'll have to someday," she said.

****

He had a long talk with his mother. They sat in the cool shade of the grape arbor. She was shelling peas, the pods cracked between her fingers and the peas clattered into the pan.

"I've done better this quarter, haven't I, mother?"

"Yes, a great deal better I'm glad to say."

He rolled two peas about in his palm. "Holt say my writing is improving. I'm beginning to get an idea of structure. Then I took a course in literary criticism from Webster; he's head of the department. I learned a lot. What you're to judge writing by, you know. Up until now I've been altogether subjective. But that doesn't go entirely. You've got to have certain standards."
His mother nodded and reached for a fresh handful of peas.

"I wish you knew Holt," said Brand, "He's been great about helping me. I guess Webster's just as good but I haven't got to know him as well. Holt has so much enthusiasm." Holt. Holt. His own enthusiasm swept him along to sing Holt's praises. "He thinks writing's greatest form of self-expression in the world. He's doing a book himself. He--"

His mother lips quivered into a smile. "And what do you think?" she asked.

"Me? About what?"

"About writing. You've told me all Mr. Holt's opinions."

"Oh, I think about as much as he does."

She put the pan aside and leaned back against the bench. Her head was framed by a tangle of grape leaves. "Are you sure you've found what really interests you?" she said quietly.

"What do you mean?" he ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't understand."

"I mean are you interested in writing or in Mr. Holt?"

"I--"

She stopped him with a gesture. "Let me finish. In high school there was a time when you had a sudden enthusiasm for drawing. That was Miss McKubbin of course. After one failure you dropped it altogether. Now it's writing. I only wondered if it really was writing or simply--"

"But Mother, even before I went to college I'd planned on that."

"Yes, I remember. They encouraged you in high school a great deal. And then you were reading Mencken at the time. A journalist's life seemed romantic, didn't it?"

"I guess it did."

"Well," she sat erect and reached for the peas. "That's all. I simply wanted you to be sure and not let yourself be carried away by other people's enthusiasm."
If it's what you're really interested in that's all I ask. But you must remem-
ber you won't always have Mr. Holt to encourage you."

"Yes I know that. But I think it's what I want. I'm sure it is."

"All right, only--"

"Only?"

"When you were little I thought-- Everything seemed to point to--"

she stopped.

"To what?"

"Nothing." He could not make her explain. No," she said, "It was no
thing really."

What was it she was about to say? "When you were little --I 'thought'--"

Music perhaps. It was the one thing he had gone after alone. But he had no
stuck at it. And now it was too late. "I'd rather be a first rate critic
than a third rate pianist, I could never be much more than that, starting
in again at this age." And yet-- And yet?

Sherril had written: "I'm so lonely, Brand. It's worse after having
been with you. It's not only being by myself but knowing suddenly that I've
always been. And I keep dreaming about Pleasant Meadows. It's almost as
if I were there except that I wake up. The city is horrid, horrid and smelly
and hot. Will college ever open again?"

He was suddenly lonely for Sherril. Her childish dependence, her
sensitive changing face. Why, he hadn't written her for a week, forgetting
her in his own flooding happiness. He saw Sherril, a little lost figure,
wandering restlessly thru dim high white-paneled rooms, closing the windows
against the noise of the street. At the postman's ring she ran hands out-
stretched to the door. But there was nothing for her. Nothing. She came
back into the room and began her restless wandering up and down, up and down.

Her chin trembled softly and her thin shoulders drooped.
He unscrewed his fountain pen and reached for a sheet of paper.
"Sherry darling." The words were a tracery of black threads behind his flying pen.

***

Marsh said: "Play for me, Brand. Won't you?"

"What shall I play?" He ran his fingers lightly over the old ivory keys of the piano. "Afternoon of a Faun." Color, green melting into green, branch shadowed. A clear brook flowing over washed stones. Light quick moment. A leafy covert.

"Now play something of your own."

He made a tune out of his head, a little surface tune, a brief happy laughter. The thin voices of leaves talking together in a summer wind.

"But that's not your music. Lovely, but it isn't yours."

"Why not?"

"Yours is hurt music. It struggles and cries and can't rest."

"This is my music now," he said, "At this moment it's the way I feel. Happy, happy, happy!"

XXXVIII

"I think you have the wrong house," said Brand.

"This is 1244 Monroe Street," the taxi driver looked at him over his shoulder.

"My mistake then."

Brand got out of the cab and fumbled in his pocket. The meter read seventy cents. He gave the man a dollar. "That's all right." He stood watching the yellow back of the car grow smaller, then he turned toward the house.
1244 Monroe Street. A flat, compressed reddish brick house squeezed in between other reddish brick houses. Dirty marble steps rising abruptly from the pavement to a dark vestibule done in imitation tile. The bulge of bow windows. A mottled green and brown jardinier holding a sickly fern. A sign leaned against the glass—"Apartments for rent." He hesitated uncertainly then turned and ran up the steps.

He had come into the city to do some shopping before going back to school. On the impulse of the moment he had wired home: "Decided to see Sherril. Back Wednesday." A three hours' ride on the train from one city to the other.

He had been there only once before when he was a child. He did not remember it clearly, a dim impression of narrow noisy streets, of shop windows, of blaring taxi horns. Cities were all alike on the surface.

The smoking car was dusty and hot, filled with the smell of stale tobacco and the men's bodies. Billboards slipped by the window telescoping one into the other. "I'd walk a mile lor a Camel—Jump into a Bradley and—" Sherril would be surprised to see him. Her small up-tilted face, her eager hands—"Conoco Gas, more miles—"

A row of tubes and bells in the vestibule, visiting cards under each or; The third was hers. Mrs. Margaret Sherril Paige. He pressed the bell and waited. In a moment the latch clicked and he climbed narrow stairs to the second floor.

Someone came to the bannisters and leaned over looking down at him. "Who is it?" A familiar husky voice. He tilted back his head. "Hello, Sherry."

"Oh Brand, is it you? Is it really you?"

"Of course it's me." He held her in his arms. He had not realized how famished he was for her, a parched thirst of all the senses drinking her in.
He surrendered himself to this new exquisite emotion. "Darling, darling."

Then he held her off to look at her, a face the color of skimmed milk, faintly blue circles beneath the eyes. "Sherry, you're thinner than ever. Have you been sick?"

"No, just lonely." She crept close to him again as if she would warm frail cold body at his. "Hold me tight, Brand, just a minute before I call Mother."

The sitting-room was small and rather bare. The faint pervasive odor of drugs, or did he imagine it. He shivered suddenly and turned to look from the room to the busy street. Then back again—gray cold walls, polished furniture, an exact precision in every detail. "But Sherril doesn't belong here. Sherril needs color and warmth. She's slowly freezing in this place." He turned to the door at the sound of footsteps.

"Mother, this is Brand Barnett."

She was taller than Sherril with delicately small bones, a meagre compressed body. Her gray hair was brushed straight back from her forehead. Her hand slid out of his. "How do you do, Mr. Barnett." A clipped frigid voice. He thought: "I've never seen a face like hers before. It's closed tight like a flat smooth box. It's dead. I think a dead face must look like hers."

He remembered what Sherril had said: "My mother is like this—-a folding of her childish mouth into a thin straight line. Oh, it wasn't right. It wasn't right that any face should shut itself up like that.

Sherril sat opposite him, straight and wordless with her hands quiet in her lap. He heard his own voice talking on and on desperately.

"I haven't any messages for you. I came on a jump without a word to anyone."

"I wish you'd brough Marsh," said Sherril suddenly. Her face broke into faint tremblings. For an instant her eyes cried out to his.
"I wish I had," he said. If Marsh were here there would be warmth, not this slow ice creeping thru his veins.

"Sherril had a pleasant visit with you all." The words were chill snowy flakes in the cold air.

There was silence again. He groped for phrases but they were frozen in his throat. That still face opposite his, those still eyes watching him from behind a thin glass surface. He stood up. "Well, I must be going." Anything to get out in the sun again, the live noisy streets. But Sherril's eyes stopped him. "Will you come have lunch with me, Sherry." He kept his eyes on her.

"Sherril has not been well. It is better for her to keep out of the sun."

The words dismissed him.

"I'm sorry." He turned toward the door walking thru frosty air. But Sherril was beside him.

"I'm going with Brand, Mother." Her voice was the vibration of a taut wire. It was as tho she had braced her shoulders against a stronger antagonist.

"The heat."

"Oh, I want to be warm. I want to shrivel up with heat."

"Well, it's for you to decide." For a moment behind the thin glass of Mrs. Baige's eyes a hungry flame leaped up, possessive, devouring. In an instant the surface of that smooth tight face would break, would crumple into lines of gnawing pain, more terrible than stillness. He seized Sherril's hand and pulled her with him thru the door. Two people fleeing in terror from a white crumbling city.

In the vestibule she stopped him. The heat from the street seeped in on them, the smell of asphalt and dust. "Brand, I can't go like this. I haven't any hat."

"It doesn't matter. We'll stop and buy one if you say. We'll take a car and ride out in the country. There'll be some place we can get buns or
sandwiches or something."

She hesitated half turning back. "I shouldn't leave Mother. You
don't know---" Suddenly she clung to him running her hand along his face
as tho she would learn the outline by heart. "I shouldn't," and then,
"Oh, Brand, you don't know what it's like being loved like that."

XXXIX

"And when you came to Bid's was it the same?"

Sherril nodded. She looked away from Brand down the still sun-peeked
aisles under the trees. "Yes," she said, "like that only much worse."

"You mean?" he had to know even if it hurt her, even if each word
was a sharp probing pain.

She dug her finger into the moist dirt. "I've never told anyone about
it before," she said, "It was something I couldn't talk about. But I
want you to know. It's been shut up inside of me for years but it's got
to come out or-or--"

He put his hand over hers but she drew it away. "No, Please, When
you touch me I can't think straight. I don't want anything but just that."

She drew her knees up under her chin and rested her cheek on her crossed
arms.

"It's been like this for a long time," she said, "Ever since--
When I brought girls home from school she'd come in and-- they never came
again. After awhile I stopped asking them. There was a boy who came to see
me. I told him not to but he did anyway. I guess he thot I was fooling."

She laughed, a harsh broken sound that was almost sob. "We .sat," she said,
"And after awhile we didn't say anything. And then he went away and I
didn't see him ever again. He was a nice boy,"" she said quietly, "I liked
him alot. I liked him better than anyone else until I met you. His name
was Martin."
A thin tall boy called Martin freezing slowly in a cold room,
going out into the sunlight at last, holding up his face to it, drinking
it in. No, he would not come back.

"But why, Sherril?"

"She passed over the question unheeding. "I didn't have any friends.
I didn't have any friends at all and I was so lonely. My grandfather left
me a little money. It was mine to do what I wanted with and I wanted to go
to college— anywhere would have done, just to get away. But I thot
college— Oh I don't know what I thot exactly except that people would
laugh a lot and be gay. I was afraid to tell her about it. I kept putting:
off wondering how to do it. And then one night at supper I told her all in
a hurry and—"

"And what, Sherry."

"Nothing. She looked at me, that's all. Looked and looked and then
she said, 'It's for you to decide.' Just as she did today. She always
says that. I keep waiting for it. It's part of the awfulness."

"And then?" What devil was there in him probing with a sharp knife
into festering wounds?

Sherril's voice dragged, word after weary word. "And then her face be-
to break up into little bits as tho I'd smashed a mirror with my fist, a
mirror with her face in it. And she got up and went out of the room." Sherril's head came up out of her arms suddenly. "That's all," she said, "It was
pretty awful, but I went thru with it. And when I came home for Christmas
it was awful again. And when I went to Bid's— It would have been easier
never to have gone away. Just to have lain down and shut my eyes and not
bothered. But I couldn't. I don't know why. I just couldn't. You see,
I think maybe she loves me in her ways"
A barren love, ingrowing, possessive. A blind insatiable desire for ownership. Clinging tentacles about Sherril's thin body. His arms ached to comfort her but his mind went on probing, analyzing. "Why does she do it? What makes her behave that way?"

"I'm not sure," said Sherril, "I've tried to explain it to myself over and over but I don't know. You see Mother was that way with Father. I was only ten when Father left but I can remember it. She didn't bother much about me. All cold and smooth and underneath—"

Underneath a devouring hungriness. Sherril was too close to it to understand. She always been to close. A little girl with small milk white serious face watching two people in a cold room. "I think I see," he said slowly, "It was as though she wouldn't be satisfied until she had all of him. She wanted to own him absolutely, was that it?"

"Perhaps, I don't know what it was except—" Sherril shut her eyes an instant, then opened them, "except that it was awful. Father kept going away and coming back again. He'd go off for two or three days, then he'd come home. Once I heard him say, 'But Margaret, one person is never enough can't you see that?' And Mother said, 'I am enough. If you'd let me prove it to you just once.'"

"I am enough." Somewhere he had heard those words before. Somewhere. A desperate straining face, arms about his neck, strangling. Did it mean—? The shot was a tangling web from which he must break free. He looked at Sherril sharply but she did not know. Her voice went on.

"Then one day he came in from work and Mother wasn't there. She'd gone out for a while and I was alone in the house. Father went up to his room and I followed him. He looked up and saw me and gave a little jerk of surprise. Then he said, 'Come in chickie,' I sat on the bed and watched him. He was putting some things into his bag. 'There,' he said, 'That's..."
enough for any man, isn’t it? I remember the way he looked at me. The
queerest look. I don’t know how to explain it exactly. It was as though—as though he were a little boy going off alone for the first time, scared sort of and yet somehow pleased and excited and grown-up suddenly. It frightened me and I said, ‘Are you going away, Father?’ He nodded and, shut his bag with a snap. I said, ‘Are you going far?’ And he nodded again. ‘Yes, pretty far.’ Then I said, you see I have to know, ‘For a long time?’ And he said, ‘Yes, a long time.’ He looked at me and I thought he was going to cry but instead he laughed. ‘There’s something I want you to tell Mother for me. Will you Sherril?’ He lifted my chin up and looked at me and said, ‘Remember. Tell Mother I said the only way to hold a person is to let him go free. Can you remember that?’ Sherril paused. ‘That was a funny thing for him to say, wasn’t it?’ she asked at last. ‘I’ve kept wondering what he meant. It doesn’t make sense quite.’ She glanced at Brand questioningly but he did not reply. There was a moment of silence then she continued. ‘Well, that’s all. He went away. I watched him from the window. He didn’t look back, just walked away swinging his bag and taking great strides. It was like—It was like—letting a dog off a leash and watching it run free. That’s the only thing I can think of to explain it.’

She broke off a blade of grass and ran it through her fingers. ‘That’s all,’ she said again, ‘He never came back. And after a while Mother began treating me the same way she’d treated Father and—you know the rest.’ Suddenly she looked up at Brand searching his face with her eyes. ‘You see what it’s been, don’t you?’

‘Yes, he said, ‘I see.’ But there was other things that he saw, crowding images that must be pushed back, locked away and forgotten. He put his arm around Sherril and drew her to him. Her body seemed to flow into his. Two dark streams meeting and merging. She lay still for a moment pressing her cheek against his sleeve. Then a stiffening of the muscles as she drew away.
"it was so awful, Brand. When I got away I went wild. When people were nice to me I couldn't get enough of it. It seemed as tho nothing mattered except having a good time. I did things I hated just so they'd notice me. I went with men I didn't like. I wanted to do everything. Try everything. Even tho I loathed it. And then you came."

Why should he recall at that? He had done the same, but it was worst, far worse, for him there had been no excuse. Suddenly he reached a decision. There was no looking back, no withdrawal, only a dim road ahead of him that he must follow. He caught Sherril's thin face in his hands and held her away from him looking into her eyes. "When I finish college will you marry me, Sherry? It will be hard sledding for a while, but we'll make out and I'll take care of you. I will, Sherry, honest."

XI

When he came back to college that fall Brand found a room in a private home near the campus. Mr. and Mrs. Star and their one son Billy, a solemn little boy of eight. Brand took his meals at the fraternity house but for the rest of the time he was free. He settled down to work. Now more than ever it was necessary for him to do well. There was Sherril to think of. In a year he would graduate. Then a job, and as soon as he got on his feet, marriage. He and Sherry. Mr. and Mrs. Brand Barnett. Queer how meaningless the words were, expressing no tangible relationship.

He was taking five courses at the University, Advanced Critical Writing, Eighteenth Century Literature, Economic Problems, the Romantic Poets and Social Psychology. A hodge-podge. For a while he floundered hopelessly, then gradually he began to concentrate on the courses that he liked, putting his greatest effort into those and working on the others spasmodically. "It's the only thing to do," he explained to Sherril, "there just isn't time for everything."
He saw very little of the stars. A word in the hall as he went in or out, sometimes a casual half hour with them before he settled down to study. They let him alone the most of the time and he was glad of it. He liked his small low-ceilinged room with its dormer windows facing the west and the south clean sheets on the bed, a wide study table, a comfortable leather arm chair beneath the light. Combing his hair before the dresser mirror one morning he grinned at his reflected face. "Well, Mr. Barnett, for the first time since you came to college you're living like a gentleman." The smile in the mirror answered his. He studied himself more closely. Gray eyes set close to the bridge of a rather long straight nose, brown clear skin, the idiotic cowlick that sprouted and stood erect for all his brushing. "Oh you'll do," he said, "You're no Apollo but you'll get by even with that face. It's your brain I'm worried about."

He gather up his books and started downstairs. At the door he met Mrs. Star. She stopped, duster in her hand, to chat with him a moment. A small brisk dark-eyed woman of thirty-four or five. "It's so nice having you in the house, Mr. Barnett. I was saying the same thing to Will last night. We had a college boy here last year and he nearly drove us to distraction, always clattering in and bringing a bunch with him."

"I just haven't time for that," Brand told her. "My studies keep me pretty busy and then with the orchestra——"

"Well, it's a relief to find one student who came to college to study. You'd think the way most of them behave that that was the last thing in the world college was for."

"I guess some of us learn better as we go along." His hand was on the knob. "I like being here, Mrs. Star," he said, "I like it a lot."

"That's good. Then we're both pleased."

"Well, I am."
He buttoned his leather jacket as he stepped out into the cold October
air. The dry leaves crackled beneath his feet. "Golly, it's good just to be
alive on a day like this," he thought, then smiling, "Portrait of a
studious young man starting off for the day's grind. That's you, Brand
Barnett, do you recognize yourself?"

XLI

"We are all militant souls fighting in the stifling armor of our bodies.
The sentence arrested him. He closed the book holding his fingers between the
pages and let his eyes roam about the room. His room. After two years in a
fraternity house, a place to be alone in, a place where he could think. Then
the words again: "Stifling armor of our bodies." The beauty of clear thou-
truth. Most people were like that, were they not? All people perhaps. With
some the struggle was more apparent, Sherril, himself. A ceaseless effort
to break thru into sunlight and freedom. With others it was quieter, only
their eyes betrayed them, a shadowed pain, a momentary glimpse of aching
loneliness. Even John. Even Marsh. There could be no perfect understanding
between human souls, only a word of his own. There were so few people
with whom one could reach a point of real constant struggle against immovable
barriers, a shouting against the wind. Only that, and moments like this
moment, rare and unforgettable, when for an instant one was complete organ-
sufficient unto oneself, facing stream, felt himself lapped in peace, floating
floating.

Suddenly the telephone bell, a sharp metallic voice brought him erect,
jerked him back into the commonplace. "Oh darn the thing. Why doesn't
someone answer it?" Then he remembered that he was alone in the house and
stumbled into the hall. "Hello. Hello."

"Brand, it's Sherril."

"Yes, what is it?" He snapped off the words, each one a click of the
"You sound so cross, Brand."

To be flung back into life like that, still dazed and bemused, to struggle again with words. "Oh I'm all right, what is it?"

"Nothing only--"

"I'm so lonely, Brand. If you'd come over."

Lonely. As if everyone were not lonely. Why couldn't she face the fact as he did? "I told you I had to work, Sherry. I've got to study sometime."

"Oh I know," a pleading voice, "But if you'd come for just a minute; I didn't see you yesterday and tomorrow--"

Tomorrow, the Phi Sig dance, five hours of playing. Well another day more or less. "I can't tonight, honest. I've got to study. I'll stop in tomorrow afternoon for a second if I have time."

"All right, but--"

"Goodnight, Sherril."

"Goodnight."

He clicked the receiver into place and went back to his room. But the mood was spoiled, split apart by the sharp jangle of a bell. The moment was lost. "I suppose I should go. It wouldn't hurt me." Perfect understanding. There was no perfect understanding. Only moments. Lost moments. Poor Sherry, such a baby after all. How could he be cruel. He reached for his top coat and pulled it on. He'd run around just for a minute. Already his mind was building a perilous slender bridge of words on which to cross to her.

XLII

The class was restless, rows of hunched shoulders and sprawled legs. The girl next to Brand took notes, a haphazard, half-hearted attempt.
The lecturer's voice was an irritating persistent drone. "The Rowley poems were not published until ten years after Chatterton's death. It was then--"

Thomas Chatterton. How had he looked, how had he felt that last morning before he died? Perhaps he had gone out into the London streets, perhaps he had sat alone in his room up under the roof and wondered about things. Life had been too hard for him, too cruel. Death had a kind still face, quiet arms. Death had been easier than life.

"That's all for today." Brand moved along with the others out of the classroom into spilled golden sunlight. Sherril was waiting for him. She had tied a pale blue ribbon about her hair. "It's so windy," she said, "I can't keep it out of my eyes."

"You look like a little girl." He pulled her arm thru his. "Come along, baby." He lifted his face to the sky feeling the wind against his throat. "There ought to be a law forbidding lectures in October."

"What was it today?" Sherril gave a little running skip to keep up with him.

"Eighteenth century. McBride is such a God-awful bore. Literature to him is nothing but dates and moments. He was talking about Tom Chatterton today and do you think he made you feel the things that fellow went thru? Not by a long sight. He was just another name. Born. Died. Wrote some poems. Overestimated perhaps because of his tragic death. Turn to the next one. Do you know Sherry," Brand lighted a cigarette and watched the smoke unfurl and drift upward. "I'd like to teach lit, once just to sh some of those birds how it should be done."

"How should it be done? I don't know."

"I don't know either, I guess. But it shouldn't be done with dates. Nobody remembers dates. Nobody wants to unless there's some reason for it. If I were teaching-- well, one thing I'd try to do would be to find out why certain men wrote in a certain way. Everything we write comes out of course yes"
"Isn't it? I mean everything that's real writing. It's more or less saying the things we don't dare say, doing the things we don't dare do, vicariously. I wonder if you see what I mean?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Perhaps it's not that always but it is a lot of the time. There are so many experiences we want to have and life isn't long enough, or else we're afraid. So we make up for it in this way; some of us. Well, that's what I'd try to show if I were teaching. The relation between a man's life and his writing. I'd want to get under the surface and find motives. Then it would mean something."

A thin pale boy in a London garret getting ready to die. He was only seventeen. Why did he want to die with so much of life still unexplored? "There's Thomas Chatterton," he went on talking half to himself, half to Sherril. "Why did he kill himself? Because he couldn't get work. Because no one would buy his poems. That's what the book says about him. But it isn't enough. What was going on underneath that made him do it? It's what happens to you inside that makes you do the things, isn't it? Perhaps it's what happens to you before you were born. Did he think about it a long time or did he just jump into it without thinking?"

"Maybe it's both," Sherril spoke slowly, "Maybe you think about it and then forget. Then you think about it again, over and over, and in the end you just do it without thinking." She looked up at Brand. "Didn't you ever think about killing yourself, Brand?"

He considered, remembering black moments in the night when life stretched endlessly before him getting nowhere. Chill terrified awakenings in the gray dawn. "I'm no good. I'm no good." "Why yes," he said, "I've thought about it but it was only a surface thought. I couldn't do it really." He laughed a little, "I'm always too interested in what's going to happen next, you know. And I'm too fond of myself to ever break away from me forever."
"I used to think about it," said Sherril, "I mean really. I thot anything would be better than living. I hated living." Her hand groped after him. "But that was before I found you, Rand, since then—" she smiled a little, "Since then, why I don't want to die ever, as long as I have you."

As long as I have you. As long as I have you. He was going to marry Sherril and they would live together always. He saw the years stretching before him. Strange house and strange cities. Coming home in the evening to Sherril. They would go into their room and shut the door. Alone. Suddenly he shivered and pulled his hand free from hers.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Sherry."

Only a verse slipping thru his mind. "No retreat, they must conquer or die who have no retreat." Was there then no other alternative.

XLIII

"There's a rainbow around my shoulder
And it fits me like a glove—"

The song came to an end at last; the dance came to an end. Dix put his banjo on top of the piano. "Let's go have a smoke." There was frost in the air, a brittle crystalline brilliance under the lights. Dix lit a cigarette. "It's some cooler out here. Must be a hundred and ten in the hall. No wonder the women leave most of their clothes at home." He began to sing softly,

"Let it storm,
I'll keep warm
'Cause I'm in love.

That the way you feel, Barney?"
"What do you mean?"


He did not want to laugh, but he could not help it. "Well, what does that prove? There are lots of Delta Phi pins."

"Asked the young lady herself. I always go straight to the source."

So Dix had been talking to Sherril. She hadn't told him. Perhaps she had forgotten. But you didn't forget things like that. Dix' red head close to Sherril's brown one. Dix' eyes-- he knew the way Dix looked at a girl. It was almost as if mentally he had stripped her of all her clothes and she stood before him naked and soft and submissive. A swift leaping anger shook him. "You better mind your own business after this."

"Oh say, Barney, don't get sore." Dix' arm dropped about his shoulder

"I didn't mean a thing, just fooling. She's darned cute, only--"

"Only what?" Why must he go limp, weak and without resistance because of the warm pressure of Dix' arm?

"Only don't take it too seriously. No woman's worth it."

"Sherril's worth it. I'm going to marry her." Had he said it or had he only thought it? He could not be sure. He shook himself free from Dix' arm. But he could still feel the pressure, warm and heavy about his shoulders. "Let's go back."

"Let's have a drink first just to celebrate. I'm dropping out of the orchestra, you know. This is my last dance. Bug Brown's taking my place."
"No, I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Just made up my mind myself. I've got to crack the books if I grad this quarter."

"Oh, that's tough."

"It sure is for me. Lord knows I don't like studying. But come on dry your tears and have a little gin." Dix' flask glinted silver.

"I don't believe--"

Dix pressed the flask into his hand. "Say, what's got into you lately, anyway? Join the W. C. T. U.? From now on little woman."

The words cut deep. "I'm not a damn Sir Galahad." He pulled the cork from the flask and tilted it to his mouth. The old golden glowing warmth. He had almost forgotten-- "Thank."

"Take another pull," said Dix. "It's good hooch."

Another and another. "Better go in now. Intermission's don't last forever."

The keys beneath his finger responded lightly playing bubble tunes. The bubbles floating upward and burst against his eyes. Bubbles ran thru veins. Rainbow bubbles. 'Rainbow round my shoulder.' Dix, a bubble burning. Dix' and Sherril's heads floating close together, both bubbles. What had Dix said about Sherril? Something --'Frat pin-- cute little tri -- straight to the source.' The bubbles turned into quick flames burning along his veins. He'd see Sherril about that. Soon as this damn dance was over. 'Keep away from Dix. Snake.' Bubbles again frething upward. 'There's a rainbow around my shoulder.'

The house was dark but he went in feeling his way up the black stairs. How many drinks had he had? He'd lost count. But it didn't matter. The cold air had sobered him. Only a queer lightness, a queer alternating heaviness. He must see Sherril. It couldn't wait. 'Keep away from Dix,
do you hear me? You're not Dix' sort of girl. Or are you? Maybe you are, huh? Well if that's the case—" He said the words aloud to the black hall "If that's the case." Then he pressed his hand over his mouth. "Keep quiet, you damn fool, or you'll be put out. It's two o'clock, anyway."

The door of the apartment was not locked. He opened it softly and the stopped with his hand on the knob. What about Biddy? She'd burst out in a moment and give him the devil for coming at this hour. Biddy was strong on the conventions, clucking around Sherril like a mother hen with chick. "She'll probably sit up in her pajamas to chaperon us," he thought. And then— "Oh well, let her." He must tell Sherril. He must tell Sherril now. Some thing dreadful might happen if he didn't. She was only a baby, and Dix— What had she said to him one day long ago. Strange ugly words from such a gentle mouth. 'If it wasn't for you, Brand, I think I'd be not much better than a common slut.' So that was it, was it? Water seeks its own level. Oh no, not! Only a baby using words she could not understand.

The door closed with a bang. "Sherril." A voice like a knife splitting the darkness in halves. "Who is it? Who is it?" The glow of a light thru the open bedroom doors as the knife struck home.

He moved to the light not answering. Then he stopped bemused and blinking. "Where's Bid?"

"Oh Brand, it's you. I was so frightened I— What is it?"

"Where's Bid?" The same question endlessly repeated, "Where's Bid?"

Where's Bid?" Only Sherril in the wide tumbled bed. Only Sherril little and thin beneath the covers.

"She's off on a field trip. I told you. Don't you remember?"

Somewhere in the back of his mind a slide clicked into place. Sherril's face lifted to his, "I'll be all alone over the week end. You will come in?" Strange to have forgotten until now. Easy to have forgotten if you so desired. He laughed suddenly. "You told me to come and here I am."
His laughter snapped like a twig.

Wide-stretched eyes questioning and alittle frightened under feather brows, rumpled brown hair, a white throat, a white lifted shoulder. "Oh Sherry, don't look at me like that. I won't hurt you, darling, I'll go away."

"What's the matter? Something's the matter." Her eyelids quivered lightly. She sat straight in the bed her hands stretched out before her palm upward, white against the white counterpane.

There was something he wanted to tell her, but he could not remember. There was a warning he must give, but he had lost it. Only a shivering darkness of the senses. An unappeased aching. A desire that was stronger than his shrinking body, moving inexorably to consummation thru shattered barriers. He came closer to the bed but her hands flew away from his, white butterfly hands fluttering to the shallow curve of her breasts, resting there until he caught them.

"It's all right, darling. I had something to tell you but I can't remember now. It doesn't matter now, does it?" His hands left hers to follow the sweet curve of her shoulder, a stroking caressing touch. "You're so little, Sherry. So little and thin. You're not afraid now, are you. It's only Brand."

"No, I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid any more." She was a child speaking, but she was not a child. A slim birch reaching to the sky, heavy with sap. Her hair against his mouth was warm and alive. Her hands under his coat groped a moment and were still, the fingers outspread along his back.

What was this strange singing flame, this marching cadence thru his blood? There was the stiff rigidity of flesh? Molten now, liquid. Flesh no longer but a quickening light, a devouring fire, a pain that was sharp and searing and yet somehow sweet.
"Sherril," he said, "Sherril." Then finding her mouth close against his there was no longer the need of little words.

XLIV

He lay on his bed with his face turned to the wall. Billy came and knocked at the door. "There's someone wants your room," the phone.

"Say I'm not in."

"Are you sick. Shall I tell Mamma?" A child's grave-eyed curiosity.

"No I'm not sick. I'm just tired. I want to sleep."

"Oh, all right." The door closed again.

He lay with his face still turned toward the wall a moment, then rolled over. The ceiling shut out the sky, but that was well. He had no use for the sky now. There were no stars nor sun nor moon. Only the four walls and the ceiling, a box to hold his cramped body rigid. He must try to think. But what was there to think about? A thousand things. One thing. One thing. If he could only wipe his mind clean and start over again. Work out a new personal equation upon the clean slate mind.

There was not enough water in all the world to wash away those scrawled figures.

Sherril. He would have to marry Sherril. The key had turned in the lock shutting them in together. Always until now there had been a crack, a loophole, a glimpse of tree tops and sky above a high wall. Something of which he had been only dimly aware, and yet he had clung to that dim awareness. But he could never marry Sherril. He saw it clearly. A shrinking of the flesh, a physical aversion. Dirty. Dirty. Two people could not marry with that between them. What had John said long ago, "It isn't dirty really. It's just the way you look at it." But it was his way.
He could not help it. A leaping flame that had burned to ash. Gray ash that covered the body with smut. An ugly word. A dirty word. "It's just the way you look at it." And he had always looked at it that way. "Perhaps there's something wrong with me. Perhaps I'm one of those fellows Freud writes about—perverted." What would Dix say if he knew? "You're a damn fool, Barney. That's what women are for." Dix would not marry Sherril either. But it would be different. He would take what he wanted and go on casual and not caring. There would be no secret bitter conflict, no strange loathing of a white thin body to color his mind.

He turned back to the wall. He would have to see Sherril and tell her that was the decent thing to do. Why was it that doing the decent thing was always so hard? "If I could just clear out and never see her again. Forget about her completely." But he could never forget. Never. Never. Perhaps it would be better to treat it casually, smile and pretend it was nothing. Then slowly, imperceptibly sever the thin strong cords that bound him until he was free. But that was not his way. That had never been his way. He could not play a slow and devious part. The sharp impact of a scene that left him wrenched and shaken or an abrupt withdrawal without explanation or excuse. It must be one of these and the latter was easier.

The telephone again. "There's a girl who says she's got to talk to you."

"Say I'm not in I told you."

"I know, but I forgot. I told her you were lying down."

"Well, tell her I'm sick. No--" If he said that she would be over. It was Sherril of course, and she would come over. "Tell her I'll see her this afternoon. I'll be around at four." There was no retreat now. He must go through with it.
Sherril said: "But I don't understand. I mean-- You came and-- It wasn't either of our faults, was it?"

"I didn't say it was. I'm not taking a moral view of the thing."

"What is it then? I'm sorry, if you want me to be sorry. I'm anything you want me to be."

"Then be reasonable, for God sakes. That's all I want."

"But I can't be reasonable about something I don't understand." She was not making it easier for him. Her strained face, her trembling mouth. Why had he let himself in for such a ghastly tangle. Then looking at her, a quick furtive glance. "She's still Sherril. She hasn't changed really. It's I. Why can't I see her as I used to see her before this happened? What wrong with me anyway?" He tried again. If he could make her understand. But he hated explanations. Incoherent phrases, gaps between meaningless words. "Something wrong— I've been like this ever since— Physical intimacies— the ultimate physical intimacy-- I can't face it,"

"But you did," she said, "You did."

"I know. The first time. I was a little drunk, I guess, or I couldn't have. It's been hell ever since. It's only obscure why his suffering was worse than hers. It included hers, made it a part of his own.

"But Brand," she said, "if we'd married it would have been part of my marriage. I don't quite-"

"That's just it. I see now I couldn't go thru with it. It's my fault. I should have known. I did know but I kept pushing it away from me and pretending. But I can't pretend now. Not any longer."

"Then you didn't love me? You were playing? You never really meant--"
"I wasn't playing. I did mean— Oh don't you see, Sherril? Can't we make a clean break and forget? It was all wrong. And now— I can't go on with it. There's no use trying any longer. I'm through."

She was coming toward him. Her voice was a thin gasping whine. Her arm He tried to push them away. "Please, please!" Suddenly he jerked himself free. "Don't touch me." She dropped back a little staring at him with tortured eyes.

"Don't ever touch me again. That's it. I can't bear—" His own voice sounded strange and remote. Someone outside of himself speaking. The cruel sharp thrust of words, relentless, unpitying. "I'm through. I'm through absolutely. I don't want ever to see you again. There, if you must have it." He shut his mouth savagely into a tight uneven line. "Well, I better be going."

She put out her hand and clutched his arm. "Don't leave me, Brand. Please. Please. I'll do anything you say. I won't expect anything you can't give. You needn't touch me ever. But don't leave me. If you do—" Both hands were about his arm, clinging. He would never be free of them. "If you do I don't know what will happen to me. I don't care. It was bad enough before you came, but now it will be worse. You won't decide now, Brand, please? After a while, it will look different. It's just..." Her whole body was twisting with a sort of nervous agony; her desperate gripping hands. Suddenly he tore them off.

"It will never be different. I'm through."

As he looked at her her face seemed to freeze, to tighten. A strange cold immobility. He had seen a face like that somewhere. A closed face. A dead face.

"All right," she said. There was no fight left in her, only a hope- less surrender. "All right, it's for you to decide." The same words. The same frozen voice. "It's for you to decide."
He walked away down the street, taking long free strides never looking back. A little girl had stood at a window once and watched a man walk away like that without a backward glance. Walk away lightly as if he were shaking himself free of chains that had bound him. But Brand did not remember.

**XLVI**

He had thought he was through with it. But he was not through. He had forgotten Biddy. She stopped him on the steps of Main Hall one day.

"Wait, I want to talk to you."

"I'm in a hurry. I haven't time now."

"You've got to have time." Feet planted firmly a little apart she had barred his way. "What's happened between you and Sherril?"

"I don't know that it's any of your business."

"It is my business. Anything that makes Sherril like this is my business."

Like what? Like what? But he knew. A face as smooth as a sheet, as dead white. "Ask her then, why come to me?"

"I have asked her, but she won't tell me. You've got to tell me. What happened?"

"Nothing happened. It's just over."

"It isn't over. If you could see Sherril you'd know that. She's like a stone-cold statue, all but her eyes." Suddenly she caught Brand's arm and shook it. "You think you can get by with anything, don't you? Because you're Brand Barnett, a little tin god. But you can't this time. You're going to be nice to Sherril whether you want to or not. I don't care what happened. I don't care whose fault it was. Probably it was yours— but I don't care about that. Even if Sherril did unspeakable things you've got to forget it and come back to her."
"I can't, Biddy," he said, "I can't."

"Why can't you?"

If he told her would she understand? Of course not. He knew what she would say. "All the more reason for marrying her. You've got to marry her now." The cheap trappings of a melodrama. Make an honest woman of her. A shotgun-wedding. "I couldn't tell you in a hundred years," he said slowly. "You wouldn't have the faintest idea what I was talking about. You're too damned normal."

"Well, it's good thing there's one normal person about. Between you and Sherril—" She stopped and began again. "Come along with me now and see her."

"No," said Brand. The word had the sharp slap of finality. "I'm through. It's no go, Biddy. I can't do it." He pushed his way past her and started down the steps.

"Well if you don't—" Biddy's voice came after him, "whatever happens, it's your fault. Just remember that."

He carried the words with him across the campus. But what could happen? Nothing could happen. Sherril would get over it in time. People always did, didn't they? A white face without a rumple. "Oh Brand, the crawling darkness!" He walked faster dodging among the groups of students, pressing his finger against his pulsing under-lip.

XLVII

The blue October days unfurled their bright pennants to be tattered by passing winds. The campus glowed with color for a brief period, then faded and grew dim caught in November fogs. Lessons and classes and orchestra practice. He crammed his hours full. No time to think. No time to remember. Only a glimpse of a familiar head across the campus, the droop of thin familiar shoulders before he ducked out of sight.
He was free again. There were no longer words that bound him. But
he had grown used to Sherril's dependence. A little gnawing ache that could
not be downed. Perhaps after all—Then the memory of that night undimmed
by passing time. He could never face that again. Never. Dirty. The old
childish word, but the right word for him. The only one.

He had dropped in at the house after supper. "Hello, Brand, where
have you been keeping yourself lately?" Ken Foster lounged on the davenport
smoking. "A bunch of us are going out to the Gardens to dance, want to
come along?"

"Where's Dix?" A quick glance about the room for a bright familiar head

"Oh, he'll be there. He's gone after his girl. He's got a new one."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. Never seen her. But she's bound to be hot if Dix steps
out with her. He's not keen on virgins."

Brand dropped on the piano bench leaning back with his elbows on
the keys. "Well, I might go. Who'll I take?" To go out with the bunch
again. To take a girl. The sort you could pick up lightly and then drop
without a crash. Why not? He couldn't steer clear of girls forever. "Who'll
I take?" he repeated.

"Where's the kid you've been running around with? Won't she do?"

"Oh that's off. Think of another one." He could say it as easily as
that. Yes, he was getting over it.

"I know a good one for you. Friend of my girl's. Name's Dorothy
something. Bennett, I think. Sort of your style, cool as icecream, but she
melts."

"All right, ring her up. I'll go."

Dorothy Bennett was blond and tall and smoothly powdered. She talked
in a high thin voice dropping her sentences unfinished. "All the girls at
the house are keen on... And I said, "Well, if that's the way..." she danced stiffly holding her body away from his. He was glad of that. Dancing was so damned intimate. He steered clear of it usually. He saw enough of dances playing in the orchestra. A familiar name brought him back again.

# There's Dix Templeton with another girl. Who is she?"

He peered across Dorothy's shoulder. "Where?"

"This way. They're coming toward us."

An arm scraped his. "Hello there, Barney."

"Hello, Dix."

The girl with Dix came only to his shoulder. A little thing, springy indefinite -colored hair, delicately peed eyes. "Hello, Sherril." A tight coldness in his throat.

She smiled at him, a brief quivering of the lips.

So this was Dix's new girl. He might have known. "He's not keen on virgins." But Sherril: "I'd not be much better than--" Oh he understood now. He swung away but Dix' hand grabbed him. "Let's swap for the rest of the dance. Something I want to tell Dorothy."

He was dancing with Sherril, trying to make his feet follow the beat of the music. Think about your feet. Think about your feet. Watch what they're doing. A tight coldness in his body. Nerves like clenched fists. He held her rigidly, feeling his arm an iron band around her. They danced without speaking, wordless and awkward. He must say something. He must say something casual and cool and light. But there were no light words.

It was Sherril who spoke, a faint small voice. "Aren't you--Isn't it--" And then in a breathless rush. "Won't you please come back, Brand? I can't bear it."

"You seem to be bearing it very well." He looked down at her, forcing his eyes to meet hers, feeling her body flinch before his verbal thrust.
"I'm not, really, really! Please, Brand."

The whole things to be gone over again. "I told you I was thru. Isn't that enough." If only he had stayed away from this damn dance. There's no use talking about it again." And then bitterly. "What do you want me for? You've got Dix." Dix and Sherril. Sherril and Dix. They made a good couple. Let it go at that. A good pair. Dix could give Sherril what she wanted. Was that true or was he only excusing himself? Well anyway, let it go.

"I don't want Dix," said Sherril, "But I have to have someone. It doesn't matter who now. I don't care what happens to me since you—"

"Well you can't expect me to care if you don't can you?" He thought: "What a cad I am. I might at least be decent. But I can't be decent. I've got to get this over with somehow, anyhow.

"All right," said Sherril, "All right." She flung back her head and laughed. Her voice was as brittle as thin glass. "All right," she said again: "I don't care either. I don't care a damn. Let's find Dix."

XLVIII

He ran into Dix in the Students' Store three weeks later. It was December. A day of quiet softly falling snow. "Lo Barney. Haven't seen you since the dance. What you been up to?"

"Nothing much. Studying for once in my life." They lolled against the counter idly smoking.

"Say," said Dix suddenly, "What happened between you and that kid, anyway?"

"What kid?" Oh he knew well enough but it was easier to fence.

"Sherril," said Bix. "You dropped her like a hot potato and I picked her up."
"Well good luck to you."

"Thanks, I needed it for awhile I guess, but after that dance, say!"

He grinned at Brand knowingly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" All his blood seemed to be draining out of him leaving a limp body hanging against the glass case.

Dix' foot tapped the floor. One-two-three. One and two and three.

"Stop that, for God's sake!"

"Well for crying out loud." The tapping ceased, "Say, you are jumpy."

"What were you going to say?" He had to know. He already knew but he must have the sharp distinction words.

"Oh nothing-- only--" Dix grinned again. "After the dance we got in th wreck and drove out into the lonesome country. Talk about hot, Christ! There was nothing to it. She's a pushover."

He was walking across the campus. Altho it was warm he had turned up the collar of his coat. "A pushover. A pushover." Well he'd known it all along, hadn't he? The way she had looked at him sometimes; the things she had said-- "Not much better than--" A good thing to be out of it. A good thing to be out of it altogether. But he hadn't known. He'd that--"

"When I'm with your Brand--" What were these tattered beginning of sentences that betrayed him. 'It's my fault. It isn't my fault.' If she was that kind it was bound to crop out sooner or later. But why must it be Dix? The old tangling charm. If a man could feel that way about Dix, more reason for a girl. Far more. "Good God, why can't I think straight!" he said aloud.

Suddenly Sherril was before him. A hesitating pause, a brief flutter of the eyelids. Then she was gone, holding her head high, her small painted mouth folded tight. She was gone, walking toward the Students' Store where Dix waited. A pushover. A pushover.
Christmas vacation had come and gone. Biddy had spent the holidays with Lee in New York. "It's a lucky break for me," Brand thought, "Otherwise she'd have spilled everything." He had not told them at home of his rupture with Sherril. It was something he could not bring himself to talk about even with Marsh. Better to forget as much as possible. If they suspected they gave no sign.

He had clung to Marsh during those two weeks, following her from room to room, talking endlessly of trivial things. Just to be near her comfort. "She's the one girl I can see without distortion. She's not all muddled up in my mind with sex and smutty talk." Marsh was kind to him as she had always been, and yet he was dimly aware of difference. It was as though she forced herself to listen to him, pulling her mind free from secret engrossing thoughts of her own, compelling herself to pay attention. He could not explain the change although he was conscious of its existence.

College again, and Sherril could no longer be pushed into the background. He was always meeting her. With Murray Keith. With Scoop Ditzler. After a while with other fellows. Then Murray again. A dead white face, red lips, and insolent lift of the head. Oh, he was well out of it. Her name was a by-word on the campus. "She'll be dropped yet, you'll see. No girl can get by with that sort of thing forever." For Christ's sake forget about it. All women were alike, some were easier than others, that was all. There wasn't a decent girl on the campus when you came right down to it. A decent girl anywhere. He thought of Marsh, clean flesh, white and incorruptible. What a dirty mind he had. What rotten dirty mind.

There was a letter on the hall table for him. He found it when he came in at eight. Sherril's little girl hand. He carried it into his room
and stood in the middle of the floor turning it between his fingers. Open it
and see what was in it. "No, never open it. Destroy it unopened. There was
nothing she could say that would matter now. It was over and done with.
His fingers gripped the letter then loosened. If he destroyed it he would
never know, and there were things he might want to know. But not now, not
now.

He flung the envelope on the bed, a gray blot against the white
counterpane, and got into his tuxedo. Five hours of playing ahead of him.
Think about that. There were a thousand trivial things to think about. The
horn of a car clutched his nerves. Three quick blasts. Dix and the gang.
Time to go. Where was his music? He had it and was out of the door. The
letter layed forgotten on the bed.

L.

Mrs. Star met him as he came in. Her corduroy robe faded to ash gray
in the dim electric light, "Miss Kemp's called you five times since eleven-

thirty. She said to come around as soon as you got in."

"Thank you, it's late now I'll--" He walked past her into his room.

Damn Biddy. He wasn't going out at this hour of the morning for anyone. But
what could she want? Something important. Oh Hell, he might as well call
up and find out. Then he remembered. There was no phone. Some woman on the
first floor let them use hers. Her name was-- He'd forgotten her name.
A quick glance at his watch. Six O'clock, almost time for breakfast. That's
damn car breaking down. He might-- No, he'd be darned if he would. He
flung his coat on the bed and saw the envelope, the bright square of the stamp.
Maybe--

Lopsided letters scraggling across the half sheet of white paper.
"Brand Please. I've tried and I can't get along. Something awful has happened. If I could see you for just a little while. If you'll come this evening. I'll wait until ten and if you're not there—" It broke off abruptly.

"I'll wait until ten and if you're not there." That was all. From ten until six, eight hours. He counted them off carefully on his fingers. Went back and counted them again. Eight hours. Not much time but time enough. Time enough for— Oh, if anything— A trembling weakness of the knees. Gripping nerves in the pit of his stomach. The room seemed to whirl about him for an instant, then settled again. If anything—

Without stopping for his coat he was out of the room, bumping clumsily into the furniture, stumbling against the door-frame. As the front door slammed behind him the telephone bell shrilled again, thinly, persistently.

Why were all those people around? If there weren't so many people perhaps he could think. They kept whispering together, nodding their heads and whispering, drawing down the corners of their mouths. White paper faces in the thin early morning light. If only they'd get out and leave him alone with Bid.

But he didn't belong here. He was in the wrong place. He went to a funeral and it was his own funeral. He went— Who was talking about funerals anyway? "I smelled gas when I came in at twelve-thirty... Lying on the floor by the stove... Nightgown... Then Miss Kemp came. .. slept thru it all." The curl papers on the woman's head wavered ludicrously like soiled butterfly wings. " guess being dropped from the university.
All the talk about her—... I went to a funeral and it was... Biddy with a
bathrobe drawn on over her pajamas, her hair on end. He stretched out his
hand and clutched her sleeve, clung to it. "Stiffen in darkness, left alone
to crumble—" Oh, he had to get out of this!

He was walking down the narrow hall with Biddy. The second door. Closed.
Let it stay closed forever. But there was something behind it that he must see.
Open it. Don't open it. He jerked away from Biddy's hand, pressing his own
hands close across his mouth. "I can't. I can't."

"You've got to." The flat finality of a living voice, something to hold to;
"I can't I tell you."

He was in the room.

She was smaller than he remembered her, as thin and light as a child,
as remote and untouchable. She layed with her hands along her sides, the
fingers loosely curved. The sheet had been drawn up beneath her arms.
It feel away from her knees and breast in smooth cool folds like water. She
was very still.

"Isn't she pretty?" said Biddy softly. That was all. They stood side by
side looking down at her. White cool eyelids on white cheeks, the feathery
brush of lashes. A dead face. A shut face. Secrets that would never now be
told.

Once he had come into this room and found her, the bed tumbled, the night
wind blowing her hair across her eyes, her fluttering nervous hands. Why did her brown hair lie so quiet, so softly?

Suddenly he leaned over and touched her cheek gently with his finger tips.
Cold. Coldness that could never be warm again. He drew away quickly. "Oh
Bid, Bid, it's not my fault. It's not—" The sentence was unfinished. With
a sharp turn of his body he was out of the room. He went down the steps holding
his shoulder rigid, never looking back.
He had been waiting for a long while. He did not know how long.
He was cold and stiff and aching. He wanted a bath. God, how he wanted a bath.
To lie submerged, a coma-like state, half-waking half-sleeping. Steam against
his forehead, moist and warm. There was something he must think about. But
he could not think about it now. Something had happened. What was it? Oh
he knew well enough, but he must shut it out. How quiet she had lain between
the sheets, even her hair, even her nervous narrow hands. "I'll wait until
ten and--"

His shoes was heavy with clay, each one a weight to be lifted. 'Boots,
boots, marching up and down again.' The scratch of a cheap victrola record.
Think about that. That was safe. 'Boots. Boots. There's no discharge in the
way. There's no dis---' But it wasn't his fault. No one could say it was his
fault. He couldn't help it if he was born that way. Part of his temperament.

It had begun to rain, a slow drizzle that soaked through the thin cloth
of his coat. He turned up his collar. How many miles to town was it, anyway?

How many miles to Barley Bight? Oh God damn, God damn. He couldn't go on
like this forever filling up his mind with meaningless things. Be matter how
deep he buried it, it was there, growing in darkness, spreading, putting out
clinging tentacles. Things like that would warp a man's whole life, twisted crook
Better to look at it. Better-- "It's not my fault, I tell you. It's not
my fault."

He was on the outskirts of town, dingy houses, wet thin roofs, a sign in a
window, 'Marcelling fifty cents' A man in overalls and high boots passed him.
What if he should stop him. "I have just killed someone."
Look at me! Look at me! I killed her with my temperament." Good lord, was he going crazy? Only a step between sanity and insanity. Boots. Boots--

The town closed in on him. An empty trolley car lurched past. Two boys talking on a corner. "And as fast as I ran the water in it ran out."

Water in a bath tub, water under a bridge, when did it stop running in and—start running out? Had anybody ever solved that problem? Had anyone...

She had tied a narrow pale blue ribbon around her hair and she looked up at him and said, "Did you ever think about killing yourself, Brand?"

A funny thing for a girl to ask, a young girl, a very young girl. But Thomas Chatterton had been young too. The attic walls had pressed down upon him that last morning.

"God, but I'm tired," he said aloud. The town was a picture slightly out of focus, blurred by the rain. A bath and dry clothes and-- And what after that? What in all the world? A white face on a white pillow always before his eyes. Words written across a page-- "I'll wait until ten and--"

Was there no way to blot them out? If there was someone he could talk to.

I've got to talk. Everything. I can't-- Another face. A living face.

Quiet eyes. Of Marsh, Marsh. There was now only one need, one and in life, to get home. He began to run, holding his arms tight against his sides, lifting his feet heavily, boots, boots--
Afterward he could not remember clearly what happened. It was like a vague chaotic phantasmagoria of sounds and images, a choking pain like a strong hand at his throat. He had struggled against it fiercely, blindly. If he could once loosen that strangling grip, if he could once breathe again freely. The fingers still held, vise-like making each breath a rasping agony. Then for a moment he was rid of them. He drew in his breath and let it out in a cry, "Sherril! Sherril!" before they clasped into place. Another hand against his forehead, a cool hand, "There, my darling." His mother's distressed face close to his. Darkness like a blot of ink upon a half-finished sketch. Sherril once more, but it was not Sherril, it was Tom Chatterton, a pale boy in long tight trousers and a white shirt. Sherril's face, Sherril's pointed eyes accused him. "It's not my fault. It's not my fault."

The ceiling was falling on him. The ceiling was an enormous envelope with a stamp like a drop of blood in one corner. He stretched out his arms to ward it off but it came closer. He screamed tearing at the hands at his throats. Suddenly it rushed back into place, dwindled to the size of an ordinary letter. The stamp gleamed scarlet. Blood was scarlet flowing like a bright stream, darkening as it flowed, turning to rust-brown. Blood? What had he to do with blood? A white face. A face on a white pillow. Quiet. The fingers tightened; he could not pry them loose. There was now only pain and after pain a black void without sound or movement, an enveloping darkness.

He opened his eyes, lifting his heavy lids with effort. His own room, white plastered wall discolored by age, the bright fall of cretonne at the window, a print of a Botticelli madonna hanging a little askew, his mother.
He saw it all in a fluttering instant before the weighted lids dropped into place. "How did I get here? What am I doing?" He made a great effort to speak summoning his lost voice. "Mother." The sound died before it had been born. He rested a moment bathed in weakness then tried once more. "Mother." This time the whisper brushed his lips and she heard. She came over to the bed and bent above him. With a fierce effort of the will he forced his lips apart and looked at her. "How did I... His voice died again.

"Hush, darling," she said, "don't try to talk. It's all right."

He could feel her hand along his cheek, a gentle stroking. "Hush, hush."

He tried to smile but his lips would not shape themselves, only a faint uncontrollable trembling. There were things he must say, questions he must ask, but he was so tired, so very tired. Sleep was the only thing that mattered. Sleep was the desideratum. His lashes drooped to lie in a dark curve against his cheek and he slipped away.

LIV

There was sunshine in the room, warm patches of sunshine on the floor. The walls were mellow with soft golden light. Books with colored covers, red and blues and dull browns, were jumbled together in the low case. The rag rugs were woven squares of brightness. Above his small ink-stained desk a faded photograph of his father as a young man, narrow jawed, petulant, slender, beautiful. Brand lay in his bed and absorbed it all lazily, drowsily, the color, the warmth, the feel of familiar things. The eyes of the young man in the photograph looked into his, pity and scorn and understanding claiming a kinship of common blood, of common dreams and desires and fears. He pulled his own eyes free at last.
"What day is it anyway?" he asked. He spoke carefully testing each word before he let it go. His voice still played tricks with him. He was never sure of it.

His mother sat across from him by the west window. Her linen house dress had faded to a pale blue; her hair, brown dusted with silver was brushed smooth and coiled at the nape of her neck, the soft flesh beneath her chin sagged a little. She was a darling, a great pile of John's socks were heaped helter-skelter in a basket by her side. She looked across at him smiling from behind her glasses. "It's Wednesday, the twentieth of February."

"Oh, it can't be. I--"

The needle moved swiftly darting in and out. "Three weeks," she said. "Three weeks today since you came home."

He watched her silently for a moment trying to adjust himself to this discovery. "Then I've been sick quite a long time?"

The bright flickering of the needle paused an instant. "Yes, quite a long time."

He loved his mother when she looked at him like that, a warm still glance, her head tilted a little at one side. When he was small and had been naughty and was sorry afterwards she had looked at him in that way, holding him off from her a moment before she took him into her arms. "Mother, he said.

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing. Just 'Mother.'" He laughed suddenly, a faint sound like a half-drawn breath. "Do you remember," he said, "when I was little and you used to punish me? I'd run away, and then I'd come back. I always came back, didn't I?"

"Yes, you always came back." She went on darning but the thrust of the needle was less sure, less quick.
"Well," he said slowly, "I've come back again." He had come back from a long way. None of them knew how far. It could not be measured by the time alone nor by distance. Time and space. Space and time. Some philosophers believed that was all, but it was not all. There was something else, indefinable. Something that could not be explained by words. His mother knew.

She spoke to him now. "I thought for a little while you might never come back."

"You mean-- before-- at college?" He had drifted away, farther and farther. All the new crowding experiences had pushed back the past except at odd moments. Now he was home again, a clear tranquility that was part of his weakness. "I feel as though I had just been born," he thought, "only-- There was something that struggled to be remembered. But he would not remember now. A little longer. A little longer to be lapped by peace.

"No," said his mother, "after you came back. You were very ill."

He had come back but he could not recall how he had got here or why he had come. There had been rain ceaselessly dripping, black hours to be fought through. And then only pain, wave after wave rolling over him to be conquered at last.

"I can't remember," he said.

"Of course not, you were too sick. Kemp picked you up on the road halfway between here and the station and brought you home."

"It was raining, wasn't it?"

"Yes, you were soaked to the skin and half out of your head."

"What was it?"

"Pneumonia."

That, then, was the hand at his throat, the clutching strangling hand that could not be pried loose. But why had he come? What had happened to send him home so many miles, so many miles? Boots, boots. He had marched to
that somewhere, sometime. He had lifted his feet heavily, marching.
Memory pushed upward and was thrust back. "Not yet. Give me a little
longer before I face it."
He spoke, listening to his own faint voice. "Do you know something,
Mother?"
"What is it, dear?"
"Do you know, I think part of me died when I was sick."
She had put aside her sewing and was looking at him. "Part of you died?"
"yes, there's only me now, not a dozen all fighting together. I feel so
tired and yet-- rested." There was more to tell but no strength with which
to tell it. The words went on in his head. "I've been fighting myself so
long now that fighting part is dead, dead or asleep, I don't know which. I
never felt this security before, this quiet. Oh, if it would only last."
"You've talked to much. You must rest now." His mother's voice was
part of the quiet, part of the strong far-reaching security.
"All right, a little tired." He closed his eyes and was asleep almost
immediately.

LV

It would not lie dormant forever. He could no longer hold it in
abeyance. With his returning strength it came back pushing up from the
bottom of his mind where it had lain for a little while buried. Suddenly it
reached the surface and he was forced to contemplate it, ugly and loathsome
as it was. "Sherril is dead. Sherril is dead and I killed her." He said it.
He said it slowly to himself. It was too late to side-step now. He was
trapped. When he had been at fault before he had sneaked out of it. He
had filled his mind with other things, crowded his hours so full that there
was no room for thought. But not this time. Days of slow convalescence
stretched before him, days when there was nothing to do but remember all
the things he wished to forget. Words that should never have been spoken
came back to him. "I'm through, I tell you. I'm through." "Well, you
can't expect me to care if you don't." Scenes. Voices. Sherril's little
whimpering cry when he had flung her aside. Sherril's dead face. "She's
better off than I am," he thought bitterly, "She's out of it. Why didn't
I die too?"

But he did not want to die. Death is the last refuge of a coward.
Then Sherril had been-- Oh no, not that. Bolstering up his ego at such
a moment. "Will I never be able to be honest with myself?" he wondered
wearily, "Will I always see myself under colored lights because I'm
afraid to face the light of day?"

Egocentric, feeling the world revolve around him. A poser, playing
a dozen parts, the dreamer, the misunderstood, the college rounder.
He had acted them all and none successfully. "It's only when I get into
an ugly muddle like this that I even begin to be myself." But what was
being himself? A silly phrase. "I'm all of those things. One's as
much me as another." A composition with no central theme, no under-
lying motive, just a jangle of disconnected chords and unrelated phrases.

He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them. The walls of his
room shut him off from the world, held him in a false security. He had
come running home with his hurt like a little boy. He always came home
sure of understanding and love, sure of Marsh's unfailing sympathy. He had
played up to it again and again, telling a little but not all, making out
a case for himself. Dependent. Sherril's dependence had been nothing
compared to his. She had needed only him and he-- "I'm like a pianist,"
he thought, "who depends on the whole orchestra to cover up his faulty
technique. I'm completely incapable of playing a solo part."
He wondered how much they knew. They had never questioned him. They had accepted his homecoming and his illness quietly and without a word. And yet, what had he said while he was ill? What had Biddy written? He must find out.

It was to Marsh that he turned. He sat in a chair by the window, wrapped in blankets, propped by pillows. He was much stronger. Strength was slowly creeping back into his weak body like sap spreading through the branches of a tree making them bud again. Marsh had been reading to him, some silly novel that she had got from the town library. He had followed the story a little way then dropped it to pursue his own wandering thoughts. She looked up at him now. "I don't believe you're paying the least bit of attention."

"I'm afraid I wasn't."

"Then I shan't read any more." She closed the book and put it on the window-sill beside her. "Shall I go away so you can sleep?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, I want to talk." He layed back on the pillow watching her a minute, wondering how to begin. She waited smiling a little.

"Do you know," he said, "after you smile your mouth droops at the corners before it straightens out again."

She smiled experimentally running her finger across her lips. "Does it? How awfully observant you're becoming."

"No wonder. Lying here with nothing to do but observe— and think. I've done a lot of observing and thinking in the last week."

"For instance?"

"Well," he said, "for one thing I've observed that John needs a hair-cut."

She laughed. "Marvellous! I noticed that a week ago. I told him
he must be cultivating a bang on the back of his neck and suggested a trip to the barber.” When she spoke of John her face seemed to soften and brighten, or did he only imagine it?

“And wouldn’t he take your suggestion?”

“Oh yes, he was going the next day but something came up and he didn’t make it. I guess he’s forgotten since then. I’ll remind him.”

“Tell him my delicate aesthetic sense is crushed by such an unsightly fringe.”

“And that your recovery is impeded?”

“Absolutely.” He was suddenly serious. He could talk nonsense forever, evading, always evading. “Tell me,” he asked, “None of you have never said a word about my coming home. You seemed to accept it as a matter of course, but you must wonder why I rushed back at the beginning of the quarter. What did I say when I was out of my head? Has Bid written you?”

She took the question one at a time. “You said quite a lot, but it was all a jumble. Something about a letter.”

He remembered the letter, the giant envelope swelling and dwindling. “And what else?”

“Oh, Sherril— you kept crying out her name over and over. You seemed to blame yourself.” She stopped abruptly. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes, I do. Go on.”

“To blame yourself for her death. We couldn’t understand of course and then Biddy wrote.”

He could imagine the sort of letter Bid would write, each sentence a flat denunciation of him. “She made it clear that it was my fault, didn’t she?”

“No,” said Marsh, she didn’t. It was a very nice letter.”

“But Bid— she blamed me right from the start. I don’t understand,” and then, “You see, it was my fault. How could she say anything else?”
Marsh looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't mean that Biddy didn't blame you, she did. But not altogether. She blamed you for the beginning and Sherril for the end. I think she was trying more than anything to be fair."

This was a new side to Biddy, a side that he had not realized, or had refused to realize. When he stopped to think about it she had always played fair. She faced things as fairly as Marsh but with less sympathy, less tact. Marsh said: "This is the way I look at it. I may be wrong." Biddy said: "This is the way it is. I know." The difference was only in the phrasing.

He smiled at Marsh a little sheepishly. "Funny, isn't it?" he said, "I never saw it before, but you and I both work toward the same end only you use different methods. You're like two surgeons performing the same sort of operation. You give an anaesthetic, a local anaesthetic of course, the patient's still conscious. Then you probe around and do your cutting but it doesn't hurt much. Bid won't use an anaesthetic, she slashes right in and says, 'This will hurt like hell but it will help in the end. She doesn't consider the patient's feeling, only the result.'"

"Sometimes," said Marsh, "I think Biddy gets quicker results than I do."

"Oh I don't know about that, in my case at least." He paused a moment, "I was getting to like Bid pretty well before this last--you remember how we hated each other when we were kids? We were always scrapping about something. Well, we seemed to have changed a bit. I thought we were growing up maybe and might manage to pull together once in a while. Then when I broke with--Sherry we were right back where we started tooth and nail."

Tooth and nail. That was true. Biddy on the steps of Main Hall, her fee firmly planted. "You think you can get by with anything, don't you?" He had meant to show her. But she had been right, he had not got by. Biddy again, a different Biddy, she stood by his side looking down at Sherril, "Isn't she pretty?" "She might have blamed me then," he thought, "but she didn't."
"Why did Sid say I wasn't altogether to blame, or can't you tell me?" he asked Marsh.

"Why yes," she said, "I don't see why not. She thought you were cruel to break with Sherril. She couldn't understand why you had done it suddenly like that. She blamed you there. But, she blamed Sherril for killing herself. She called it a dirty trick sneaking off and leaving you to face it. I think she's a little sorry for you."

Suddenly he did not want pity. Pity was so...People who were weak. John. One was never sorry for him even when things were hardest because John did not pity himself. But Brand Barnett, they swaddled him in pity. No, that was not true, he had swaddled himself. Now he must break free. He must be done with it for ever.

He sat up straight in his chair. "I'm going to tell you exactly what happened," he said. "That's what I came home for, you know, to tell you."

"Why me Brand?"

"Oh because,— because I've always told you things I've never told anyone else. I've felt so sure of your understanding."

She flushed and looked down at her hands folded in her lap. "I've tried to understand but I haven't always. I've wanted to understand people more than anything in the world. You and John particularly."

"You've succeeded pretty well."

"Oh I don't know. With John, yes, I think so, but you—"

"With me too, better than you realize." It was on the tip of his tongue to say more, to say a great deal more. "Because I love you so much I can tell you things. Even when I was little, my real things. I never was afraid of your laughing at me like Mother or looking bewildered like John.
I've loved you so long, Marsh, but it's taken all this to make me realize it. Now I'm sure. There's no one else. There's never been anyone else. It was all there aching to be said, but he did not say it. The other came first.

She sat perfectly still while he told her, her eyes fixed on his face. It was hard, but he went through with it, trying not to distort facts, trying to be honest. "It was a feeling I'd build up about sex," he said, "a sort of protection, I guess, because I hated all smutty talk I heard and the cheapness. And because,-- oh, I didn't like being called Sir Galahad and things like that. I used it as an excuse, I think, rather than face the truth. The truth being that I'm strictly conventional with all the old views on chastity and Marriage. At least I guess that's it. Anyway--" There was more. Bound to Sherril and yet straining always against ties that shackled him too closely. The night of the dance, Sherril alone, and afterwards. "I made it an excuse to get away. Oh, I didn't know it was an excuse then. But now, when I take it out and look at it in the light I can see. Funny how things change when you once really looked at them, isn't it?"

She nodded without speaking.

"That's been the trouble," he continued, "I've never really looked at anything that bothered me until now. I've shut it away in the dark and let it grow. When I bring it out I'm surprised to see how it's dwindled." He laughed sharply, "That doesn't help matters much," he said, "when I realize what a beast I was to Sherry. What a perfect cad. Seeing things straight at last doesn't--- doesn't bring her back again."

Marsh spoke for the first time, "If you'd found this out before Sherril died would it have made any difference?"

"I don't quite understand."

"I mean would you have married her?"

He thought a moment before answering. "I don't know," he said, "I think maybe, yes."
"But would you have been happy?"

"No, he was sure of that. "I shouldn't have been happy. I can't bear being cowed, you see."

"Well then, it would have ended badly sooner or later. It just happened sooner. That's all."

"But--"

She smiled slightly, "I don't believe you'd have stuck it out. You might have tried but-- Sherry would have suffered more that way than she did."

"John would have stuck it out," he said abruptly, "no matter how he hated it."

"Yes, John perhaps, but you're not John." The same softening when she said John's name, or was it his fool imagination again?

"I'm not John," he repeated, and after a moment, "Perhaps you're right. If I'd married Sherril it might have been harder for her, if that's possible. But I needn't have been such a cad, Marsh. I needn't have been so cruel."

"No." She came over to his chair and dropped on the floor beside him. Her dark head was close to his hand but he did not touch it although his fingers moved once quickly. "You've got to stop thinking about that now," she said, "That's over except for what it's taught you. Sherril was cruel too. She's made you suffer as much as she suffered. You hurt each other equally because--"

"Because we were both cowards and sneaked off. Bid was right, wasn't she?"

"Yes perhaps Bid was right."

LVII

The days went by swiftly, each a copy of the one before. He lost count of them after a while. Breakfast and dinner and supper on trays, the doctor's daily visits, John and his mother and Marsh coming in to sit with him,
bringing news of the farm and the neighbors. "Betty will calve any day now. If it's a bull I'll sell him. I should get a darn good price with that pedigree." "Mrs. Kemp was over. She's had a letter from Lee, his uncle's taken him into the firm." It was queer to think of Lee grown-up. Only a little while before they had been kids together, a shambling awkward Lee when he had beaten in an unfair fight. "I wonder how we'd get along now," he thought, "I'd rather like to see Lee again."

There was snow one night changing the world for a brief space then vanishing in the warmth of the sun. The buds on the maple by the window were swelling. "An early spring," said his mother.

Cousin Frank came to see him, black hair grizzling at the temples, a ragged mustache, a face weather-beaten, weather-scarred, the obstinate line of his mouth. "Well, young man, how do you feel anyway?"

"Oh I'll soon be up and around."

"Then back to college, I suppose?"

No, he could not go back. He could never, never go back. "I don't know," he said, "I can't think yet about that yet."

Cousin Frank opened his mouth and then shut it again without speaking. He sat on a straight chair opposite Brand, his legs spread apart, his head sunk between his shoulders. "John's made a go of the place," he said, "I thought he'd fail sure when he switched into dairying."

"I can't quite see John failing permanently." He thought: "Frank's pretty decent to admit it after all the rows the two of them had, but of course he has to admit it. There's no getting around it with things so obviously o.k."

"Well," said Cousin Frank, "He pretty nearly touched bed-rock for a while. But stubborn, good lord! Some folks might call it perseverance but I don't know as there's much difference."

"I guess the only difference is whether you fail or succeed."
Failure—stubbornness. Success—perseverance. Isn't that it?"

"Maybe so. I never thought about it like that." Frank chuckled.

"That's pretty good," he said. "That's pretty good."

"John's straight Tyler," Brand continued, "The Tyler's are all strong on perseverance it seems to me."

Perseverance with some of 'em, stubbornness with others. With me it's been all stubbornness, I reckon." Frank rose to go. "Eat a lot and get back your strength." he said from the door.

Brand watched him walk away down the hall, the heavy droop of his shoulders. "He looks all in," he thought, "He looks beaten." There was a faint stirring of pity. "Poor old Frank."

He said something to his mother about it when she came in a few minutes later. "Frank looks seedy, what's the matter?"

"He's lost some more of his land. He couldn't pay the interest on the mortgage."

"I thought last year was such a good one?"

"It was for us, but, — well Frank still sticks to the old way of doing things and it doesn't work. He's just plain hard-headed, I guess."

Brand caught her hand and squeezed it. "Oh Mother, Mother." he laughed suddenly.

She smiled, slightly bewildered. "What's the joke?"

"I was just thinking. John and I Tyler and Barnett. What a queer combination."

She joined his laughter. "Queer. I should say it is. Did you just discover that? I've known it all along."

"I believe you have. And you've kept the joke to yourself all these years."

"Sometimes it wasn't such a joke."
"No," he said slowly, "I can see that it wouldn't be, sometimes."

John was busy through the day but he always spent an hour or two with Brand after supper. "Well, old fellow, how goes it?" It was his usual greeting.

"Oh, I'm getting along. I'll be up in a day or two. Up and under feet."

"Sure you will." John moved about the room, turned the wick of the lamp, kicked a rug into place. "We'll have Delco lights before long," he said, "No more fooling with kerosine."

The effulgent brightness of electric bulbs, chasing shadows into the outer darkness. "I like lamps," said Brand, "in spite of the nuisance and the smell, they're softer. There's more mystery about them."

"And lots more work."

"Yes I can see that. On progress!" He looked at John laughing, "science," he said, "A wonderful thing, science, lighting the dark corners of our house with electricity, taking pictures of our bones, turning our minds inside out for examination. Soon there won't be a hiding place anymore. We won't even be able to think alone. Lord, I hope I'll be dead by then."

"It'll straighten out a lot of things, won't it?"

"Yes, I suppose, but once everything's straightened out. Once everything diagrammed and outlined and scientifically explained what will be left to live for?"

John wrinkled his forehead in bewilderment. " Loads," he said, "work and, oh we'll understand each other a lot better."

"But once we understand each other the adventure's gone. There's nothing to search for, no surprises. It will be all sane and scientific and dull."
"Think of the messes we won't get into."

Yes, that was true. No tangles, no gropings, no deep incurable hurts. But without suffering would there be happiness. The sudden swift contrast of moods. Better to suffer than live always on the same contented level from month to month, from year to year. Days without nights, an interminable brightness. "Take your electric lights and leave me my lamps" he said.

"All right, but you'll have to keep them filled."

"I shall. I'll learn enough by the time maybe. And if I don't I'll sit in the dark and thank God for it." He grinned at John. "I talk a lot of rot, don't I? I don't believe anyone's more scared of the dark than I am unless---" Sherril. "You don't know, Brand, the crawling darkness---"

Sherril, Sherril.

"Unless who?" said John.

"Oh, no one. No one at all. I'm the only one who's scared---now.

LVIII

He had come down stairs for the first time. John steadied him, an arm beneath his. "Lean on me I'm nine years old!" Brand was glad to lean. His legs were loose wires dangling and almost without control. The stairs fell away endlessly below him, "Good lord," he said, "That I should ever reach this stage of dependence. I can't even navigate without clinging to someone. He was on the couch, slippery leather, the hollow beneath him where the springs sagged. "I'm as wobbly as a new born calf."

"Wait till you see Belle's calf. He's sure a little beauty, marked clear as a map."

"Encanaim on a calf," said Brand weakly. He shut his eyes for a moment to whirling darkness, then opened them.
"Your're tired," said his mother. She stood beside John looking down at him.

"A little," He could feel his whole pose of deadly fatigue, his arms limp at his sides, his head unmoving on the pillow.

"we'll go away while you have a nap." She bent over him tucking a rug about his shoulders. Her hands were gentle and quick. "There."

He was alone. Pleasant to lie drowsily, half awake and half asleep, seeing through partly closed lids the familiar room, the arch of the fireplace, marble as warmly white as a woman's arm, as delicately veined, the "dull-faded pattern of the rug, the wing chair with its worn tapestry. The footstool was worked in a sampler wreath of stiff unrecognizable flowers.

On a wall opposite him a steel engraving caught the glow of the fire. A fat priest with his cassock pulled up to his knees lolled by a table, one hand grasped a half-filled goblet. Mother had threatened to take it down at one time but he had rebelled. "I like the old fellow. He's having such fun." He grinned at it now faintly. "I wonder if you'll ever finish that drink of yours? Or is it part of the charm that you never do?"

Once when Sherril was there she had stopped before the picture, her nose wrinkled with distaste. "I hate fat smug old men."

"Maybe I'll be fat and smug someday."

"You, Brand? Oh no, never!" She had lifted her face to his widening her eyes. Suddenly she slipped her hands beneath his arms and burrowed into his shoulder. "I'd love you even if you did get like that. I'd love you no matter what."

The false security in which he had lived for a little while crumbled. He had so wanted to believe what Marsh had said that he had made himself believe. "You're not altogether to blame, Sherril too." Biddy had thought that also. But it was false, false. They were both safely outside this
thing that had happened to him. He alone, he and Sherril alone knew. He
stretched out his arms above his head, shaking his clenched fists. If he
could have her back for a day, for an hour. "I did love you Sherril. I did
try to be good to you at first." But why had he been good to her? Why
had he loved her. Oh if it was clear enough if he would only face it. "She
was a background for me, a perfect background. No one had ever made me feel
my own peerless importance so much as she did. She depended on me utterly
and she never criticized. I was perfect to her, the Lord God almighty."
But one could not play the part of God forever, not even Grand Barnett.
He had wearied of it and flung her aside. The other had been only the
culminating point. "I would have found another way out if that had not
happened. When I told Marsh I would have married Sherry it wasn't true.
Oh God what is true anyway? Will I ever know? Will I ever, never know?"
The fire had burned to ashes, gray, paper-thin like the wings of moths.
"I wish Marsh would come back," he thought. Marsh could build up his broken
faith. She had always done that for him. Little things, big things, she
had been there to sympathize and to understand. "It's taken me a long
while to find out what I wanted but I know at last. I've wandered a long
way from the track but now I'm back again right where I started. The thing
I've been looking for is here." He lay still a moment staring into the dead
fire. "I haven't anything to offer her but if she'll wait I'll get a job
somewhere; I'll do something." There was always a 'but' to confront him.
"I can't go back to college. That's certain. Then a job, what sort of a
job can I get? Oh, anything, anything but college." Ghosts rising to haunt
him. The wraith of a thin young girl in a blue sweater always before his
eyes. There was an emptiness that Marsh could not fill. There was an aching
that even Marsh could not alleviate. "Oh Sherry, Sherry honey."
The door opened softly and his mother came in, walking tip-toe to the fireplace.

"Mother."

She turned, "I thought you were asleep."

"No, I haven't slept."

"What's the matter, dear?" She pulled a chair to the side of the couch and sat down. His hand slipped into her's. "Perhaps you shouldn't have come downstairs. Dr. James said--"

His fingers tightened, "I'm all right," he said, "It isn't that, it's--Oh Mother, I'm so unhappy. I'm so unhappy."

LIX

By the last of March it was spring, a thin tracery of green along the tree boughs, a white spray of plum blossoms. The dogwood was a mass of bloom, flat scalloped petals as thick and smooth as cream. Brand was up and about, wandering out of doors into the sunshine, sitting on the porch with a rug over his knees and unread book between his fingers. He had grown steadily stronger. He could think of Sherrill now without pain. That shaken half hour alone with his mother had straightened things out for him a little, given him a new perspective. His mother had understood more than anyone and she had showed him a course to follow.

"You can't lie down now," she said, "This is the time to prove that you can keep on in spite of everything."

"But I've proved so often that I can't."

"That has nothing to do with it. That's over. What you're to show now is that you can."

"But Mother--"

She shook her head at him, "Ever since you were a little boy you've done
"Done what?"

"Tacked a 'but' on to your sentences, at the beginning or at the end, it doesn't matter which. It's always there. And I've accepted it; we've all accept it. It's been your undoing. But—" she smiled slightly, "This is my but. I won't accept it any longer. You're too big for buts."

"Only on the outside, on the inside I think I'm not much more than three.

"Then we'll grant only the outside; the other doesn't exist." Her voice was firm and decisive admitting no argument.

"What good will it do," he asked, "now Sherrill's dead? No matter if I do straighten out I can't bring her back."

"No," she said, "you can't bring her back. That's just it. That's why you must do it, to prove to her that she did not die foolishly and selfishly, that good can come out of even the ugliest thing."

"Prove to her?" He smiled waveringly, "How can I prove it to her? I don't believe in life after death and resurrection of the body. Even if you do, I can't."

She looked at him a moment before answering. "I don't ask you to believe as I do," she said at last, "Perhaps I don't believe it myself, not as literally as that. But—well, there's a part of you that belonged to Sherrill and still belongs. Do it for that part. Do it for yourself. It will make her act brave instead of cowardly. It will mean that you have profited inste of losing. That's the only thing left for you now, to profit or lose."

He nodded. "Yes, that's all that's left, isn't it? If I could only make one decent gesture."

"This will be a lifetime of decent gestures."

"I know, but—" he made a face, "There I go again with my buts. Well anyway, I'd like to do something, something really decent, give up something
I wanted or— Oh, I can't explain it."

She made a dissenting movement with her hand. "It isn't so necessary to
give up as to go ahead."

"Perhaps you're right."

John, coming around the corner of the house, brought him back to the
moment. "Meet the pride of Pleasant Meadows, he said. He stood smiling
with the sun on his blond hair. He wore breeches and boots and a rough
brown sweater. His shirt was open showing his strong fine throat already
bronzed by the spring sun. "This is Hercules, the oneriest bull calf in
captivity." He braced his feet against the tug of the rope in his hand.
At the end of the rope Hercules stood with his long legs firmly planted,
his head lowered defiantly. His markings were clean and beautiful, clear
patches of red-brown against white.

Brand stepped off the porch and came close. "He is a beauty. The eyes of an Italian prima-donna."

"The disposition of a volcano," said John, "I don't envy the ladies when he gets started."

They both laughed. At the sound of their voices the calf leaped in the
air. His hoofs spattered the gravel. "So that's the way you feel about it,
young fellow," said John, "Just for that you go to the barn."
He turned, wrapping the rope more securely about his wrist. "See you later," he called
to Brand, "I'll ditch this tornado and—" They disappeared around the corner of the house in a confusion of legs and hoofs and flying gravel. Brand watched them out of sight then went in-doors.

Marsh was in the living room dusting. She looked at him over her shoulder
and pushed back a lock of hair tucking it behind her ear. She wore a
yellow smock stitched in black. The duster was a flutter of orange feathers
at the end of a stick.
"You're as bright as the day," said Grand, "Fatuous remark, isn't it?"

"Very," she ran the duster lightly across the piano keys, a ripple of sound. "There," she said, "That's finished." Quickly she turned to him, "Play for me, Brand, why don't you?"

"Oh I haven't for so long. I don't believe I'd know how."

"Of course you'd know how."

"I wonder." His fingers ached for the touch of the smooth cool keys, an uncontrollable longing. "I'll try, if you can stand the racket."

She dropped into a chair near the piano holding the duster upright like a torch. "Please."

For a moment he sat still with his fingers outspread. Then he began to play. Softly at first, a whimper, ashy voice fearing to be heard, growing, growing in a strengthened confidence, telling all, telling everything. Suddenly a change, the dark brushing shadow of a cloud, a momentary struggle. Then clear again, a rapturous assurance. But brief, a hint of underlying conflict crept beneath the bright surface, dying, to be reborn. Swelling, obscuring the brightness, until at last there was only a pain and anguish and an overwhelming despair. As swiftly as the pain had come it was gone. An abrupt alteration in the tempo, a quiet finger ing on the keys. A remote calm, a still sleep, fading into unbroken silence. Peace now, a peace ever-lasting.

He let his hands slip from the key-board to his knees and sat thus for a moment without moving. Then he turned. "Do you know what That was?" he asked. His voice had a queer harsh resonance.

Marsh shook her head slowly.

"It's Sherril," he said, "It's Sherril as I remember her. Do you see?" he asked. "My poor Sherry."

"Yes," said Marsh, "it is Sherril."
He was quiet for a while thinking then he turned back to the piano, "Listen," he said, "and see if you can tell me what this says." Never before had he played as he played now, putting all of his emotion and desire and love into the music. He was speaking of her, speaking to her through music as he could never speak with words. It was a call, an irresistible compulsion, all the loneliness of mankind, the aching unsatisfied desire for understanding. "Do not desert me now. Do not desert me now. There is only you in all the world and without you—" A period of dark groping. "I'm lost without you. Lost. Lost." Then a teasing bewitching love motive, as light as thistledown blown by passing winds. "I can give you this," it said, "Undreamed of beauty. Undreamed of delight." Fear suddenly, desperate and harrying, bottomless pits of despair. "I can give you this too. This is your's also. The heights and the depths. Everything. Everything but peace." His fingers were still at last. There was no more that he could say. He remained motionless waiting.

The dueter slipped from Marsh's fingers and clattered to the floor. The bright feathers smoldered against the dark wood. She stood up and came toward him moving cautiously like a person caught in the meshes of a dream. "Beautiful music," she said, Beautiful. It does queer things to me." She spoke without expression as though the words had been learned by heart.

"Marsh!" His own voice was a cry, triumphant and sure. His hands caught her's drawing her to him. "Oh Marsh."

There was the rattle of the knob, the creak of hinges and the door burst open. John. He started into the room. "Here! --" then stopped, his mouth fixed in a net foolish grin. "I'm sorry. I --" The smile straightened into a quivering line. He turned abruptly and went out.

For a moment they stood with their hands still clinging together, then Marsh tore hers free. "John, wait," a clear imperative call. "Wait,
I'm coming with you." She sprang to the door. As she passed her foot touched the duster and the feathers stirred slightly like awaking flames. Brand sat staring at them stupidly after she had gone, watching them tremble an instant before they were still.

LX

He was back on the porch. He must think it out. He must think it out clearly from the beginning. "John, wait, I'm coming with you." What had it meant, that cry of Marsh's. He had been so sure of her, so completely sure. But there was John. John and Marsh. Brand and Marsh. John and Marsh and Brand. His mind followed a circle of its own devising, ending where it had begun always. He rose and began to tramp up and down. His feet beat out the words. John and Marsh. John and Brand and— Oh, he could not think with this bright day burning about him.

The hall was dark after the glare of spring sunlight. "Mother," he called.

"I'm up here, Brand."

He mounted the stairs slipping his fingers along the smooth polished rail. "Where, Mother?"

"In my room."

She sat in a low rocker by the window with a shirt of John's spread out across her knees. "Always mending something, aren't you?"

"Pretty nearly always."

He dropped on the bed and leaned back on his elbows staring at the headboard, an ugly walnut thing of scrolls and curlicues. In this bed his father and mother had slept for five years; in this bed he and John had been born. And now he and John— "Funny, isn't it?" he said dreamily, "People are born and grow up and have hell of a time, before they die, but furniture... just
about the same except for a few scratches." He ran his finger along a deep jagged scar. There's one mark against you, old chap. That shows your age.

His mother followed the course of his finger, smiling. "Do you remember how that happened?"

"No, do you?"

"I should say so. You did it."

"I?"

"Yes, when you were four. You had been naughty, some little thing. I believe you wanted John's wagon. He was playing with it and you tried to take it away from him but I wouldn't let you."

"Then I suppose I howled."

"That doesn't begin to express it. You lay flat on your stomach and kicked and screamed. I shut you in here and told you to stay until you could behave yourself."

"And what happened?"

"That's how you behaved yourself," She pointed at the scar. "You got a hatpin of mine and dug into the bed. You had to take it out on something. I cried when I saw it."

"Poor mother, what a despicable little brute I was."

"Yes, you were sometimes, and then completely lovable. I was in despair over and over again. I simply couldn't handle you. Nothing I tried worked on you."

"But you never stopped trying."

"Sometimes almost, after Marsh came. She seemed to understand you better than I did. She could bring you out of your moods when I failed." She folded the shirt and put it on the window -sill beside her. "It was hard for me to realize that a child of her age--and yet I let her do it. It wasn't exactly fair."

"Why?"
"She was too little for such responsibility."

"Oh Mother, have I really been that much trouble all my life? Have I hung about your necks like an albatross?"

"Of course not, it was simply that I didn't understand you and so I let Marsh—"

He leaned forward resting his hands on his knees. "You all thought I was more complex and temperamental than I really am. It flattered me I guess, and I played up to it. That's the truth of the matter."

"Well, I'm through now," he said decidedly, "No more temperament, no more dependence. I'll take care of myself and if I flop no one else is going to flop with me." To tighten, to harden, to fling aside the silly soft wrappings of adolescence. More difficult to do than to say, but he must do it. To fail now would be to fail forever, to admit defeat. He stood up straightening his shoulders. "Mother?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter with John? I thought he— Why doesn't he marry Marsh?"

She looked up at him, "I don't know. I've wondered myself. I think perhaps—"

"What?" His voice had a quick impatience.

"We both thought, I believe, it was you and Marsh. Oh, it's just what I've been saying. You always turned to her. There seemed to be an understanding between you, a tie.

"What about Sherry?" he said, "Didn't that prove?"

"Yes, it seemed to. Marsh and John were drawing together. I hoped— But John's slow and you came home."

Yes, he had come home to spoil things once more, to tangle straight threads. But if Marsh really loved him better than John. No that was not true. It was his need of her she loved, his dependence. Real love was
deeper than that, more manifold. He spoke again. "Just because I came home was no reason. Marsh doesn't love me."

"Maybe not, I don't know. Not the way she loves John, of course, but you've always awayed her. It's as though she felt bound to you in some way."

She spread out her hands despairingly. "I can't explain what I mean but I feel it don't you?"

Yes, he had felt it. Even now remembering it it stirred his pride, a faint arrogiance in his own power to hold. When he had played she had come to him with her hands outstretched, her, eyes blind and lost. His music had always done that to her, catching her out of herself like a strange hypnotic force. But it was not love. John had jerked her free. She had torn loose her hands, "Wait John." Afraid; Afraid of what he might do to her, poor Marsh.

"No," he said "I don't feel it; it's your imagination, Mother. Marsh doesn't love me nor her." An honest lie. The first decent unselfish lie he had ever told. "I'm going to find John," he said, "I want to get this thing straight once and for all."

It was almost as though he stood back to watch himself go, holding his shoulders straight and his head high, walking with certainty and assurance. A stranger and yet Brand Barnett, feeling within himself a new strength that tasted somehow more satisfying than anything he had before known.

John was not in the garden or in the pasture. Brand went out to the barn. He stood still for a moment in the doorway, dust motes danced in the sunshine, the horses turned their heads to stare at him whinnying softly. The air seemed surcharged with drowsy quiet. He was about to go when he caught a murmur of voices from the room off the barn that had been John's lab. They ran together softly scarcely more than a whisper to disturb the silence. In an instant he was at the door and had pushed it open. As John an hour before had been the intruder so he now was the intruder. But with a different
they did not draw apart as he entered but stood side by side looking at him, John's arm about Marsh's shoulder. It was he who was speechless and embarrassed.

Marsh held out her hand, "Brand." There was no need to go on, he knew; oh, he knew absolutely. "John's just--- John's consented to marry me." said Marsh. Her voice wavered slightly then strengthened.

"Consent! John snorted. "You mean you've consented. I've wanted it all along."

"Well of course, if you'd rather put it that way," She slanted her head back to look at him. "He's trying to save my reputation but I'm shameless."

From the strain of muscles about his mouth Brand knew that he was smiling. "I'm very glad. I know you'll be awfully happy together. I'm very, very glad."

His own voice was saying those things with no conscious volition on his part, while within him another voice, also his own kept up an endless argument.

"Your beautiful relinquishing gesture, it's spoiled isn't it? Acting again, a new role, the magnanimous bestower of gifts." "Oh, it isn't true, I simply wanted--" "You wanted to be the one to bring them together. You wanted them to see you as generous and unselfish. Be honest now. It hurts your pride to find that they've done it without you, that Marsh isn't taking John because she can't have you, but because she'd rather have him. Hard to acknowledge, isn't it? "I could get her now. I could have had her if--" "Oh no you wouldn't. She showed you that an hour ago when she left you for John. The other was only a defense to save your own pride." The voice went on, calm, detached, ironic, pointing out the obvious. "Why did she stay on here when she might have gone away?" What was she waiting for? John, of course, and you thought--" Was there no way to end this pitiless analysis?

Marsh was talking. He clung to her voice desperately. "I've loved John for a long time, always I guess. But this last year I've been sure. He was
so stupid, he wouldn't see. I couldn't make him."

"I thought you and Brand--" said John slowly. Did he imagine it or was it true that Marsh winced at the coupling of their names? It was over before he could be sure.

"Brand and I? But Brand had Sherril. I didn't realize until today when he played how much, how very much, he still has Sherril."

Was she trying to save him or herself? For a moment there in the living room-- but perhaps it had been only pity. One interpreted an action according to one's desire. His mother had said, "You've always swayed her. It's as though she felt bound to you in some way." Bound. He had been bound to Sherril and he'd had broken loose. Had Marsh felt--? Oh no, no. Their bond had been different, less mistaken, he and his mother and John. Marsh alone had known, and Marsh had acted. She had severed their ties once and for all. John had won.

They walked back to the house together across the sunny strip of yard. "Now I shall never have to go away," said Marsh, "I belong here at last."

"You've always belonged, honey. Hasn't she Brand?"

"Yes, I thought so."

"Oh, no, I haven't," Marsh's moved in negation, "not really. I liked to pretend that I did but I never quite made myself believe it. I was still Marsh Winchester and the rest of you were Barnettts."

"Well, if that was what worried you it won't much longer. You'll be a Barnett too. Mrs. John Tyler Barnett, how does that sound?"

"It sounds nice."

"Mrs. John Tyler Barnett," said John again. His lips framed each syllable lovingly, "Golly, is it true? You aren't fooling, Marsh Honey?"

"No, I'm not fooling."
Although Brand walked beside them he was not with them. They were enclosed by invisible walls that shut him out. Barnett? Absurd to think that the separation was a thing of names only. One belonged or one did not belong that was all; the name itself made no difference. What was it Biddy had called him long ago? "The cat that walks by himself." Clever Biddy, to realize that when no one else had. He had seemed the dependent one. Marsh and Dix and Sherril, he had bound himself to each of them in turn but the bonds had had no strength. Marsh, the first and the last, their tie had seemed unseverable and yet it too had parted, a rope made out of sand, a chain forged from glittering links of tinfoil. In spite of his insatiable need of other people he had always walked alone. He lifted his chin and stared ahead of him across the far-reaching fields already filmed with green. He had called this place at home, he had loved it with a strange ingrowing passion born of insecurity. For after all it was not his. It could not possess him and become a part of him as it had done with John. He was not a rock lodged in the soil, a tree with its roots deep-growing; a bird rather nesting for the summer and then gone again, a wind that blew for a little while across familiar pastures and then moved on. So he too must soon move on. But where, where?

LXL

John and Marsh decided to be married the last of April. "There's nothing to wait for, is there?" said John. No, there was nothing to wait for but--It was his mother who left the thought on an upward note of interrogation.

"Oh, you're thinking about the place, but I'll fix that so I can get off for ten days or so. Frank will look out for things."

"I'll do what I can," said Brand, "I can take care of the stock, I guess. John nodded, that'll help a lot, and I'll hire Jeff Harris."
He was around last week asking for work. "We need a new hand and with Brand—"
He turned to Brand questioningly.

It was Sunday morning and they were at the breakfast table. Blue and white dishes, beaten biscuits and lamb chops and coffee, honey like translucent sunlight. An air of unhurried calm. Marsh wore a green dress as limp as a lettuce leaf. Her face glowed with a steady unwavering happiness. "Brand will be here," she said. "You'll stay for the summer anyway won't you, Brand?"

"And then back to college in the fall." His mother carried on the thought.

They were arranging his life for him, shaping it according to their own id. But they were wrong. Couldn't they see, didn't they realize that college was over and done with, that he could never go back? College and home, he must shake himself free of them both and start out again on a new course, alone.

"No," he said, "I'm not going back to college and I'm staying here only until you return."

"Not going back to college?" His mother repeated the words slowly, "Not going back?"

"No, I'm through. I couldn't go back there, nothing in the world could make me." With his napkin ring he cut circles in the table cloth. "Don't you see?" He looked at his mother and his voice was suddenly beseeching. "Please don't ask me to. Please don't. I just couldn't. I've written to Holt about a job. I think maybe he can help me, but if he can't well, I'll clear out anyway. I'll get something to do. I won't ask any more of you. You've done so much. I realize all you've done for me and I'd go back if I could, but I can't. Honest. I can't. I can't."

Suddenly John was angry. John who was so rarely angry. He leaped to his feet pushing back his chair. "You've got to go back. That's all there is to it. Over three years and now to quit. What'll you do, I'd like to know? There's not a damn thing you're fitted for."
He turned from John to her. "But, Mother, what if he did? Then John wanted to sell four years ago, I yelped. The place wasn’t worth much then but he stay home and worked like a nigger. Why? So I could go to college. When all the time he was the one who should have gone. Now, now—"

"That’s over," said John, "I stayed home and got what I wanted." His eyes met Marsh’s for an instant. He drew in his breath quickly. "Now it’s for you to get what you want."

"Perhaps I don’t want it. Perhaps I only think I want it because I know now it’s the only thing I ever could have done decently." To their mute questioning he added. "It’s music. I guess it’s always been music only I was too big a fool to realize. I’ve frittered away my time trying different things, thinking I could express myself in some other form, something easier," he laughed. "I’ve always looked for the easiest way, you know."

But he had turned again and again to his music, finding an outlet there, a release that nothing else could give him.

"I thought it was writing," said his mother.

"I thought so too for a while. I kidded myself into thinking it. But it isn’t the same. It’s harsher and stiffer and less expressive. Music’s the only way I could ever say what I want to say. And it’s too late now."

"Why is it too late?" His mother still questioned him.

"Oh because," Brand buttoned and unbuttoned his jacket with nervous fingers. "I’m too old to start in again. Twenty-two. I should have mastered the technique by the time I was twelve or thirteen. As it is I’ll never catch up. It means years of study, thousands of dollars. And who knows? Even if I did try I’d probably fail in the end. I could never be more than a second-rater. A tin pan pianist!"
His mother's mouth quivered softly pulling up at the corners.

"Well laugh, it's true," he stared at her moodily, his eyes divided by the grooves of a frown.

"Of course it's true if you look at it in that way. How can you expect to succeed if you start out with the idea of failure?"

"I'm just showing you how impossible it is."

She leaned toward him. They had forgotten the other two. The combat was single handed. "Nonsense, she said, "It isn't impossible, it's very possible. A great many people have not found what they really wanted until they were years older than you and yet succeed. There's no reason on earth why you couldn't if you made up your mind to it." Her voice softened. "When you were little I hoped it would be music. It seemed your definite talent. Then when you gave it up I was disappointed. But now—"

"But music's different, Mother. You've got to plug away at it from the time you're born almost if you expect to get anywhere. At my age I should be playing in concerts instead of just beginning."

"Suppose then, you never did wholly succeed. Suppose you were only second-rate. Wouldn't you be happier doing that than anything else?"

"Maybe, I don't know. I might hate it, seeing other fellows succeed and getting nowhere myself. I'd probably end by teaching in a jerkwater college."

"And if you go into journalism where will you end?"

"On a jerkwater newspaper I guess." He laughed without humor, "One's as bad as the other, isn't it?"

"No," said his mother, "The one you really enjoy doing is far better."

"But there's the money, you've got to take that into consideration."

John spoke: "We can fix that all right. Your share of the farm. I can either pay you a certain percent of the profits or buy your part outright, whichever you want."
His share of the farm. The one link in the chain that still held firm. His last foothold. With that gone he would indeed stand alone. Suddenly his decision was clear and unalterable, "All right," he said, "you buy the place from me. You can pay me in yearly installments until I have my share. Deduct what I've already cost you and I'll take the balance."

"That's foolishness," said John, "I won't deduct a cent."

"Then I won't take it."

"Brand's right," his mother's voice cut in. "This is business, John, not sentiment."

"Oh well, just as you say."

Brand looked at his mother smiling a little from between half closed lids. "You're going to make a man of me yet, aren't you, Mother?"

Her eyes smiled back into his. "No," she said. "You're going to make a man of yourself. My part's over with."

It was as though quickly and almost painlessly she cut him free, stripped him of his adolescence with one swift movement. His failure or success depended on him now entirely. And that was best.

He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Now we've settled it, I'll write around and find the best place to study and I'll start in practicing. Then when Marsh and John get back I'm off."

He paused in the doorway to look at them. Already they were removed from him, living in a world to which he did not belong. Even his mother. No longer would he come running with his troubles. No longer would Marsh be waiting to straighten out the tangles of his life. Their lives were inextricably woven into the same clear pattern but his followed a design of its own branching away. He smiled, a stiff forcing of his lips upward. "And the cheese stands alone," he said, trying to make his voice flippant and light. He went out closing the door behind him.
It was good to have something definite to do. Some work that he must master day after day, he spent long hours at the piano practicing. Strange but he did not mind the grind. For the first time he found the mere technique of music fascinating. "Oh, it's what I've wanted. It's what I've wanted all along, fool that I was." Perhaps the long period of groping would be a help after all. It made his decision now definite and unchangeable. "I've tried everything else so there's no question about it. This is all."

When he played he forgot all that had gone before, the agony and the relinquishment. He lived for the moment. Sherril was a memory dim and half-obliterated. Marsh a dream that in spite of its tenacity had been only a dream blurring and fading. Moments of course, when he saw her with John's arms about her, when she smiled at him suddenly ignoring the gulf that separated them. A thin stab of pain, a realization of all that he had missed, then his music, the mere mechanical dexterity to be mastered, concentration that allowed no glancing aside or behind. There was room for nothing else.

He was vaguely aware of the stir of preparation about him. Miss Willett, the dressmaker, came from Snow Mountain for five days. She sat in his mother's room cutting and sewing and trying on. The whir of the machine pulsed endlessly through the house. Marsh ran in to show him her new dresses, blue and greens and pale soft lavenders. "Do you like this one, Brand?" She had slipped up behind him unnoticed while he was playing.

He turned from the keyboard to look at her. Clear white, gossamer woven, a spray of petals.

"It's my party dress," she said, "John says it's 'real goodlooking'" She laughed and sighed in the same breath. "John doesn't know what I wear. I might just as well put on an apron and let it go at that."
She had worn a dress like this before, somewhere, somewhere. She had danced with him, her body relaxed and swaying in his arms, the thin petals swirling about her. "Wasn't there another dress? I seem to remember."

"Yes, a little like this one, but the girdle was different and the skirt, cut in sharper points." She sketched the difference with her hands. "I wore it to my first dance at the high school ages ago. Funny you'd remember it.

He had danced with her and then left her after a little while for Claire. Claire's blond head nestled against his shoulder. The breath taking glitter of Claire. "Oh, I remember all sort of things," he said abruptly. His back was to her again. "Very pretty," he called over his shoulder, "Very prett indeed."

She went out of the room without a word and he sat still staring at the piano keys, feeling pain surge up in him, a heavy numbing ache that for a moment would not be downed. "Oh, I mustn't think of this. I must forget it." Scales Mental cocaine to deaden the ache. Over and over. The unfailing response between brains and fingers. The quick coordination that left no room for thought. He plunged into his playing with renewed determination.

LXIII

Marsh had written to Biddy asking her to come home for the wedding, and Biddy had replied, a formal little note. "I don't believe I can get there because of my classes, but I hope you and John will be very happy."

Marsh showed the letter to Brand. "John and I are so disappointed," she said. "There are only a few people we really want and Bid's one of them. Don't you think she could get off?"

--He was standing on the campus watching Biddy stride away from him.

Suddenly she turned and came back. "Have you heard from John?" She flushed
slowly. Bid and John, he had thought. How obviously right after all. But it had not been right. They had been fooled both of them. He handed the letter back to Marsh. "Let me write and see if I can persuade her."

"Maybe if we asked Mrs. Kemp—"

"No, he said decidedly, "let me write first."

In his room that night he wrote to her. The lamp beside him was turned low. The flame, a ragged yellow leaf, wavered and cast shadow across the paper.

"Dear Bid: Marsh and John are pretty much cut up because you won't come home and help form a background for their show. I wish you would come, selfishly, perfectly selfishly, because as a rejected suitor I need moral support and you're the one who can give it. Maybe you will change your mind under those conditions. We can go through it together somehow, can't we? I don't want to flunk out again and I'm apt to without any bolstering.

Brand."

Once more he was playing the dependent but this time it was only play. If Bid did not come he would face the show alone and get through in some fashion. But if Marsh wanted her—Strange how important it had become that Marsh should have what she wanted. "I wonder if I'm really growing up at last," he thought. "Two decent lies to my credit after all those others. But I better not start crowing."

Biddy wrote that she would come. Brand smiled slightly, reading the letter. Even a hint that she was a quitter and she was up in arms. Was that it, or was she coming to protect him?" The thought made him squirm inwardly. "Well, I implied it myself, didn't I? It's what I wanted, hateful as it is."

Now that she knew that she was coming he struggled with conflicting emotions. He wanted to see Bid. He could not bear ever to see her again, all the memories that she would awaken, all the old agony. "I've got to go
He drove the Ford into Snow Mountain to meet her train. The day before the wedding. It was good to get away from the ceaseless flurry of preparation. Mrs. Kemp had run over to help. Biddy grown older, competent and brisk and decided. Light hair turning slowly to gray, a compact body moving surely but without grace. She looked at Brand over an armful of heaped lilac plumes. "I'm glad you're going. I'm a sight. It would take me half an hour to clean up. Suppose you bring Biddy right here."

"I shall, as fast as Elizabeth will carry me."

He made the five miles to the station in ten minutes fixing his eyes steadily on the road ahead of him. If he drove fast and straight there would be time to think. No time. No time. When he had last seen Biddy—He swerved aside to let a farm wagon creak past. He was glad to be alone, to meet her alone after—Watch out for that culvert. The car jounced over. Perhaps if Mrs. Kemp had come it would have been easier. What would he say? Oh, forget about it. Keep your mind on the road. Slow up for the curve. He might—

The main street of the little town was already thick with dust, misty gold in the sunlight. Shop doors stood open. Children coming home from school stared after him. Three blocks straight ahead, two to the right and then the depot. Already five or six automobiles were drawn up at the platform. The town taxi, a dilapidated Ford touring car, waited hopefully for passengers. Half-a-dozen men lounged against the station walls talking about nothing. A travelling man with his sample cases about him looked at his watch and then up the track. A minute now. A half minute. Good lord, what would he say? Think of something quick. Anything. Suddenly the train was in and there was no time for thinking.
Five people got off. A woman and a little girl, an old man, a young man and Biddy. "Hello, Brand." She held out her hand to him, "Here I am." Her blue eyes looked into his for an instant and then away. "See who I picked up and brought along."

The young man was beside her, poised and half-confident, carefully tailored. Who in the dickens?

"You don't mean to say you've forgotten me?"

"Oh Lee, good lord."

It was Lee. Strange not to have recognized him, but he had changed. The awkward overgrown boy was gone and in his place a man, quietly assured, completely at ease. "I'm glad to see you again, Brand."

"You too, Lee." Their places were reversed. Brand, shy and self-conscious searched desperately for words. "You're looking awfully well," he said at last lamely.

"I? Oh splendid." They moved toward the car.

"Here, put your bags in back. There's no room for anything but us in the seat." He felt himself making unnecessary gestures, flourishing his arms, jerking at the door of the car to pull it open. "I'm behaving like a six-year-old," he told himself, trying to show off before the company. He glanced at Lee across Biddy's shoulder. The cut of his blue suit, the fold of tie, inconspicuously right. "He looks so uncompromisingly adult," he thought miserably, "as if there wasn't a childish streak left in him. He's so sure of himself he can forget himself."

They were in the car now, driving through the streets of the town. Biddy between them was silent following some thought of her own. Lee talked, the clipped precision of a business man's voice, accustomed to quick decisions, accustomed to being heard. "I had to run down to Washington on business so I decided to take a few more days and drop in on Bid. She persuaded me to come here."
"I'm glad she did. John and Harsh will be delighted."

"I was home last fall, you know, after you had gone back to college."

"Yes, Mother wrote me." His little stiff formal sentences ended definitely giving Lee no opening. But Lee did not seem to mind. He went on talking easily, lightly, filling in the gaps with his own voice.

"Bid tells me you've been ill." He leaned forward to peer at Brand.

"You don't look up to the mark. What was it?"

"Pneumonia."

"Are you feeling fairly fit again?"

"Oh yes."

Biddy's eyes turned to study him, a long searching look. "You're thinner."

"Maybe a little, but I'm alright. Talk about something else, please."

Lee smiled. "You've change evidently. You used to like personalities. I remember a game we played once. You gave me a good crack and Biddy rushed in like a cyclone to defend me." He laughed without rancor seeming to find the past that they had shared too remote to be of any real significance. "I must of been a complete ass in those days."

"Why?" Biddy slipped her arm through his.

"Oh, just the usual adolescent foolishness. Brand here, I used to worship him. Copied everything he did. No wonder you rebelled, Brand." He laughed again softly, reminiscently. "I suppose most kids go through that period, then they out-grow it."

Some out-grow it and some didn't. Lee had slowed it off definitely. Now he remember and grin. But it wasn't so damn funny to the adolescent himself. And if one never quite grew up, moments of painful regression just when one thought one had a last solidified. "Some of us are perpetual adolescent," he said shortly.
"What?"

"Oh nothing." He swerved the car between the tall gate-posts into the drive. "Here we are." At his side he felt Biddy stiffen suddenly. He looked down at her noticing her mouth tight at the corners, her whole pose of rigid self-control. His fingers closed over hers for an instant reassuringly. "I'm darn glad you came, Bid," he said. At Lee's surprised glances he added, "I asked her to come. Moral support. I always need buttressing."

He was at ease again. A swift chameleon change. He felt Biddy's body relax. She drew in her breath softly and smiled at him. "I'm sort of glad myself," she said.

LXIV

They were glad to see Lee, amazed and delighted for a clamorous moment. "This is a surprise. Now the wedding party's complete.« Pain wrenched Brand's heart before the memory flooded his mind. Complete? Without Sherry? She would have loved it so. All the silly endless preparations, the frothing excitement. He caught Biddy's eyes and knew that she too remembered.

Marsh and John moved in a world apart, scarcely touched by the babble and hum around them. "You might think it was my wedding for all the attention they pay," Edith Barnett said with sudden exasperation. I've spoken to John three times and he hasn't heard a word. Brand will you call Dr. Morse and tell him—

He passed John and Marsh on his way to the telephone. Their hands fluttered apart and they smiled at him with dazed eyes. It was strange that two people could live in the same house year after year calmly and unemotionally, and then be caught like this, drugged, almost unaware of any existence outside of their own. A tingling electric shock leaped from them to him,
But Lee kept on, "That sounds sensible. I remember your playing and I've wondered now and then why you gave it up. I heard Rachmaninoff in New York last winter."

"Did you? I've never heard him. I'll have a chance for such things next year perhaps."

"You're coming to New York?"

"Yes, I'm going to study with Brunacchi."

Lee put down his fork. "You're amazing as ever," he said, "Not a word all this time. It's just by chance I dragged it out of you." He turned to Mrs. Barnett. "I suppose if I hadn't asked point blank he'd never have told me. Simply come on to New York and not even looked me up."

"Some of us would have told you, certainly." She looked from Lee to Brand smiling a little. "You see Brand only decided a day or two ago."

"Well, I'm awfully glad. You'll let me know when you come, won't you, Brand? I'll help you settle."

"Thanks, that's good of you."

"I know some interesting people you like to meet. For instance--"

Lee's voice was lost in his own mental wandering. He was aware only of Biddy's profile, the tight line of her lips. "She thinks I'm a quitter," he told himself miserably, "backing out again, running away. I've got to make her see it isn't that. It isn't all that. I wonder if I can get her to understand you?"

After supper he caught Biddy alone in the Hall. "Come for a walk, won't you?"

She hesitated looking at him squarely. "What for?"

"I want to talk to you."

"But I can help here."

"Oh no you can't. There's not much to be done now, and anyway I won't keep you long."
"I won't be a damn bit more fitted for anything when I finish college for that matter. College isn't a vocational school. It's simply a place to find out what you like or don't like."

"And you have managed to do that?" John voice quivered with rage. "Have you?" Suddenly the anger that had gripped him died down. "Oh hell he said, "what a fool I'm making of myself." He dropped back into his chair knees spread apart, his head resting on his hands, "I'm sorry Brand."

"I'm sorry too," Brand fought down a rising sickness. A silly spectacle. A silly childish scene, inexcusable and vulgar. "Yes, he said slowly, "I've found what I want to do, I guess. By the process of elimination. Only it's too late now. If I'd known five years ago even but— Since it's too late I take what I can get and make the best of it."

"What was it, the other thing?" Marsh leaned forward resting her elbow on the table.

"Oh nothing."

"Please, it's only fair to tell us."

"If it's a question of money," said John, "You know a half of the farm belongs to you."

"I think I've pretty well got my share already, more than my share."

"Not by a long shot you haven't. The place has doubled in value during the last three years."

"Due to your hard work not mine. I haven't done a lick."

"Land's gone up around here," said John, "My work hasn't had as much to do with it as much as you think. Anyway it isn't like I was giving you something; it's yours."

"It is yours, Brand," said his mother, "Grandfather Tyler left it to you two boys."
including him for a vibrant moment, then only a great emptiness as Marsh turned back to John shutting him out. "If she could only look at me like that. If I'd been the one." His blind hand groped for the receiver.

Lee and Biddy stayed for supper. Mrs Kemp went home. "I'll come back afterwards," she said, "But Will is away and I better be there to see them do their work."

"Shan't I come along, Mother?" Lee asked.

"No, you stay. There's nothing you can do."

Supper was a hasty picked-up meal. "A table-full of smuts," said Edith Barnett apologetically. "I hope you all get enough."

"Mrs. Barnett, smuts! With these muffins." Lee helped himself to fourth, a fifth. "If you knew how I've longed for this sort of food after months of restaurants." He sat opposite Brand. The light from the hanging lamp shone on his blond hair making of it a smooth satin surface. His heavy brows lifted when he spoke.

Biddy was only a half-seen profile down the table, a snubbed nose, a small firm chin. She ate silently keeping her eyes fixed on her plate. Across from her John and Marsh sat close together scarcely touching their Food. Under the table Brand knew their hands clung palm to palm.

"You'll finish at the U. next year, I suppose, Brand?" said Lee. A politely indifferent question.

Brand cleared his throat before he answered, "No, I'm not going back."

He was aware of Biddy's head turning slowly until she faced him, fork suspended her eyes stretched wide.

"What are you going to do then?" she asked.

"I'm going on with my music."

"I though you'd given that up long ago."

"I had, but now I'm starting in again."

"I see." She dropped it definitely, the line of her profile once more nose and chin and dropped lids.
"Well, wait till I get my coat."

They were out of doors. A still dark night without a moon, the stars clear and far away like glittering silver chips against the black background of the sky. The trees were only deeper shadows, formless, drained of all color.

"Where shall we go?" He stooped a little trying to see her face.

"Why not sit here, if you really want to talk? There's no sense stumbling around in the dark and getting nowhere."

"All right." They sat side by side on the porch step. Their eyes were stretched to the blackness. Behind them the light in the living room gleamed suddenly flinging a warm splotch of gold against the night.

"Well," said Biddy, "you said you wanted to talk?"

"I do, but you make it so hard."

"I don't see why. I'm not doing anything."

"No, you're not, except stiffening up inside so my words can't get through."

"That's nonsense. I'm perfectly limber." She moved her body, spread out her hands, "See?"

"Don't be so damn literal," he said impatiently, "I'm talking about your mind."

"She laughed faintly, "What am I to do? Perform some sort of mental gymnastic so you'll know that's limber too?" She sighed and slumped forward. "Go on, Brand, I'll listen. I guess I'm not up to gymnastics tonight."

He was suddenly aware of her weariness, a strange enveloping lassitude as though supporting bands within her haddsnapped. "No," he said, "Your dead tired. I'm going to mull around telling you about myself now."
As his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness it had lifted a little. He could see Biddy's face, flat-white, turned to his.

"Go ahead," she said. "I want you to. Perhaps I'll stop thinking about myself listening to you. What's the matter, Brand?"

His fingers clamped about his knees. "It's nothing much except--oh, I don't want you to think I'm a quitter because,-- because I'm not coming back to college. It's not like that, I mean, it's not all that."

She nodded slightly. "I wouldn't blame you if that was the only reason. I guess I knew that you couldn't all along, only I hadn't thought about it. I've been too busy thinking about myself lately for much else."

"I thought you never thought about your self. I mean feeling around inside as I do."

"I don't believe I ever did much before. I was always damn busy doing things. When when Sherry died I began to muddle around and when Marsh wrote--" She bit off the sentence abruptly and started again. "If you've been doing that all your life you must had a hell of a time. No wonder you--"

"No wonder I made a fool of myself again and again." His voice sharp and thin finished the sentence for her, "I have had a hell of a time, thanks to my own foolishness. But that doesn't matter, it's--I've made other people have a hell of a time too, Bid."

"Yes, of course, that's what would happen, Sherril--well, I guess I contributed to that."

"You?"

"Yes, if I'd understood the two of you I might have helped some. But I didn't. After she died I began to see things but not before."

"I've been seeing a good many things myself since then."

"I imagine you have."
"I came running home just as I always do," he went on slowly. "And then I was sick for a while and I had to think. There wasn't anything else to do. Then—well, something happened and my vanity took another flop. I began to see what an awfully dependent creature I was, always having to be propped up by someone. I—I made up my mind to try to stand alone."

He twisted a button on his jacket until suddenly it broke loose and spun away in the darkness. "I guess you don't think I've succeeded very well, sending you an S. O. S. to come help me through the wedding."

"You did that for me," said Biddy.

"For you?"

"Yes, you know I'd hate myself forever afterwards, if I played quitter"

"No," he said "I did want you, honest. And—I wanted Marsh and to be happy."

"I see. Well, I guess she's happy enough. She and John. Even if I hadn't come."

"You did come though."

"Oh, I came." The arm brushing his trembled slightly, she gasped. "I—I—Oh damn, what's the matter with me tonight anyway?" She ran her wrist angrily across her eyes. "Talk about fools," she said fiercely.

He did not know what to say and so he said nothing, staring straight before him into the darkness.

"There, that's ever said Biddy at last, "I'm all right now."

She straightened and pushed her hair back from her eyes. "Tell me about you Brand. You're going on with your music, and then what?"

"And then what?" His voice was an echo, faint, half-smothered, "God knows," he said, "if I make a go of it, well and good. If I don't---Start over at the beginning again, I suppose. Find another prep some place. Go around in my little grewe and get nowhere, just keep on going."
"Like a caterpillar in the pine processional," said Biddy, "'Round and 'round."

"Perhaps I'll surprise you and go in a straight line."

"It would be kind of a surprise; you never have so far."

"Well, that doesn't mean I never will. Golly, you might be a little encouraging instead of flattening me out right at the start. I'll show you yet."

"All right show me." Biddy giggled. "I'd like to see." A mounting cresendo of laughter drowned the words.

"What's so darned amusing about that?" The old stiffening and tightening of his nerves, the old defensive alertness.

"N-nothing," she spoke in gasps between shaking bursts of laughter,

"Nothing it-- just struck me funny."

"What?"

"You," she said, "you and me." She mopped at her eyes with a crumpled handkerchief. "The whole thing, don't you see? You say one thing and when I agree with you you get mad."

"Well, laugh if you want."

"I--I can't help it. It is funny if you'd once get it. Us sitting out here screeching and then consoling each other like a chorus of rejected suitors. You starting in again at the beginning. Both of us so serious about ourselves. Thinking what we think is so darned important."

"I don't see--" he began again. And then to his astonishment he did see. For the first time, the very first time. He had told himself before that he was funny but he had been serious even in the telling. It had been simply an attitude he had struck. A young-man-amused-at-himself attitude, the proper behavior for a hero. Now suddenly he saw Brand Barnett a comic figure, playing a comic part with the most solemnity, charging
a windmill and thinking it an army with banners, stalking pompously in a circle
He was seized by an incorrigible mirth. It began deep within him and mounted
growing in strength and power until his body and mind were gripped and
shaken helplessly. Peal after peal of clear laughter. "Oh, good lord, good
lord!"

Biddy's little bubbling giggle blended with his. "I didn't think
you'd see it. I was scared you'd---" words spilled over each other hurrying
to be said.

"I didn't at first. Then all of a sudden. Golly, what a joke I am.
What a darn big joke." His voice rose to a gusty shout. "All these years
and I never---"

The door behind them opened flooding them with light. They turned to-
ward it blinking. Their lips still twitched uncontrollably.

"What in the world are you two laughing about?" said Marsh. She stood
with one arm raised resting against the door-frame. "Come tell us the
joke? We're all dying with curiosity."

Somehow they had scrambled to their feet and were beside her. She
looked from one to the other half smiling, "What was it?"

"Oh nothing," Brand fought back a mounting spasm of mirth. "Something
Bid and I---"

"A private joke," said Biddy, "Nobody else---" She giggled again and
pressed her hand to her lips.

"Well, if you're going to be selfish," said Marsh.

"It isn't that, it's--- Brand's hand touched her shoulder for an
instant, an unconscious brotherly pat. "If we told it it wouldn't be funny
anymore, would it, Bid? It's just that I've got a new slant on things."

"All right, keep it to yourselves then. But you've got to get to
work now. All the wedding cake's still to be boxed and tomorrow at twelve---"

"Tomorrow at twelve you'll become Mrs. John Tyler Barnett, sister of
Brand Barnett, the greatest--"

"The greatest-what?"

"Finish it for yourself, he said, "Words fail me."

But she had forgotten him. John's voice,—"Marsh, where are you?"
Already she was gone.

At the door of the living-room Brand caught Biddy's arm. "Wait, we've got to do this thing properly. Enter chorus of rejected suitors."

"Enter chorus of rejected suitors," Biddy repeated. She lifted her head and grinned at him. "Gee, Brand, you're sort of a good egg after all," she said.

THE END.