

Hunter of Doves

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The man had vanished. He was dead. Now he seemed in peril of a double death for the work that should have left his image clear was to be, it seemed, the exact medium that would forever blur him. His time, the elements in which he had had his chance, was already hopelessly muddled. The past had become the inglorious present and with it, her friend and his intention. Mrs. Heath, who had been the dead man's friend in life, did not want any share in this betrayal. The danger was that no one intended to betray. There was nothing in the ingenuous face of the young man seated on the terrace of her house in the country to indicate that. His was a mute expression of rapt interest, of devotion to the dead man and his works. The expression even implied rites of purification and announced himself as the true Gabriel who would trumpet forth the connection between the dead man, Alec Barber, and the living works of the dead author, Noel Bartram.

It was no secret that Barber had taken the name of Bartram. The cipher concealed a further enigma, not so well known, hiding the actual difficult name of his birth. So her friend had triply buried himself and behind his several masks had slipped on the final mask that dying bestowed.

She tried to focus on the visitor. Surely, he was too youthful. He must have been a mere brat in the 'thirties when Noel Bartram was writing the three short novels that were the sum of his art. Youth was well and good, but did it not seek first of all to serve itself? The eyes — were they actually truthful or only self-consciously determined to look trusting? They gazed at her with almost embarrassing steadiness, offering all, and made her feel infantile, too trusting herself, as she had felt long ago when she held tightly to the hand of her father who was gravely interpreting the expression in the melting eyes

of the great dog. “See, he wants to speak,” her father had said, and she had placed her own hand on the creature’s head, pressing the bony structure beneath the mat of hair. What had the dog been imploring so earnestly? Surely for more than a bone. That her mind was running to doggy analogies made her lips twitch in a jerk of a smile and she brought her hand up to her mouth roughly to rub away the threat. For all his angelic appearance, the young man on the terrace was a gravedigger. But there would be no earthen pots, no beads, no beautiful flasks for the feast of the dead, no solemn ceremonies with stately folds to give off definite pungent clues to former existence. No, for her friend there would be nothing but a rag bag of recollections culled from a medley of individuals, some of whom had barely had a speaking acquaintance with the dead man and who now waxed loquacious simply because they scented a chance to get their own names in print. The huge sheaf of notes on the young man’s knee testified to his industry, but to what else? Were they more than rags, to be pinned to her friend’s tree of life, to flutter in the wind and even to conceal the branches and the fruit?

The vision of an actual tree was suddenly so strong that Mrs. Heath seemed to see it, with all its quivering leaves, and her dead friend stepping softly around it and past it, headed for some high grassed meadow, in his old trousers deliberately shabby for the hunt, weaving his long legs through the tobacco- and rust-colored tufts, the dead thistles shaking stiff purplish manes, the milkweed pods bursting to fatten another summer, and the man himself, with gun slanted, and his dog— ah, always a dog — after the elusive bird that was forever on the wing.

Noel Bartram had been a poor hunter, until the very last, when he went after and brought down doves.

Would she be able to make the young man on the terrace with his sweet-scented name — Timothy Comfort — realize the importance of the doves?

Not deer, not even rabbits, but doves. And whatever had become of the bookplate she had made for Noel, fashioned in a fine Spencerian tradition, with elegant whirls within whirls spiraling away from his initials, N. B., cunningly contrived within a mask, and the doves all finely drawn and on the wing, dipping and soaring toward the four comers of the winds! Possibly his sister, Nora, now had it, locked away in a secret drawer, though she might very well use it for very own. Who else had a greater right? The tall, slim creature, with the birdlike head, might have been his twin. She had even married a man with a last name beginning with a B, as if to say, as I am, so shall I ever be. And her husband, Joel Baker, had been Noel's friend in college. His inseparable friend.

If Timothy Comfort had any idea of the importance of Nora as a clue to Noel, he did not show it. He was famously pleased to be enmeshed with the Baker pair. They had blessed his enterprise with a list of names, many of them glamorous, and some of the reflection from the glossier reputations seemed to have gilded the young man himself. He sat in a glow that was positively a little feverish, certain of his ability to interpret the dead man's work in the proper spirit. A definitive edition of the three novels was to come out in an omnibus, and it did seem odd that, of all people to undertake the task, Timothy Comfort, who had never written a line for publication, should have been given the privilege of writing an introduction. For a brief second it seemed almost sinister.

Writing was not Mrs. Heath's medium. She had to think of the situation in her own terms and she could not imagine turning an unfamiliar into Klee's studio, for instance, and expecting such a person, however well intentioned, to make anything of the table littered with shells, a skate's egg, bits of dried moss, a piece of coral, fragments of textiles. The inner watching that was the core of Klee's work would be concealed from such an eye, no matter how electrically awake. The inner necessity that was the way out for Klee, needed inner watching to detect, and a gift, yes, a gift was also needed for detection. One should not approach the ark with the intention to riffle for

one's own glory. That led to nothing except the rough smashing of the ancient vase to find the hidden gold bracelet. And for another moment, she looked at the innocent young man, gloomily, as she hoped she would have looked at Cortez had she been an Aztec with the prescience to foresee the intention behind that white-god smile.

Timothy Comfort was speaking. Not of Noel Bartram, she realized, but of himself. It almost seemed that he intended to lead her on by confiding his own secrets, and by spilling them out, unhand her. But again, he might be just another tiresome young man, pinned, as they all seemed to be, like dead butterflies to their own tedious histories. There seemed so little honeycomb to most of them, and at the image of honeycomb a terrible nostalgia for all the richness that living could impart made her want to shake the young intruder out of his self-satisfied preoccupation. Not that it had the appearance of self-satisfaction. For he was going into his own immediate past, dressing it up with a sort of anguish, trying to make himself appear a suitable counterpart to the anguished persons in Noel Bartram's fiction. Persons? *Were* they persons? In memory no individual stood out from Noel Bartram's novels, no Madame Bovary and no Julien Sorel. But it would be more to the point to ask if there was even an Underground Man, for, of all writers, Dostoevsky, had been Noel's great obsession. But the underground man of Dostoevsky's story had an entity so real that though she could not remember if he had even been given a name, she could feel all too vividly his agitation, his frustration and despair. No one person in Noel's works had so alarming an identity. In a sense, he had used masks of persons, and in somewhat the same way that the painter Ensor had used them. Sometimes Ensor used a mask as a still life — and so did Bartram. But what Ensor did that was distinctive was to emphasize the mask in its temporary and dangling detachment from man, killing the actor and giving life to the mask. Masks superseded their wearers and virtually had a life of their own and in giving them such a life, Ensor seemed to recapture the transfigured spirit in which masks were regarded by primitive tribes. The inanimate mask became more vivid than the shadow-person and in thinking this, Mrs. Heath found

herself wondering at the connection between Ensor and those Italian painters who replaced kings with cabbages as rulers of a world of dreams.

And just what or who had ruled the Bartram dream world? For his created world had the nightmare quality of an intense dream.

Even his animals had goblin natures. The fighting cock denuded of feathers with one eye banging like a bloody button against the stained, struggling satin vest of a dying matador. The donkey with only one ear and that one perked stiff as a tin trumpet. The malicious parrot and its eternal seed-dropping, as sinister as the drip of icy water on some chained victim in a dank dungeon. As for his people, did one remember the girl with the wooden leg or only her leg, its cork covered with a fine silk stocking? It was Mr. Matucchi's shoes that haunted you, concealing with their elegance, bunions and broken arches. Oh, oh, what a procession winding toward some Calvary!

Now Timothy Comfort had folded up his own story, tucked it neatly, one might say, into some pocket, like a handkerchief. The edges barely stuck out. The war, yes, of course, the war had got him down. A marriage; it had already gone on the rocks. But he seemed to be involved with a Number Two, if one could judge by a secretive smile, delicious to see, and a reference, offhand, to someone called Ann. Ann had wanted dreadfully to meet her. Ann was a great friend of Mrs. Talbot's and it was Mrs. Talbot who had introduced him to Noel Bartram's work with so shattering an effect that he could not rest until he had persuaded Bartram's publishers to revive the novels, that, since the man was dead, were beginning to make a noise. Not that they had not had an underground reputation for years among those "in the know" but now it was, time for them to get a wider airing. Of course, Joel Baker held the key. As a friend, a brother-in-law and literary executor, nothing could be accomplished without him. He had been helpful, up to a point. Timothy's chin sank into his collar thoughtfully and Mrs. Heath,

determined to steer clear of talk about the Bakers, tacked briskly with, “I wish Bessie Talbot would give me back my book.” She frowned into her glass, now drained of a weak bourbon, and found herself very nearly angry with Bessie Talbot. “She took it right off my shelves. That’s the way books disappear.”

Timothy Comfort laughed outright. He gave himself up to it; you could see laughter rippling through his body, under his clothes. His look was compassionate and humorous and once again she had the amazing sensation of feeling childlike, confiding and almost putty. “After seeing all those people,” she muttered crossly, irritated that she had almost been swept into confidence by nothing more substantial than youthful charm, “I don’t see what I can add.”

“Oh, but everything,” said Timothy Comfort, and she had to admit the boy had a pleasing voice. “Everything. I left you toward the last on purpose. I wanted to get rid of the trivia first. One can’t neglect anything.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Mrs. Heath. “I see you've got Parker Grainger on your list. In my opinion, you could very well neglect him, with profit.”

“So I found out,” and once more the young man seemed to embrace her as he smiled. “I doubt if he is ever sober long enough to accumulate a memory. He had anecdotes but I had the feeling that they were like those stories soldiers bring back from the war, something that happened to someone else. In fact, I trapped him in just such a fib. He tried to palm off a tale about himself and Bartram driving a droshky down Broadway at two a.m.. I finally tracked it down to Bob Colt and a trumpet-player who had used the vehicle to transport records. Bartram wasn’t even there.”

“There you are,” cried Mrs. Heath. “Nothing is reliable except the work. People either want to read or they don’t. You can find Noel Bartram, perhaps more than you like, right there, in his novels, if you take the trouble. Or have the sense. The intuitive sense,” she added in a threatening mutter.

He wasn’t offended. Far from it. He leaned toward her sadly with so appealing a confidence that she almost feared he intended to lay his head upon her breast. She drew back stiffly and put on a stern expression. For a second it was so still that the murmur of the brook over stones was clear as a bird’s trill. Timothy’s head had dropped and when he lifted it, he had the orphaned look of his generation. His eyes seemed to implore her not to block the path that he was seeking toward some homeland. Don’t be a crow trying to steal robins’ eggs; help me to hatch them and to fly.

How difficult it was. She put her hand, helplessly, before her eyes. And how thrilling. And brought the hand down abruptly with a warm smile. Wasn't there some way to make this boy feel the amazing texture, the complication, so that he would not fall for the appearance of things? To listen, instead, for the moment of silence when the bird spoke. But the young were in such a hurry, such a panic. Back they tripped into the past, looking for the glossy hillside, the striped awning, the champagne bucket. Reading Scott Fitzgerald like a bible; fancying the lost ‘twenties had been one long round of pleasure; desperadoes, dancing at the Rita, playing tennis along the Riviera; driving a high-powered car with maddening speed and one arm around a beautiful damned girl. There was something about Timothy Comfort’s well-made clothes and the neatness of his really good tie that disheartened her in the same way that she had been dampened by Noel Bartram’s Brooks Brothers suits. In her young days — also in the ‘twenties, but oh, how different from the legend — all that had seemed less important. Though, of course, she had to admit that it was easier then to get to Paris on a shoestring.

“I realize my limitations,” Timothy said in a subdued voice. “That’s why I need your help so much. I really do.” And once more, he seemed about to east himself upon her like some lost child. “But why, why?” she heard herself answer; hypocritically, really, for of course she knew why. He did need help. Even an Etruscan tomb needs a guide to the prancing horsemen. And at least she might keep him from a magnetized glare upon the Paris phase of Bartram’s life that had been little more than a kindergarten for what had followed. But all these young people bummed and buzzed about the ’twenties and Paris. You might think the period had been the garden spot of creation instead of the anteroom to horror.

“When I read your letters to Bartram,” said Timothy, in the tone of voice that implied a compliment, ‘I knew you could tell me more of what I needed to know than anyone else. Not counting his sister or Joel Baker, of course.’” Mrs. Heath felt her cheeks burning with a flame of resentment but she laughed it off, with a snort and an abrupt gesture that might have been a restrained slap. “I should think I might have been consulted before my letters were handed around. Who was so liberal as to give them to you?”

“They were among his papers. Nora gave me a big bundle of letters to him. Almost everything he had kept except letters from his wife, and from what I know of him, I am certain he must have written her and she to him, even though they both lived in Hollywood those last years. Of course, his to her would be better. But there wasn't a trace of them, Nora said.” The way he put it made it fairly certain that there had been letters, stacks of them, and that Timothy knew it.

“But he was married for a year before the end. Do you think he wrote his wife then, even though they lived in the same house?”

“He might have, and anyhow he must have written her in the year before they married, even though they were in the same town. Why, you know he did. I know I do. I have, I mean. Write letters. You fall in love and if you are a writer, and perhaps freer writing than you would be in speech, or at any rate more egotistic about it, sort of congratulating yourself on the turn of a phrase, you simply write notes, you have to. It’s one way to break through. Get in, you know.” From a certain desperate tension around his mouth, Mrs. Heath knew that he did know what he was talking about and she looked at him with genuine interest.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. But if it comes to letters, I should think the ones that would be most important would be the letters he must have written his sister. What about them?”

“Oh, those,” and Timothy waved his hand in a futile gesture. “Wherever they are, I haven’t seen them and probably won’t. Nora has them, I suppose, unless she has burned them.”

“You think she has burned them?”

“Why not? Wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t ask me,” said Mrs. Heath. “I’m a hoarder. My attic is filled with letters. There’s something primitive about it; like ancient peoples who saved parings of nails, bits of hair, as though these fragments had power over the soul. All those letters, penned up, like so many pigeons, cooing, screaming, why do I keep them? Perhaps I am hoping that time will exhaust them and when I come to look at them again, they will be little more than the pearly skeletons of something I had loved.”

“But you haven’t a Joel Baker in the house,” said Timothy, shrewdly. “No,” said Mrs. Heath. “I haven’t a Joel Baker.”

There was a long silence. “What are you thinking?” asked Timothy, leaning toward her with an ingratiating smile that implied they had been thinking the same thought.

“I wasn’t thinking,” said Mrs. Heath. “I was seeing. I was seeing Joel Baker in the elevator, late at night, in that hotel where Noel had an apartment on the top floor. I knew the Bakers lived in the same hotel but I had never met either of them. Going up late one night, I saw this man standing in the elevator, with a dog, a big-muzzled dog with a handsome head, and the man shrunk back into a corner, aloof and apart, apart from himself, you might say, simply cut off from the world. He had the dog on a leash, and, in a sense, he had himself on a leash. There might have been three of them in the place, not two. I knew it was Baker; I recognized the dog that had once been in Bartram’s place when I was there. The man stood so far away, though he was only two feet from me, his aloof face as haughty as something engraven on an old tomb. I don’t know why I liked him, instantaneously, but I did. Not a handsome face, but oddly ugly, implying a kind of central intensity that is, for me, the greatest attraction there is. But then they all had it — Baker, Nora and Bartram. I looked at him but he didn’t deign to look at me, that is, not directly. Out of a corner of his eye, he was sort of sizing me up. And I liked that, too; anything is better than being ignored. Without curiosity, what are we? Mere muffins.”

“You see?” Timothy almost crowed. “Now you are vindicating all my own curiosity about Bartram. Aren’t you? And you will help?”

He had her there; she had to admit it. At the same time, she had no notion how ably the young man might use a gratified curiosity. There was

something about him that made him seem altogether inappropriate for the task. Was that, perhaps, the very reason that he had been given the privilege; so that he might fail?

“I don’t know that I believe in all this goring and prying. You can see all there is to see in Van Gogh’s painting; it wasn’t necessary to broadcast the fact that he cut off one of his own ears.”

“Then you think that Bartram...”

“No, I don’t,” snapped Mrs. Heath, getting to her feet and brushing wholly imaginary crumbs from her lap. “Noel Bartram was as sane a man as you will ever meet. You’d know, if you had ever laid eyes on him. He had a difficult, tortuous underground life; it’s all there in his work; in a nightmare world. In a way, he was writing an American journey into a Siberia of the human spirit. His people, if you can call them that, were lopped-off criminals or impaled saints. Exiles, every one of them. Surrounded, moreover, by crucified animals. But if you think he was cracked, or, for that matter, a tough kind of character, you’re wrong. He was very gentle, soft spoken. If he shot doves--he loved them.”

She was a little breathless and obscurely angry. “I don’t know why I should go into this I really don’t.”

“I do,” said Timothy. “I need to know and you are the one to help me. I won’t get anything from the Bakers, that’s certain. Maybe I can’t use what I discover. But I ought to know more than I do. It isn’t as if I had ever met Bartram.”

“Perhaps it wouldn’t have informed you if you had. Look at the mess of anecdotes you’ve picked up. Do they inform you?”

“No,” said Timothy. “Window dressing.”

“If I help you, it’s Bartram I’m helping. I loved the man.” And pacing a moment on the terrace energetically in what seemed to Timothy a most characteristic stride, she suddenly whirled on him and made a grimace. “There, I’ve caught you with that silly expression on your face. Our imaginations are so limited, life so narrowed, that the second one uses the word love, the image of a bed leaps up. Don’t deny it. It wasn’t anything like that, not at all. For one thing I was married and to a man I adored. I’m not sure that Bartram didn’t adore him too. It always seemed odd that after we separated, my husband and I, I never again saw Bartram with the same sense of ease.”

The young man had risen and now puckered his forehead with the evident intent to appear knowing. His mind was racing in the under- brush and a faint glow illuminated his face. He had the Noel Bartram look on an autumn day with haze over the valley and bright sunlight on the hills, the smell of burning brush pungent and sharp, and the spotted dog tense and silky with the shine of hope, his tail a divining rod that quivered delicately, feelingly as he moved, muzzle down. “Well,” she said, placing a hand on the young man’s arm. “Think about it. And I’ll give myself over to remembering a little and see what I bring up. Then we’ll meet again. Or I’ll write you. That might be best.”

“Think about the doves, for instance?” asked Timothy with the eagerness of one who hopes to please.

“Yes, the doves. An ancient bird. Not only the dove of the Holy Ghost and the Annunciation but that other dove, deeper back, primitive, urgent, the dove of Aphrodite.” She spoke the words softly as if she were using a brush and the best paint and had made a broad stroke that would not need to be defined further.

The young man let out a little whistling breath that was intended for comprehension but emerged as something inept and silly. What would he make of the thing? There was no knowing. When she thought of the Bakers, of their subtlety, cleverness and strength, young Timothy seemed little more than a tool who would take the wax and make the exact image that would best satisfy them. Them? No, they would be two separate entities, husband and wife, and their union would be in a jealous guarding of their secret.

As for the secret itself, its nature, its substance even, she was not one to rush in where angels fear to tread. So far as she was concerned, the age had turned silly with diagrams and pat answers. One needed not only intelligence, whittled to its finest point, but awe. The wounded bird might be brought down but sometimes got away along that dark track of the woods that led to nothing more than deeper darkness where the air whistled with the sighing of leaves and the needles of fir slipped under the feet like something waxy and alive, writhing out from under the heavy tread.

“And so, good-bye,” she said.

From the window she looked out at the road where the innocent boy was involved with his car. Now it slowly drove along, and she could fairly see the expression on that too-open face. Puzzled, eager, gratified. And in some way kin to the cherubim tucked into the corner of an old painting. Obviously he had confidence in his heaven-sent mission. Would confidence prevail against Joel Baker? But why should she put such stress upon Joel Baker?

The darkness of the big room with its sharp cool contrast to the too-bright outdoors had plunged her into a gloomy wood where the shine of plates on the old dresser offered little more than childish consolations. What was she to make of Bartram when she had seemed so unfit to unravel or to solve the conundrum of her own life? This house was her ark but the dove was elsewhere. If it had sighted land, it had stayed on that green isle never to return. The demand to go backward in time brought its own violence and the image of Bartram was splintered to a hundred fragments among which her own head in a garnet velvet hat danced headless before her eyes. But the hat had nothing to do with Bartram. Why should it dance up, out of the unknown?

A sense of panic forced her to sit down coolly, to support her head on her hand and to tell herself this was not the way. One did not need the literal documentation for a painting. 'And the second she let her thoughts tum to painting, a balm entered her very blood, she was absolved from going back, step by step, bruising her feet over each separate stone. She might even learn from a canvas of her own where the little houses in the village across the Delaware appeared to be swimming in water and the river itself had the opacity of a black asphalt pavement. The years could not be recalled in their continuous sequence of day by day but were enclosed in a memory of a single sun-parched afternoon or some cool evening. In the smell of a spring hyacinth and the bitter bruise of purplish berries of the deadly night- shade. Was reality the teacup on the table or the light that fell in bars upon it from the shuttered window? And what light in Bartram's world had transformed love to represent everything that was not expressed?

When she thought of Bartram in his good clothes, driving a new car like a manic over back country roads or simply standing, the thoughtful host, before the wood fire in his country house, his voice gentle and his eyes watchful, she was almost exasperated for if one tried to get hold of him

through his appearance, he was already leaping upstream over the falls like a salmon bent on its superior destiny.

And if one began with the fashionable practice of focusing on Bartram's mother as the progenitor of all that Bartram had become, what did one find? A large White Queen with a sweet tooth who longed to stuff her adored boy into acquiescence, but acquiescence for what? She had succeeded for a time and nothing is harder to forego than success. Though Bartram always appeared as a man without a family except for his younger sister, who was too much like him, some softer shadow of his own nature, to be a part of a family pattern, he was nonetheless deeply imbedded in a great family connection. In the background were numerous cousins, uncles and energetic males who were hard business heads. As for his father, he had died competing valiantly with the hard business heads of the world and with incorruptible honesty had been broken by heads harder than his own. He had been a building contractor, and so strong is the power of suggestion, that Mrs. Heath could not now determine whether he had actually fallen from one of his own high constructions or only figuratively fallen or whether she had made some identification of him with the Master Builder or if the son had put such an idea into her head. Now in retrospect she seemed to see the man she had never laid eyes upon, in his own height and breadth, who must have had some of the son's shyness, alertness and gift of seeing. The energetic males of the family connection had taken over the son then returned from what must have appeared to them a shiftless indulgent year in Paris, and substituting for a father, had found a job for him, or "position" as the mother would have put it. With all their connections, it was certain that they would have a finger in real estate and in particular a good hotel and what more suitable in their minds than a young man like Bartram as manager.

Whether the mother intended the hotel as her son's sole future, Mrs. Heath could not say, but it represented security, that shackling iron which simply meant one is freed from necessity to become enslaved. It's true, Bartram did

not have the appearance of a slave, the first day she set eyes upon him, and, at the suggestion of the literary doctor in New Jersey had stopped with her husband at the hotel to call out the young man whom the doctor had described as a gifted solitary in need of the companionship of his own kind. He did not even have the appearance of a solitary as he came out under the striped awning with such a proud step. She could remember herself instantaneously approving of him and leaning out of the car to take his hand, and she remembered the hand itself, unexpectedly large and firm, for his slender-ness might have led one to expect one of those rather limp grasps that disturb you by an avowal of reticence.

If she might describe herself, it was that she had the gift for recognition and for unashamedly letting herself go when she instantaneously liked, and she had certainly liked Bartram. For one thing she had admired the appearance of the two tall young men, standing in such amiable understanding by the car; her husband, fair and with light hair shining as a helmet and Bartram, dark and sinewy, both soft voiced, communicating first simply out of a mutual feeling that they were exiled from a beloved Paris, and later, communicating out of a sense of mutual betrayal of some earlier dream of a fairer world.

She had fairly snatched at the chance, she now realized, to rescue Bartram from the doldrums, and, when they were inside the hotel and she had admired the view from his penthouse apartment where he deprecated the big room and even the view as little more than a cage, where to see beyond rooftops merely enhanced his sense of being in jail, she listened with a growing impatience to his admission that he had been working on a novel for three years with a trepidation that it would never be finished. He was already tempering his admission with a reluctant confession of his weaknesses, saying that if he intended to write, he should be able to do it, even here. But the truth was that the hotel and all its occupants surrounded him with the felt mat of a persistent presence. If he were alone in his privacy, the 'phone might ring, calling him below. One had no idea, he had

pleaded, pleading for himself, the nature of the interruptions. He was the guardian of the hotel, its keeper, its jailor. A hotel like this was jam-packed with broken hearts, broken pocketbooks, too, and as the hotel was a genteel one, with a gilding upon it, one could imagine the pride of the victims who, finding themselves slowly drained of their substance, tried to keep up a front, sallied past the door, hummed, pretended light-hearted gaiety, delay of checks from rich uncles, alimony, or the imaginary sale of imaginary real estate that would put them on easy street. Of course, there were solid characters too, mostly dull, heavily respectable, who never got drunk, or leaned too far out of windows and who never brought in riotous companions to cause old lady guests to knock on the walls and finally to 'phone irritated blasts to the office. What was needed in his situation was a hard head, he averred, and didn't a hard head intimate a hard heart?

His preoccupation with the fallen element of his clientele certainly prepared her for his own work when she finally came to it. Even in conversation, he gave to the object of dislike all the attentiveness one gives to love. She could hardly believe that the four walls of this narrow building could compress so much treachery and suffering and that the occupants, some of whom she had encountered in the elevator, could really be the gargoyles of human existence that he described. But the fact that he saw them as such interested her profoundly, implying a sensitivity whose secret she longed to explore. She listened to him with the feeling that in him hate-attractions were more powerful than love and through them there was a constant wedding of fears and the betrothal of secret desires. There was such a contradiction, too, between what he appeared to be and what he undoubtedly was or combatted deep down in his secret soul as to make him simply irresistible. She had to know. She had to. And reckless as she always was when once she felt the impact of her own imperious desires, she had no hesitation in telling him, flat-footedly, that he owed it to himself to finish the book, not at some future time, but now, and that if he did not, he would forever have it dangling in his inner consciousness, an awkward corpse, whose deathly presence would putrefy his entire life. The only alternative would be forever to forego writing at all; simply to chloroform the impulse, now, and remove

the dead beast to a place of decent burial. Then, at least, he could go on living. “And never think,” she had said, getting to her feet and pacing up and down, “that life itself isn’t important. Not just the literary life, but life, out of which all the rest springs.”

He had agreed with her, his cheekbones flushing, and, opening another bottle with a fine bravado had poured generously. When the ‘phone rang and some voice from the office had squeaked, he had shut the thing off with a disregard for consequences that was wonderful. She remembered the sun pouring over the broken building tops into the big room with its disarming appearance of quiet comfort, the chintz-covered sofas and chairs so deceptively like those found in easeful homes whose windows looked out upon broad lawns. She remembered the enchantment that the three of them felt in their new-found acquaintanceship with its links into a past held in high romantic blissful suspense and the bond between them of their commitment to an arduous future of uncertain reward. They were gilded, the three of them, by their high hopes and by the vision of their dedication. And that very vision compelled them to confront the world as it truly was, and to balance their chances with the circumstances.

He had no idea that his hook would sell, he modestly stated, and for that very fact was the more compelled to complete it. It gave defiance to his fate as his relatives and soft-hearted mother conceived it. That he needed defiance was only too clear to Mrs. Heath; she was not deceived by his gentleness, and when he finally abruptly proposed to call up the office and to tell them he had to go out of town for a few days — on a business trip, if necessary — she was second only to her husband to rush to him and shake him by the hand quite as though he had won the Irish sweepstakes.

The flurry of departure was as blissful, as expectantly happy, as though they had been about to board some liner to sail for ultimate seas. With her eager eye for detail, she had noted everything, the fine leather bag dragged from a

closet, the extra pair of shoes with the burnish of precious wood. Ah, she thought, with amusement, with some patronizing too, he is a dandy. And when he finally emerged from an inner room clad in a shapeless old suit, wearing upon his head a battered hat and carrying — of all things -- a gun, she felt she was suddenly confronting him in the role of a gentleman with a landed estate who permits himself shooting in order to feel the squire. Well, it was the hunting season, the delirious fall of the year, and might not this passion, if such it were, be as rightfully indulged as her husband's obsession with boats and sailing?

It was an unfortunate thought for it immediately burdened her with anxiety for the two of them. Seeing them, side by side, trying to squeeze a bottle of Scotch into an already bursting bag — but bursting with what and for how long a pilgrimage? — she admitted to herself that there was a slyness in her intention toward Bartram, and that full encouragement to him was one way to fan the flame for her husband's own work, so neglected, and for reasons so obscure, so tortured and even malign, that to confront his typewriter now so often littered with penciled designs of sloops, ketches, and barges, that were to carry him where? was to admit a dizziness such as one feels standing on the brink of an abyss. Moments like this, so pangful, so alive with a terrible dread and a fierce combatting hope, were surely the great moments of resolution in one's existence. More than the two men, she was aware of the three of them and of the burden that their individual talents laid upon them, and that this was the trembling moment for some advance or deathly retreat. And she permitted herself that trifling attention to detail which so often conceals the larger anxiety by asking Bartram if he had remembered to bring along his manuscript, for wouldn't it be a good idea if he could read it to them and thus wind himself up for what ought to be its conclusion?

He had looked up in surprise that she had imagined he had not thought of that, first of all, and patting the bag, in appearance like some sleek animal, trained to fetch and carry, said that the thing was right at the bottom, the first item to go in. They had trooped out, and as she went through the door

she noted a pair of long black suede gloves, one draped on the arm of a chair and one dropped to the floor with its fingers lightly spread as though to break a fall. The black gloves and her image of the probable woman who had dropped them filled her painter's mind with thoughts of a possible Toulouse-Lautrec female. In the elevator she had idly begun to talk about the French painter, the hunchback, who had illuminated the underworld of flesh, sinned against and sinful, with the gloss of gallantry and decaying desire. Bartram had picked up the theme, eagerly, expostulating that an artist in this country was seldom allowed to earn money in the playful manner of the Toulouse-Lautrec posters. They had gone on talking for miles of road, burnished with the late afternoon autumn light, as she quietly brooded between the two young men, bearing and not hearing, now deciding what to have for dinner, now wondering about Bartram and if he were in love and who had worn the gloves and had dropped them with so evident an intent to return.

When they came to the long hill that swooped down to the Delaware, they had stopped the car for a good look. Bartram let out a sigh as quail rose from the brush near the road and fluttered backward through the dying goldenrod. His eyes clicked and sparked as he chanted an ode to autumn, the perfect season. Wasn't it Pushkin, the first of the Russians and the last of the whole men, who could create only in autumn, the rioting season of the heart? "And didn't he die in autumn, too?" Heath wondered.

Bartram wasn't sure of that. "But if he didn't, he should have. A man should die in his favorite season with all the pangs of it in him. I'm not sure it wasn't autumn. Shot in a dirty duel for a woman. It reeks, looked at in one way, but looked at in another, damned fitting."

The words might once more have been spoken. She could bear the tone of the voices in the car and smell the fires of burning brush in a far-off field. In agitation, she began to pace the floor, torn up once more by a vanished past.

What a hateful young man, Timothy Comfort, who so lightheartedly and for his own selfish purposes came stirring and digging, roiling up the soil on the grassy mounds. What could he ever know of it all? What could she toll? How little seeped through of the real agonies. And not just their agonies, but all the miseries of spirits thought too small for anything but petty concerns. This house had been some little oasis on that autumn night with the fires burning bright. And so brightly had the thing been that it glowed now in retrospect. The pang of retrospect. For Bartram was dead and Heath — where was he? A wanderer, who in her thoughts was closer to the River Styx than to his own bright shore of life. And this brash young man, this stripling, this Timothy Comfort who was no comfort, had invited her to call back the actual dead and the living dead, for how extricate one memory without the other? She was no filing cabinet, neatly documented, but a living soul, who had been abandoned in Arcadia by the two of them.

Here they had sat breathlessly while Bartram had read his book and had taken fully the first long intent silence that greeted its close as a genuine reward. Perhaps the most genuine he was ever to get. For that work was fated to drop almost as soundlessly as a stone into water. The circle of approval was so tiny and from writers like himself as yet unacknowledged. She had foreseen all that, the first evening, with a tightening of the throat; an anxiety and a dread that he might lose heart before he was done. Or was it of her husband that she had been thinking and had merely transplanted the anxiety for one to the other? Certainly they were together all that fall so much that the household became bewitched with their intermingled presences.

Bartram had taken a room in an old hotel across the river and in spite of the telegrams and imprecations from his mother, his uncle and the chorus of relatives who would fete him for a solid business character if they could, he stayed on and he finished it. Yes, he finished it. The corpse came to life and walked. Take up thy burden, Lazarus. And on the afternoon of the day, punch drunk, he had gone out with his gun and an old dog belonging to the

hotelkeeper, and had shot a pheasant. After a long cold afternoon, he had brought the bird down, the first he had ever brought down in his life. He confessed it. The man in the old hunting hat, with the gun, confessed that the role had come before the act. It was a dreadful bird to cook for it was filled with buckshot. In his excitement he had continued to pump in the lead. They had rushed to town, the two of them, Heath and Bartram, for wine and the bird came out of the oven beautiful to see but difficult to eat. If it had only been possible to swallow the shot! They laughed it off, exclaiming at the sweet flesh, disdaining the bitter pills, while Bartram sat, a little abashed, stirring the mound of shot on his plate absently with his fork, turning the pellets over and scattering them with a rattle among the bones.

Of what were they all thinking in the silence that often fell during that last meal before Bartram returned to town? If there was a glow upon them, there was sadness, different for each. Unquestionably Heath must also have suffered chagrin beneath the genuine joy he felt for his friend. The fatality of his own self-reproach was beginning to mount and for obscure reasons burst out wildly all that fall. Bartram's achievement seemed to gear him for work one minute and the next to stall him in complete futility. The fall of the year that had entered so auspiciously floundered and bled.

Even a bird blundered. They could hear the hollow taps against the attic rafters, the frantic rush of something, but what? How the old superstitions brooded in the house that fall! Their hearts pounded as they stealthily opened the attic door. Was it a robber? A ghost? And the bird, wild with fright, flew in their faces, beating its wings, knocking its head against an old trunk, and, retreating to the dark eaves, sat cowering. When they approached with her apron to throw over its head, it rose high to the peak of the roof, knocking feathers down. Softly one fell upon her shoulder. Silly thing, silly thing, she called, but the silly thing glared wildly and tossed itself in delirium from one end of the dark attic to the other. Heath got the window open and they both flapped their arms and the bird shot out, straight as an arrow. They could watch it, circling high in the sky.

They were quiet afterwards; downstairs by the fire they sat quiet and apart. Something alive had gone out of the house and was in the sky. Their hearts felt empty; without a word, they knew it. They admitted it, secretly, and the secret was a loud noise in the room. The messenger had come and gone clapping the news loud as a bell. What was it, oh what was it? Where had the emptiness begun?

She blamed him. If he would only work. If he would only try. If he would only stop drawing ships. If he would only saw wood, just to exercise his muscles. If he would only not take to heart his stupid father and his father's deathly reproaches that he was not making a fat living, was not keeping his wife as a man should. She had never wanted to be kept. No, she had wanted to be in a house where her man was allowed to be himself. But who was Heath? Had she known? Had she foisted upon him a too-bright expectation? What was wrong, oh, what was wrong? Money, that was too simple. Not just money of the lack of it. For it was the 'Thirties and dollars did not grow on bushes for anyone. And how was it that since the advent of Bartram, the pattern had somehow broken? Bartram, Bartram, yes, Bartram had finished his book. He had even shot his bird. Bartram. And they could not get loose from Bartram. They were writing back and forth or going to the city and staying at Bartram's hotel and now Bartram's book was going to be published in the spring, and Bartram himself was preparing to make the grand cut, and snip off the hotel with his big family connection and even with that holy cow, security. Bartram was going to take a chance. And had she rubbed it in, slyly, perhaps, but rubbed it in, nonetheless? Probably; yes, certainly. For no exasperation is more powerful than the one of baffled love that cannot love as once it did.

And where was the Heath she had known? Sunk in a deep dream of boats, rivers, talking of a ship that would sail around the world. She would even make believe that she wanted the ship; they would sit, side by side, studying his sketches of the ideal boat. She would nod her head, her insides bleeding

with the thought that it must be only in a fable that they could be together. Oh, we are being babes in the woods! And at night she would feel so done in by the day, so gone, so lost, so far away, and then once in sleep she had the dream, the delicious dream of a joyful moment, and it seemed to her that she was standing by her kitchen window looking out upon a garden filled with flowers and someone came softly behind her. She could feel a man standing behind her with his arms lightly pressing her shoulders, then he was touching her ears and he was putting earrings into her ears. Surprise, surprise, and the rush of joyful surprise, of desire, how lovely, and turning, whom did she expect? Heath? But in the dream it wasn't Heath. It was Bartram. She woke and lay quiet with Heath beside her. Why Bartram? And she furiously denied that she was in love with Bartram or wanted Bartram. No, it was something else she longed for. The old joy. She wanted to want Heath, the early confident Heath. Her own husband. Not this man, absorbed in some dream of boats, stalemated on a becalmed sea and yet obsessed with sailing in deep need of the swift breeze. And to feel so helpless no longer able to be the breeze, to perform the miracle. But who was really himself that fall and winter? The world was dazed for it was the time of droughts, foreclosures and despairs. Time for divorce, too, for among their friends, this was the season.

Even Bartram. Especially Bartram, For Bartram's triumph over his lethargy, Bartram's entry into his own real world, cut him off from some source. His family did not matter, his mother's great soft mutterings did not matter. But his sister, that mattered, and in some curious, involved way he was no longer the solid friend of her husband, but a rival. Oh, a most modest rival for it was a bore to most of their friends, Bartram's admiration of his brother-in-law's witty works. Bartram was always quoting Baker. He might have been his younger brother for all that they were practically same age.

It was from the north window of this very room that she had looked out that December day to an amazed view of Bartram, in his old suit, wearing his battered hat and trailing a gun, walking toward the house over tufts of

wintry grass gashed with the bruises of ice and snow. She had been alone and blissfully working with a newfound hopefulness that was precariously based on what might well be someone's doom. For Heath had been called home, out to Chicago to a father who was desperately ill and might be dying; might also turn human, at last, and in his softened state, new-found milk of comprehension might flood his veins. She had started up at the sight of Bartram, not too grateful, and with a certain shyness, for his quick approach to the house, silently made and unannounced, was as direct as in her dream when he had stolen behind her and she had felt the pressure of his arms.

But his face had not been the face of her dream. It was darkened with trouble, saturated with unshed tears. He had been so absorbed that he sat with his hat on, his gun protectively balanced across his knees. Sensibly, she had quickly made hot coffee and had spoken of ordinary things. Boldly she tackled the gun. Why had he brought it? The pheasant season was past. This was the time for deer. She had found tracks by the old mill, even seen the white tail of one shy creature bounding through the brush. Had she had any idea he might bring one down, she would say, then and there, "I forbid you. Something wild must be sacred here. And it is the deer." But he was not that good a hunter, she consoled herself, while he sipped his coffee gingerly with a slowness that was ludicrous. She wanted to shake him out of his woebegone state, to call, "Come, man, speak up. Nobody is dead. The world may be quaking but is still in its orbit. And what is more, you *live*."

When he began to speak it was in the broken tones of one who has survived a holocaust. What devil in her made his plight somehow ridiculous? More than once, during his recital, her lips had twitched. Terrible laughter had lurked behind her concerned seriousness. What mockery had quivered, ready as an arrow, to fly straight to his wounded heart? His story was not simple; he had come, the hunter, to lead her to the sacred burial grounds. She sat alert, quivering, seeing more than she could ever divulge, uncertain how ever to console. For he was knotted and tied in the cage of his being.

Outwardly it was almost an idle tale. A party, yes, one of those New York roaring parties in his apartment at the top of hotel. It was to celebrate the approaching coming out of his book and to announce his engagement. For he was to marry at last, he thought, and a girl who had been his young sister's roommate at college. And he admitted, as abashed as he had been at the excess of shot in his first pheasant, that he had carried in his pocket for three mortal years a license to wed. What was his pretence for delay? Probably he did not know himself. But he imagined that now he was eager for it as the girl had once been. But what kind of girl could this be who had submitted for three years to lie on the shelf? What had happened in the interval? Mrs. Heath could not seem to get hold of her, could form no picture. She was a wisp, a sort of Doppelganger of his sister. And yet, he had expected her, after the three year's slight to come at his beck and call and to be the living proof, at a party, among their friends, of his good intentions. Mrs. Heath listened to Bartram with her mind busy juggling what he said with a probable reality, while the image of his intended bride slipped from the scene. Even in his narrative, it slipped away. His unashamed tears were not for her. Nor were they for himself unless a self denied.

His grief was Nora, young Nora, whose strange behavior eluded him, tortured him. She drank; no one knew how much. That pearly skin might be desert sand. Some terrifying deep thirstiness parched her long slender body. With pride he insisted that if she drank a lot, no one would know it. She was not one of the unseemly women who turn boisterous. At any moment, she could walk a chalk line, would turn a face, pure and unflushed, toward anyone, carry on a conversation in polite, self-contained syllables. But at some moment, unforeseen, she disappeared. At these infernal parties, she might leave the room without his noticing it. Soon an odd feeling that something was not right made him hunt every corner. Once he had managed to slip out and to follow her as she had walked swiftly as to some certain destiny in the empty dark of three o'clock in the morning, But at the moment when he hoped to catch up with her, she had picked up a cab when there was not another in sight for pursuit. Where did she go?

Wasn't it odd that he never consulted Baker? Mrs. Heath could not restrain herself from asking, "And Baker?" Oh, Baker was a devil with women. She might not know it, to look at him. He did not have the appearance of a Romeo but he was successful with women. He was conspicuously untrue to his wife. And all this was related by Bartram with an odd pride in the man. Not that it wasn't a bit raw that Baker should pick on his own girl at a party intended to announce their engagement! The two of them had been thick as thieves from the start, secretive as alley cats, in their corner. And did Bartram realize how he gave to the pair the detachment of bright comic balloons at a carnival, their clown-faces floating in air, and to the guests a nature so distorted that beheaded creatures seemed to have taken over the night with only the brother and sister retaining their disenchanted forms and by their disenchantment to be accursed. But Bartram had hardly begun to feel uncomfortably aware of the conspicuous isolation of Baker and the girl when they had disappeared. One moment there, the next vanished. At the touch of a lighted cigarette they might have exploded into thin air!

He had noticed it, and across the width of the room met Nora's eyes, wide open, in a fixed entanglement with his own shocked glance. He had felt naked, naked, stripped by Baker's boldness and nakedly he had looked at his sister, who suddenly, coolly, lifted her glass and eyeing him smilingly, composedly drank, sipping delicately with the gesture of an innocent child biting into a fresh apple.

Did he realize the picture he was painting of the brother and sister, alone and apart, and so terribly united in the carnival room with the masks and lolling bodies as unreal to them as stuffed birds? There he sat, in her house, in his idiotic hunter's costume, sniffing childishly; heartbreaking, really, in his unconcern for his intended bride who seemed no more than a drawing on a slate scrawled by Nora and by Nora rubbed away. What did it matter where she had gone or in whose bed she might lie? If in Baker's, so much the worse for her. And whether because she had intuitively liked Baker or

whether she was suspicious of Nora, the extremal Eve, Mrs. Heath found herself not blaming Baker too much, excusing him really, as probably one who had suffered disaster deep in his bones and was making for himself some awkward amends.

And wasn't it curious, too, that Bartram did not so much as censure his friend except in playful terms that only half-concealed actual pride? What were these people to one another? She could only see them in the vivid setting of the carnival, where the brother and sister seemed to be fixed as flies on pins in their opposite comers, staring at one another. But Bartram was going on with his story, in hints, in fits and starts, trying to find a line to walk amidst the contradictions. He had things to do, as the host, and somehow in some interval, Nora had escaped him. She had left once more on her blind adventure.

This time he lost his head, rushing over the sprawled feet of guests, hearing scraps of conversation that confirmed his loathing for midnight poses. Hardly knowing what he did, he had hurried out into the corridor, then thoughtful, imagining himself smart and canny, he had returned, stealthily, and going to his room had changed his clothing for the old hunting suit. He hardly knew what he had in mind when he took the gun. But so equipped, with the gun, he seemed whole. He had even enjoyed his rifle as he slipped out the door like some uninvited stranger.

How deserted the street had been! Of course there wasn't a cab in sight and no Nora. But he had to be on the move and cannily, like a thief, got into a car standing in front of the hotel, an old once-fashionable model. The keys were to be found in the glove compartment; that he knew. It belonged to one of his guests, a woman who kept an old car because she was certain to smash it. He had got into the scat, nervously alerted to the street, to the emptiness, to the lighted corridor of the hotel where an ornate chair stood empty as an abdicated throne. This was the way he had often felt when he

had planned to become a hunter, when he had smelled in fancy the richness of the autumn woods, felt the tingle of crinkling fields parting to a pheasant's wing. The street was a great empty meadow and around the corner he might find the bird on the wing. But where he drove, how far, weaving through what streets, he could not say, or when or how he had come up against one of the Sixth Avenue pillars with a hollow crack that knocked him out of the seat with no bones broken, only a shiver of glass falling delicately across his knees and one tiny sparkle of frost biting his chin.

He got out, coldly, soberly, stepping away from the car with the case of one who has achieved a premeditated crime. The sky was lightening over the grey street. In the country, he thought, there would be the sound of birds soon on the wing. He had admired himself, his coolness, and the suddenness with which he had solved something. For it was clear to him that he could not, would not, go back to the hotel. He did not want to face suave Baker, to wait, too, for the return, but when? of Nora. Without hesitation, he had turned his back on the wreck. Let them find it and worry. He had the glee of a child to sustain him while he made his way to the station and took the early milk train to Mrs. Heath's town. On the train he read the paper and chewed gum.

Here was the man who could write a sustained, complicated, adroit novel. Mrs. Heath eyed him cautiously as he sat there with his gun. He might really have been a hunter, come up fresh with the blood of wounded animals on his hands. The hunter who likes what he slays. Sees the beauty in the doe's eyes, the trembling of the great buck's antlers before he takes to flight. He sat, like many a hunter, with the innocence of some vast outdoors as penetrating as a scent upon him. And now he had ended, she did not know what to say. She stood before him awkwardly.

She could no longer remember how the day passed, what they ate, what they said. She only knew that in the late afternoon, he had taken his gun and

made his way up the side of the bare hill opposite the house. Perhaps he might shoot a pheasant, he said, but there was something about his pose following the desperation of the long day that made her say sharply to him, "See you don't shoot yourself. That's all I ask. If you did, I would never forgive you."

Just the same, she was nervous for a little, as she watched him toil up the hill through the bare trees, treading over the thick leaves with steps that seemed to leave a darker stain. Then she was busy at something, then again watching at the window and he had reached the top. In the light of the end of the wintry afternoon the hill was burning with the low sun in the west. The dead leaves under the bare trees crinkled with silver and rose; rose ran up the limbs and played among the quicksilver branches.

Bartram stood at the top with his figure in a flowing contour against the sky. The very outline of his body was fluid and fluid the movement of his arm as he moved it briefly with the gun. He was standing, resting the gun now against the ground, and he seemed to be looking down the slope that led to the wide river. He might be painted flat, she thought, like the figures in the ancient caves, where each separate object is clear but connected too with other strange things, one thing springing from another, contradictory things fusing, all united by the charge of life, surging with it, fluctuating at the edges, never still. And if she had suddenly seen a wonder-beast join him on the hillside, half-lion, half-goat, she would not have been amazed. What seemed untrue was the long night and the story of the hotel. He did not belong there and where he might belong, she did not know. But at that moment, he seemed secure in an old, old world, storming with eternal oppositions beyond mental reconciliation. He stood there, appeased and safe, and for that moment at least, she knew that he must feel the night roll off like a sickness. She could see it from afar. The next moment, he disappeared, sudden as a diver, over the rim of the hill. He seemed to have fallen into a sea of air.

That vision of him dipped in brine of air was in some way the true Bartram. But what she meant by that, she could hardly say, for there had been many Bartrams and she was conscious of them as she was aware of her many selves. As well ask where her head in the garnet hat now floated. But it had been real, that head, and the hat with its amorous crush of velvet had been a very part of her flesh. Bartram had come down from the little mountain with briars caught in his hat hanging like a film of sea moss to the battered brim. He had come refreshed, restored, ready for some deep-sea change. But vestiges of other selves still clung; glee and smug satisfaction when a wire arrived that evening from Baker asking if Bantam had shown up at her house. "Let them worry," had been Bartram's comment.

And did they still worry about Bartram, though he was dead? Oh, Bartram was a man who came to stay, and thinking of Nora and Baker, she knew that Bartram was still living with them. He looked at them, too, from their young son's eyes, so like Bartram's that it had been a shock the first time she had seen the boy, so like the uncle, as he came stalking over the lawn and speaking in the same kind of voice with the same shy grace. That dry antagonism of the father toward the son, what was it except a memory of the thorn? For Bartram had been the beloved, would be so long as Nora had life. Baker had been only his surrogate.

In the weeks that followed Timothy's visit, it became more and more difficult to treat the hoy's persistence with silence. He wrote such insinuating letters, mutely imploring. He even attempted a wily flattery that drew blood, for Mrs. Heath sat down one empty evening and dashed off an account of "recollections" that if they did not pierce to the kernel were still part of the fruit. Yes, Bartram had bought a house in her neighborhood the fall following the publication of his first book. He had disentangled himself from the hotel but not from his mother. What was her son to do in a big house without someone to care for him? If it had been part of his plan to live with his mother, it would have surprised Mrs. Heath. But he had shown an odd submission to the White Queen who as a perpetual mourning widow

was troublesome to a difficult son. She cooked huge meals and they had to be eaten. Bartram had begun to put on weight and then to take more and more to the fields with his gun. He bought a hunting dog, milk-white, with tan spots that had in them a dash of color like blood. On visits to Bartram's house, the big creature got up in her lap like a puppy, gathering his hind legs into knots under him. "1 You are spoiling this dog," she had scolded and her eyes had spoken to the White Queen whom he was also spoiling.

But he indulged himself, in Mrs. Heath's eyes, and was no man to accept the wilds without conveniences. Even his choice of a house had irritated her, for he disdained handsome: old houses because they did not have ready plumbing. His house had running water and the good farmers had painted everything to shine; even the attic stairs. If he excused himself on the ground that he wanted to step into his new life at once and start writing without chores, he did not convince her. This was only another symptom of which his dandy tastes were crying evidence. He had his good clothes, his elegant shoes and his fine gun. Now he had his fine dog and to this he added a new car. When she tried to tell him that leisure and time were the only luxuries for a writer to cultivate, he took the pose of the old-time English squire who cannot function without some ritual of living. Well, it was his way, but that he made ease of it was not apparent.

Only wandering over the hills steeped him in content. She would see him from far off, with the dog and lowly local characters who shot not only for pleasure but desperately to fill the larder. He would drop in of an afternoon, filled with stories about his companions, and sometimes as he talked he had the glow of a navigator who has discovered strange ports. That he got on well with the local hunters was his pride and in the field, the boyhood equalities ruled. He would even lecture about hunting. You don't hunt to kill but walking is part of it. It makes an aim to the saunter. It was the smell of the earth, the look of the sky; one became a mariner on a strange sea guided by smells as the sailor is by currents and charts. You saw the grass ruffle to

hidden creatures: the dog's nose became your compass. Your companions were seamates outward bound.

The White Queen accepted the dog and its hairs on the sofa but as time went on and Bartram pounded out another novel, she did not accept the station he had chosen. She grumbled and worried about his future. There was no money in it. Who had bought his first novel? There would never be enough readers to keep the wolf from the door. The hotel had been a good thing, a sound business, and he ought to go back to it. It was modern; this kitchen sink had a way of stopping up. Her son had to do a janitor's chores and feed the furnace, take out ashes. At the hotel he had his evenings. Why couldn't he write then, if write he must? Times were bad, millions were out of work. Why throw up a good situation on a gamble? Who could believe it, if you told them, that one could give up a good situation to starve? Oh, she made it hard for Bartram with her hard practicality that had behind it the deep convictions of the many. She was one of the hard-fact customers who damn the living fount. Not that she knew it; she adored her boy and so she worked on him, sowing doubts. He worried. More and more he saw his situation in the somber light of his mother's fears.

Then he would have a fit of flaunting the future in a burst of spending. He even decided on a special dog for raccoon hunting and when it arrived in a stuffy boxcar, shivering, tail between legs, straight from the hills of Kentucky, he could not wait to acclimatize the brute but had to give it a workout that very night. What a comical night it had been, with deep snow covering the world, and all the traditional fixings culled from a book rigged up for the occasion! There had to be a bonfire, there had to be a bottle of whisky. The dog was brought out under a bright, shivery moon. Nora and Baker had joined the party in the country and cowering in their city clothes, followed Bartram and the Heaths. Deep into the woods they had ploughed over the crunchy snow with branches sifting icy particles down their necks. The fire was laid according to ritual and in its bright glow, they stamped their feet, taking slugs from the whisky bottle. Bartram tried to get the dog

to rush the 'coons but the poor beast whined and tried to creep to the fire exactly as though the raccoons had been mythical. Baker was the first to give up and tramp hack to the house. Mrs. Heath had followed and decided to make an ill-advised hot cocoa. Finally Bartram, Heath and Nora returned with the dog. The poor thing had slunk abjectly to the fire, paws out, nursing its grievances and imploring for pity with its homesick eyes. But Bartram was indignant at the cocoa and furious with the dog who had betrayed him. This was a 'coon hunt not a tea party. Baker stuck to the fire and Mrs. Heath stayed to keep him company while the three trailed out, dragging the dog to give him a last chance. From within the house they could hear him whimper as he pressed himself to the warm crack of the door, refusing to stir. That finished it. Bartram was cold as a stone toward the brute and gave him away the next day to one of his hunting companions. Mrs. Heath could not remember that the dog had ever earned his salt but sometimes he appeared at her hack door, lean and hungry, abjectly whimpering for a handout.

She wrote this story to Timothy. It is good enough for him, she thought, guilty that it revealed nothing of the true Bartram. Or did it? It had been a confused time. If he had not been happy, he had often been -- well, exalted. He loved driving recklessly over the back roads until he broke a spring. He had a dam built which his brother-in-law called "Bartram's folly." For had it ever really become the lake, the paradise for wild birds, that Bartram dreamed? It had settled after one brief swell following a torrential rain into a thick green scum; rats had haunted the logs of the dam, tall goldenrod flaunted in the marshy grass. He could not summon at will the dreamy wilderness or beckon to the wild birds for a price.

Perhaps the failure of his projects hampered him more than she then knew. Perhaps his mother's perpetual drip of disbelief wore away some hopeful chance. Perhaps the mere state of the nation, deep in a depression, awoke in him the desperate struggle of one trying to escape the common fate. But whatever it was, once he had finished his second book, he began to talk his

mother's language. It would not sell. What was his future? There was no hope for slow growth in this country of quick returns. A "real" writer was a pariah and must be. He didn't like the role.

More and more he sank into the writings of Dostoevsky. They seemed to speak some special language to him. But what? It was hard to say. Bartram was a modern man. He might feel love and he might have the compassion that gave to the Russian writer the gift of seeing the saint in the madman but somewhere along the route of his veins, the thing froze in a horror. When one read what he wrote, one stood on the brink of a new Ice Age; creatures were striking at one another in despair; the innocent not only suffered but were suffering fools. She remembered one hot afternoon when she had walked to his house out of some hopeful expectation. It had been a dark time and Heath, whose father had not died or relented, had gone out on a job for a little ready money. Bartram had been sitting in his shady yard under a great willow tree with a book. He had a glass of some drink beside him and came to meet her, followed by the spotted dog. It was the dog who had welcomed her. He looked cool and icy in his summer suit and she thought she detected an amused look as he glanced at her dusty shoes. Self-consciously, she tucked back a lock of hair and hoped he would not comment on her hands that were stained with a dye she had used to reclaim an old dress that morning. Only his eyes warmed her as they met hers, oddly excited, and seeing nothing except some secret thought of his own.

Yes, he had been reading, he said. Stavrogin's confession, that hot coal that had been suppressed in the early versions of *The Possessed*. Did she know it? Didn't she think this was something Dostoevsky must have intimately known and suffered in his own skin? Didn't she believe that man was a pit filled with unacknowledged terrifying impulses that sometimes broke out to his damnation? And when one looked around at the smug, the satisfied, at the petty aims that engrossed even one's best friends, wasn't damnation a privilege?

His intensity in that serene setting almost put its spell upon her. His affinity for the damned was contagious and for a moment she stood, transfixed. In that second when feelings so far outrun any articulated meaning, she knew there was no way out for her and Heath, no ship would sail, no breeze would ever waft them to green shores. There was nothing to wait for but the destructive final storm. She looked at her friend with hateful intent, for he seemed the very pride of doom. Thoughtlessly, she plucked a flower and broke off its head and, nibbling the stalk, turned away, afraid that he had seen the sudden flare of her antagonism. He followed her meekly down the hillside. In her haste, little stones rolled and scattered from under the soles of her shoes. When she came to the foot of the hill where the brook was crossed by stepping stones, she crossed, leaping from stone to stone. And so ran into a great spider web drawn from one shrub to another straight across the path of the brook.

“Oh,” she called. “It’s all over my hair!” Some of it was in her mouth. She began to laugh, calling, “Come taste it.”

“Taste what?”

“The web. I’ve mined a spider’s web. It tastes like something.”

She could really taste it. He put out a finger and drew a shred from her hair putting it gingerly to his mouth.

“Nibble it. Don’t be afraid of it. It’s as wholesome as honey.”

“Honey?” he cried. “You’re crazy.”

“I’m not. It’s made out of the spider as surely as honey is made by the bee.”

“But it tastes of death,” he said. “That’s what it tastes of. Death.”

“Not to me.” She was ready to fight about the web. And running up the opposite bank of the brook she shouted back at him, unreasonably passionate, “Never to me.” A contagion of childish laughter seized them. They began to laugh out of nothing and running ahead of him she taunted, “Never, never.” “Never?” came his echo, and at the top of the incline she waited breathlessly, and answered in conciliatory tones, “Well, hardly ever.” When he came up, she took hold of the lapel of his squire’s jacket. There was a blue cornflower in the buttonhole. “Listen,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I’m referring to what you said back there. What counts is what you think. Just be sure you really think it. Maybe your way is through brimstone. If it is, then go to it.”

Half-smiling, half-mournful, he said, “And my mother? How can one answer her and by answering her, the world?”

She had stamped her foot and then deliberately kicked a small stone. They could hear its racket all the way down the hill and its final splash in the brook. She was fed up, she said, on fathers and mothers. His mother. Heath’s father. It was enough to make one despair. Didn’t he know they would hang chains on you if they could? Their chains. “How dare you talk of your mother? You’re only her child but it’s your world. Yours. Yours.” And half-crying more at the thought of the damnable hold Heath’s father held over him than of any power Bartram’s mother might possess, she started off toward the road that led home. “It’s wicked, wicked,” she kept muttering, and, finally turning back upon him, taunted, “You just want to make it hard for yourself, that’s what. You should have been the one to run into the spider’s web. Not me.” And unreasonably, she added, “There’s no justice.”

He had caught up with her, actually enlivened and charmed by her rage. Her rage put him at ease; he had laughed and then sobered for real talk. What did she think of this? Then he had sketched a plan for a new book, rapidly, on fire with his own vision. Perhaps she had not fully understood what he wanted to do for the truth was that she was repelled by the group of characters he was assembling for probing; another terrible bunch of misfits, she thought, and this time he was condemning them to a quarrelsome exile on a desert island in the South Seas where they had been shipwrecked after vainly searching for some lost paradise. It was too late to know now what he might have made of it, for the book had vanished with his life, and was no more than the plan of an unknown inventor dying in his poverty.

Had he left no notes for this projected work? If Timothy Comfort knew of any, he made no sign. He seemed bogged down in an engaging affair with the Bakers, indiscriminately in love with the two of them. In notes to Mrs. Heath it was Nora this and Baker that until she wondered at herself for not smartly writing him to give up Bartram and be done with it. Then she suffered with the thought that she too was abandoning her old friend. Once she had a mind to write Timothy to give up celebrity chasing and to come out for an afternoon with the lowly characters with whom Bartram had once hunted.

When she met him, quite by accident, in a New York bar, she knew how inappropriate her notion was. Flanked by Nora and Baker and accompanied by a tall amiable girl whom he introduced enthusiastically as "Ann," he was thoroughly at home. He was one of those insidious persons who irritate one only in absence; in his presence, she was charmed by his flattering confidence. His own drama was so engaging that he seemed to have forgotten Bartram. They were having a celebration, he confided. She could have no idea what they had recently gone through with Ann's mother. What a woman. Of course, she disapproved of him! He had tried playing on her sensibilities for she had some, of a kind, and he had flattered her. Divorced

and alone, with time and a certain income, she had come to the conclusion she, too, wanted to write! He had even read what she called her “poetry” and confessed its naiveté had startled him. She was as touching as a child of twelve and as soon as he realized that, he knew she was dangerous. Nothing for it except to ship her out and he had had the bright idea of suggesting she enroll in one of the summer courses for writers. She was at the University of Ohio, right now, and grateful to him. In her absence, they had moved into another apartment, and one so small he wouldn’t be able to squeeze into it on her return.

Now they were rid of the octopus, he meant to dig into his piece on Bartram in dead earnest. There was a rough draft. He wasn't satisfied ... there were difficulties. He shook his head in a commiserating manner that implied he was up against obstacles and lowering his voice to a conspiratorial mutter, began, “I don’t know what to make of Baker. I owe him everything. He’s advised me, helped me with my own work. I’m selling my own stuff right along. But on this business, he’s sabotaged and I don’t mean maybe. I can’t make headway. He doesn’t like the draft but won’t say why. We came here on purpose so we’d run into him; they often hang around at this hour. Don't say anything now. You know your voice carries. He’s clammed up. I want to consult you. “

Whether it was the Martini, swallowed too fast, or the insistent drone of Timothy’s voice or whether it was the presence of the Bakers whose actuality was so reminiscent of other younger Bakers, or whether it was the hypnotic buzz at the bar, behind her, on all sides, in differing keys, she could not say, but she felt as detached as if she were lodged in the ceiling and staring down from the plaster cornice. To keep Timothy soothed, she nodded methodically, even turned an interested gaze upon him. Then she stared into her drink, turned her head toward the Bakers on her loft, turned back to Timothy, on her right, and even took in Ann who seemed to be wandering in the background. What she was most conscious of, was that there were too many people, pressing and shoving.

It wasn't merely the jolly Baker on her left but the first Baker, the one in the elevator, who had stood alone in his corner with a dog. There was a dog now. It was not the same dog but it had the possessive nature of the old dog with the fabulous beard. This one also stood on guard protecting Baker in his detachment from life. While the jolly Baker sipped his drink the dog waited upon the other secret, saturnine Baker who relied upon him perhaps more than he had ever had the right to rely upon a single person. And of the two Bakers. Mrs. Heath gave the saturnine Baker her trust. She could hear Timothy's low muttered insistent voice while she could distinguish a certain clearing of the throat from Baker that indicated he, too, was about to break into confidence.

Beyond Baker, she could see Nora's bowed head with the sleek glossy wing of hair drawn up under a little hat. Though Mrs. Heath knew she was no longer the slim elusive girl but a solid matron with two growing children, the view she had of her, shut off as she was by Baker, was of old symbols and signs of the young Nora. That wing of hair, those gloves! For the long black suede gloves lying along the counter might have been the identical pair Mrs. Heath had witnessed the first day she had visited Bartram in his hotel. The fingers of this pair, curled, abandoned, suggested now, as they had then, some chanson-singer in a French café. And the hand, the long hand with the green emerald ring, might have belonged to the young Nora who had bewitched her brother.

The phoenix-forms of the past were so insistent that once more she was back in the living room at Bartram's house; for the moment called to life by the emerald ring. Once more she was seeing the brother and sister as she had come upon them one summer day, when, as she stepped into the shadowy room, they had appeared to be as freshly dipped in some cool, watery light. Though she did not know, then, that it was to be the last time she should ever see them together, she had felt it as some special occasion. Lolling in two chairs, facing a glass table upon which rested two mellow drinks and

two immaculate iced cupcakes, they might have been listening to some enchantment beyond any that could be conjured up by the Mozart record they were actually playing. The White Queen was invisible. Baker was off chasing some light of love and the night of Nora's adventuring had led her this time straight to her brother. They were so given over to their private view that Mrs. Heath, after a few awkward comments about the weather, had made some excuse to slip away. Bartram had come to the door with her, smiling not for her, but out of his own happy jubilation. His sister barely moved her head in farewell and lay stretched in her chair, in a trance of ease, extending two slippered feet in green snake skin that made of her body in its frail white dress an attenuated blossom.

In the loneliness that close proximity to the happiness of others brings, Mrs. Heath felt for the absent Baker. He was beyond the reach of the enchanted music and on the summer road she fell for him as one outcast feels for another. The haunting music had dyed the air with some iridescence. Was she in the world or in a great bubble of light where the glossy reflections are not only of an actual willow tree and bangle of hollyhocks but of scenes picturing long-ago joys? Only innocent distant joys could endure in that frail bubble of air; she saw herself a child, sailing high as a cloud in the old swing; paddling in the brook; picking shells from the sand with the sea murmuring at low tide. The bond in the road broke the spell; the trees on the way toward home wore a monotonous green uniform as oppressively regimented as orphans.

When she saw Bartram again she knew that the light of that particular day had been too bright to last. He was absent-minded and flipped coins on the table. She found herself unconsciously raising her voice when she spoke to him as if he might be deaf. Once the hotel had seemed a jail. Now it appeared to be the country. He kept asking, "What am I sitting here for? For what am I waiting?" No money was coming in, only going out. Why should they act as if they could expect quiet lives? There was no sense in expecting that much from their lives. Heath incited Bartram and Bartram, Heath. In

the hours that Bartram haunted their house, the two invented ludicrous schemes to make money. They talked about rubber in Brazil. Bartram even began to sketch a few designs for boats. Then they decided it would be a fine daring idea to get hold of an old junk and trade in the China seas.

Omens and dreams began to interest them. "If I could see a good omen like old Xenophon, I would know where to march," Bartram declared. "Why do we take the pose of being so independent? All Xenophon needed was to see an eagle on the wing and then his mind was composed, and don't think he didn't act courageously." Heath told of a dream he had about his father's house struck by lightning and in flames. He was eight years old, barefooted, and too scared to rush in with a bucket of water for fear the hot cinders would burn his feet. They both complained tediously of not sleeping and argued indecently about the best way to induce sleep.

Sometimes she heard herself talking out loud in an empty kitchen as she washed the dishes. "The birds have it good, they can fly away." There was no honor in cooking and cleaning. The nihilistic pair even mocked her when she emptied ash trays. Heaven knows, she hardly knew what she did. But to keep one small dish clean, seemed urgent; she too was looking for omens that all might yet be well. She stuck to her painting grimly but there were days when she did not know whether to paint out or paint in. Now and again one or the other would stand behind her. She could feel their silent comment. Often it seemed to be their contempt.

They resented her for trying to be herself. They wanted her to give over, as they were doing. They even deserted her to take in the big city with an evening at the bars. When she heard their car returning at four in the morning, she called to them, her voice gay with a delirious sense of conspiring with them at last.

Then Bartram retreated to his own house. He was alone; the White Queen was extending some visit. On weekends he might show up, with a curious artificial smile and a girl from New York. "What do you think of the new one?" Heath would ask. And she found herself answering, "They're all alike. Handsome, if you like, but they might as well be Chinese. I can't talk to them."

Neither could she talk to Heath or Bartram. "What have I done that is wrong?" she asked herself. It angered her to feel guilty. "Why should I feel guilty?" she furiously questioned. But even as she questioned, she knew she could not hear the guilty answer. The wild bird in the attic had spoken. As she was in terror that this admission might ruin her life and Heath's. As for Bartram, what was there to say to him? He had become more remote than a stranger.

There would be evenings when the three would try elaborately to recover themselves. Each would outdo the other in thoughtful, almost timid courtesies. They might have been treating each other with the tender concern of invalids. A good meal was certain to revive them and going out to the dewy grass, they would marvel at the tall sycamore cutting into the blackness of the sky. Once she had wished that sometimes in a storm she would wake and lie fearful thinking of that tree, how immense it was, how near the house and how it could crush them in their bed as easily as a walnut if it should be uprooted in a storm. "Like a walnut," she had repeated, unreasonably moved. So uneasy a silence fell that she wished she had not spoken. A light breeze in the upper air ruffled the high plummy top of the great tree and a light from the house cast a weird glow along the ghostlike pale stem of the trunk. Bartram had laughed. "There you are," he cried. "An omen." His words, so lightly spoken, sounded terrifying in the night. An old oracle had found a voice.

They did not see him for days. When Heath finally walked over to Bartram's house, he came back shortly. "There's a family powwow going on," he said. "I expect they'll railroad Noel back to that hotel."

"He's a fool if they do," she cried. "Let him sell his car first. Mortgage his house. Why, his new book may even sell!"

"You think so?" asked Heath in a dangerously cold voice. She had burst out then, crying bitterly, "How do I know? How do I know? Don't torture me." But she could not have defined the nature of her torture. It was only that the house was too small. She could no longer breathe in it. When Bartram showed up late that night, she did not move, but sat languidly, like a sick person. He was too cheerful to notice her inhospitality. He was almost exalted.

He announced he had crossed the Rubicon. They had tried to high-pressure him back to the hotel but if it came to jails he would pick his own. Good old Baker had helped him cross up the plotters and had steered him to a better idea. Hollywood. Not in big-time way, nothing sensational, just a job. Then he wouldn't wonder how he was to live, and could write. Baker had done a stretch there and what Baker could do, he could do. He could break that jail if worst came to the worst but what he hoped was that he would work out some reconciliation scheme. A sort of truce in life. If he could prolong the truce, he might get something done. He named names; if they could do it, he could.

For a moment she couldn't answer him. She even felt contempt for writers who, in comparison to painters, needed so much. Give her paints, a clean room, food and love, and what more was needed. But writers seemed to need the world to bow down before they were convinced they were any good. Finally she said grudgingly, "Well, if that's the way it's to be, I'm glad to see

you take it on the chin. At least someone around here has had the guts to make a decision.” Heath snorted resentment for what seemed a slash at him and with the exaggeration of a moan, said, “Women are all alike. Happy to see us punch the old time clock.”

“Time clock? Time clock?” and she heard her voice as a disagreeable menacing echo of Heath and despaired. But I love him, she told herself, even as she heard her voice, surely belonging to someone other than herself and a most unpleasant person, toll out its doom. “I should say if anyone minded a time clock around here, it’s me. *I’ve* worked. Cooked, cleaned, even made those idiotic book jackets so we could eat. Time clock, indeed!”

Perhaps if she and Heath had been alone the shame would not have been so great. Spoken in the presence of Bartram the words stripped Heath to the bone. His white face silently accused her of robbing him of his pride, for all time, and she left the house abruptly. Lying on the damp grass in the darkness she accused herself, excused herself. I am robbing myself, not him. I know it. And she felt the pang of the future in all its bereavement full upon her. Oh, what tiny thing might yet save the day? But why should they expect the miracle? For lack of a handful of rice, babies perished somewhere, for a mistake in timing, cars crashed into cars, and the young went out to die in armies they had not chosen. If she gathered such thoughts, it was her way of composing herself. If there was to be suffering one should not feel entirely alone. But the next moment she was taxing all her resourcefulness for new hope. Perhaps if she made a drastic sign to Heath and one day simply burned up his paper boats....

But it was Bartram who had burned his boats and, accepting his own sentence, had decided on Hollywood.

She had gone so far back in her thoughts that she hardly recognized the voice of Baker which had been for some minutes monotonously trickling into her consciousness with patient insistence. "... and if you managed to get rid of that young ass, we could talk better," he was saying.

"I don't think he can hear," said Mrs. Heath, uncomfortably aware of the sound of her voice that seemed to belong to another day and saturated with that day's burden. "See, he's left us," and Timothy had indeed tripped off to join some crony.

"I suppose he is filling your ear about me," said Baker. "But what can I do? That piece. Simply puerile. I won't give my O. K. to it. That's flat. I don't believe in the fashionable personalization racket anyhow. All about Paris. I ask you. Noel was a fool in Paris. How he wore Brooks Brothers suits. As if he couldn't have written mother-naked. His hunting. Only thing Timothy didn't think of was to get a count of the birds he shot. I can't see it. No."

His No had so quarrelsome a sound that she almost reversed her sympathy for him. After all, it was Bartram, not Baker, who was dead. His work was now at Baker's mercy and the sound of his voice seemed to hint that it was at the mercy of his revenge. But the source of that revenge, if such it were, was in some wound and her own wounds forced her to blunt her accusations to a mild, "But why did you let the boy begin? You hardly knew him?" Baker's answer was to groan, "God knows. Nora liked him. He adored the idea of Noel." The tone of his voice was a wreath to the young Noel, his inseparable early friend, who had *adored* him. Whether he knew it or not, Baker, too, was an actor in that curious irrational drama of which Bartram, the writer, had been the master.

Between that idyllic afternoon at Bartram's house and this moment at the bar so many changes had been wrought that she seemed to look back from

another universe. Imperceptibly the alterations had brought the actual world closer to the horrors of Bartram's kingdom ruled by the cabbage-heads. Even the persons at the bar signified by their scars that they had suffered on some desert isle of the spirit not so remote from that abandoned spot where Bartram had planned to disenchant his victims in the novel he never lived to complete. The bar with its glittering array of glass gave the illusion of any bar on a ship at sea where the passengers congregate in an ill-founded hope of lusting intimacy. Baker's attempt to catch her off guard and win her for his side had no better foundation. She would get up and go and when Timothy and the Bakers had vanished, Heath and Bartram would still be with her.

As for Bartram's work, it would yet soar. With or without Baker.

Timothy had returned, whispering again and she frowned at him as she turned to listen. He was muttering that there had really not been too much to say about the Hollywood phase of Bartram's existence and he had practically ignored it. He had written one book out there, the best anyone had yet written on that subject, and, he ventured to say, the best that anyone would ever write. Didn't she agree? By not focusing in the conventional way on the industry but merely on the distorted individuals who swarmed around like maggots, he had really made the revelation. Oh, the absolute, complete revelation! In his youthful enthusiasm, Timothy had the look of an inspired apostle. He wanted her to know that it wasn't his hurt ego that was at stake. The fact was that Baker — and his voice dropped so low she could but barely decipher it — had sabotaged the proposed publication of the omnibus which was tied up by a contract to include the introduction. And damned smart of him. What did Baker take him for, a booby? But Baker wasn't God. There would be an edict later than his. She could take his word for it. And he just wanted to go on record...

But what he wanted to go on record about, Mrs. Heath could not say. (“I don’t care what he wants to go on record about,” she told herself. What would it matter? She could no longer bear to recall her shameful behavior in the shameful scenes that led to the final one when Heath had actually sailed away, on a real, not a paper, boat, and with another woman. She remembered that Bartram had locked up his house a month or so before that time and had driven off in his car. “Watch out,” she had called to him. “You may live to be one of the best dressed men in America.” If it was autumn, the marvellous season, no one would have known it.

He had gone with a certain proud acceptance of what he took to be his destiny, reiterating over and over that one had to live and this could be a way. It was the twentieth century, not the eighteenth, he apologized. It had been his mother’s horrid reality that he had embraced out of any possible alternative he might have had the knack to manage. That he would continue to write it “out there” was a foregone conclusion. How, he did not know. But he would.

Well, he had. If his mother’s world had engulfed him he had made a lamentation that seemed to be in itself praise for an invisible kingdom where the cabbage-kings would be the exiles. Rejected by his business-minded relatives, goaded by his apparent ill success, faithful to his guilty love, he had plunged into his nightmare, and once there, deep at last, he had fled as often as he could to the enchanted woods.

He had fled to the woods where he had shot doves — so he said — and, that he had married or what he had made of it, did not seem to count. He had shot doves. That, she would insist. And coming back from the woods in a station wagon with a load of doves, not in the fall of the year but close to mid-winter, he had charged, head-on, with his wife and spotted dog, into another headlong car and ended it for all of them, except the dog, who had

stepped out free in the whirl of broken and scattered wings where Bartram lay.

“All I want to say,” argued Timothy, forgetting in his earnestness to lower his voice, “is that it doesn’t matter about my end of it. It’s the work. Has anyone a right to keep it down?” Looking at the young man Mrs. Heath respected him for the first time, for he was carried away in a passion of selfless interest which he barely understood. It touched him with the only kind of dignity she felt he might ever know and she tapped his hand, lightly, smiling. “It won’t be kept down.” And because she had felt the full force of so much negation, she had to say with a conviction as unreasonable as hope itself, “I’m sure of it.”