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John O'Hara

Complete Works

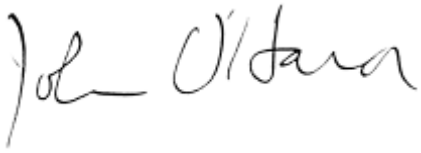
Series Sixteen

The Complete Works of

JOHN O'HARA

(1905-1970)

Contents



Version 1

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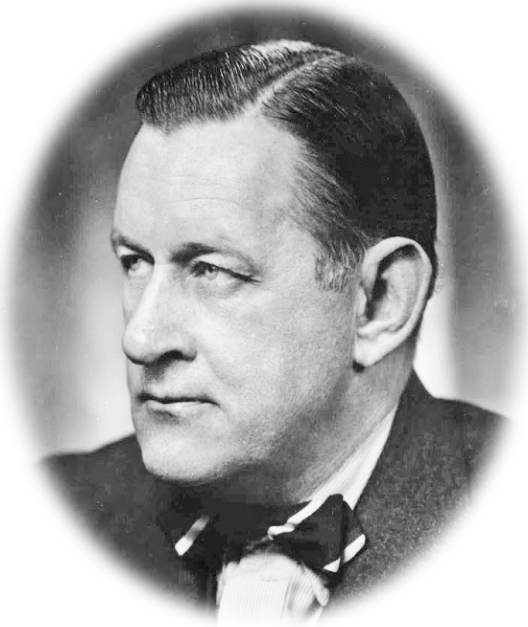
JOHN O'HARA



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Complete Works of John O'Hara

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Contact: sales@delphiclassics.com

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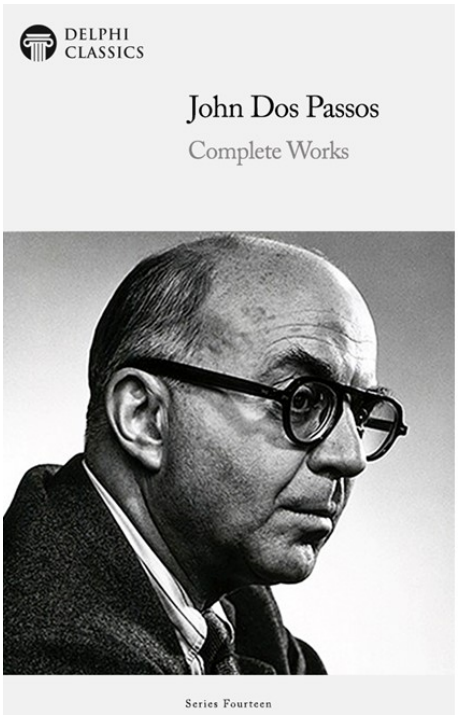

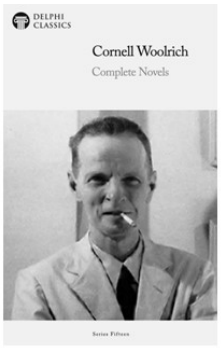

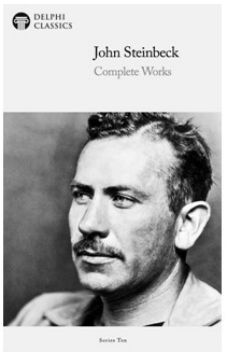

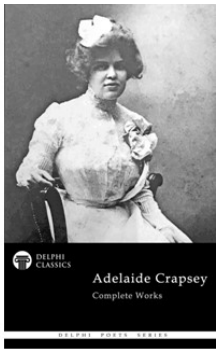

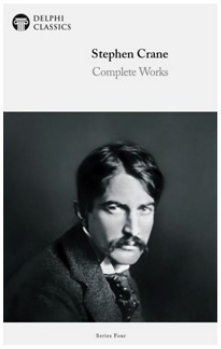

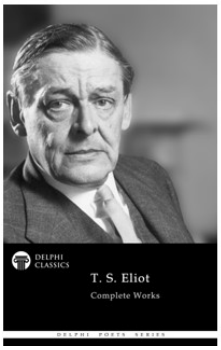

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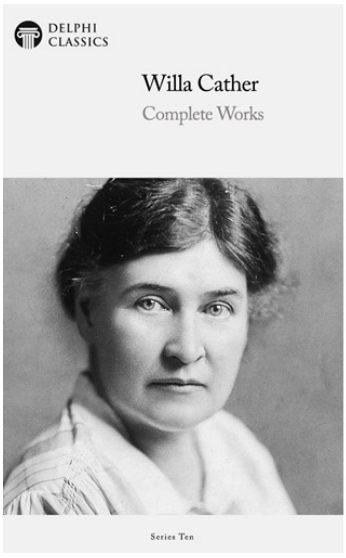
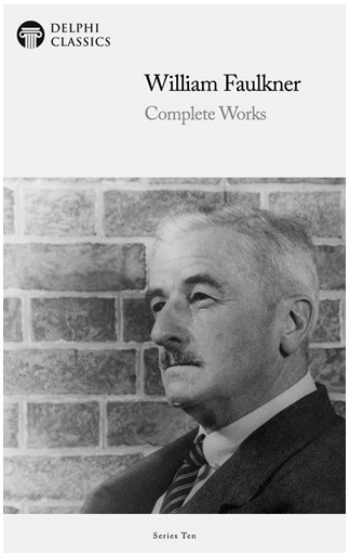
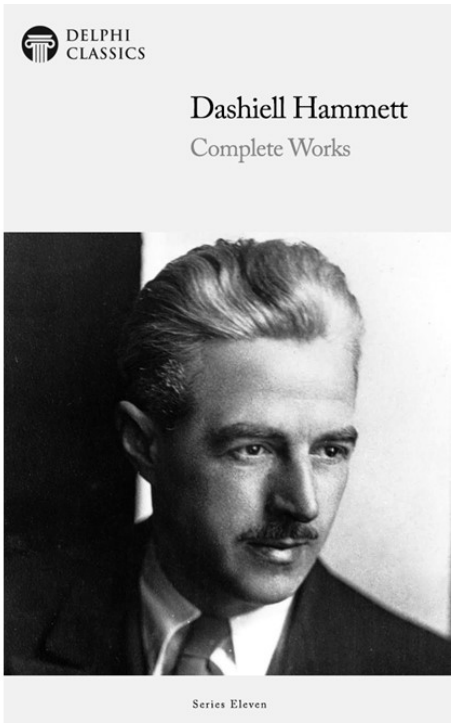
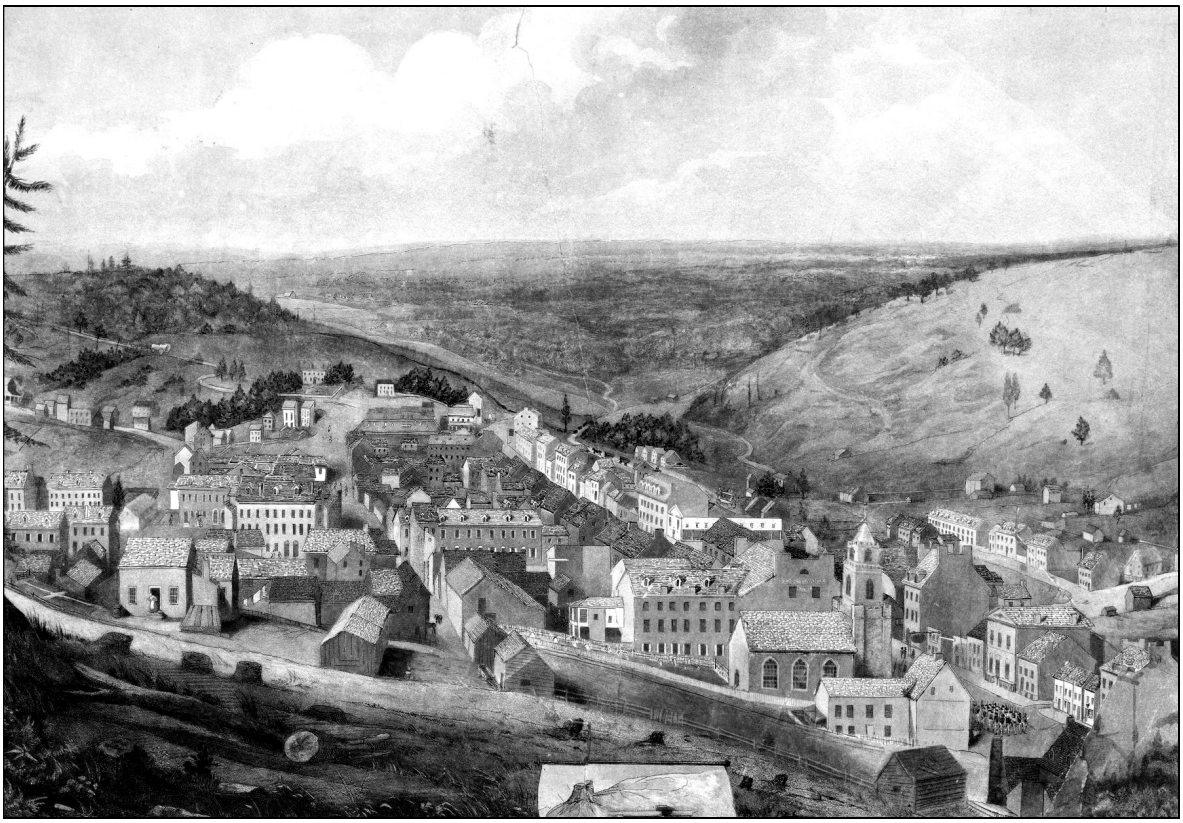






The Novels



Pottsville is a city and the county seat of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, c. 1856 — John O'Hara's birthplace

Pottsville in recent times

Appointment in Samarra (1934)

John O'Hara was born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, to an affluent Irish American family. Though they lived among the gentry of eastern Pennsylvania, his Irish Catholic background gave him the perspective of an outsider to elite WASP society, a theme he would explore time and time again in his fiction. He attended the secondary school Niagara Prep in Lewiston, New York, where he was named Class Poet for 1924. His father died about that time, leaving him unable to afford Yale, the college of his dreams, and he fell overnight from the privileged life of a wealthy doctor's family, including club memberships, riding and dance lessons, fancy cars and domestic servants in the house. By all accounts, this social fall afflicted O'Hara with status anxiety for the rest of his life.

Initially, he worked as a reporter for various newspapers. Moving to New York City, he submitted numerous short stories to magazines. During the early part of his career, he was also a film critic, a radio commentator and a press agent. In 1934, he published his first novel, *Appointment in Samarra*. It concerns the self-destruction of the fictional character Julian English, a wealthy car dealer, who was once a member of the social elite of Gibbsville — O'Hara's fictionalised version of Pottsville. The book created controversy due to its inclusion of frank sexual content. The novel's title is a reference to W. Somerset Maugham's retelling of an ancient Mesopotamian tale which appears as an epigraph for the novel:

> "There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

Appointment in Samarra describes how, over the course of three days, Julian English destroys himself via a series of impulsive acts. O'Hara never provides any obvious cause or explanation for his behaviour, which is apparently predestined by his nature. Facts about Julian gradually emerge throughout the novel. He is about 30 years old, college educated, owns a well-established Cadillac dealership, and within the Gibbsville community belongs to the prestigious "Lantenengo Street crowd". He is introduced seven pages into the novel, in the thoughts of the wife of one of his employees:

> "She wouldn't trade her life for Caroline English's, not if you paid her. She wondered if Julian and Caroline were having another one of their battle royales.."

Within the three days of the novel, Julian gets drunk several times. Alcoholism would trouble O'Hara throughout his career as a writer. An especially notable long lyrical paragraph describes one of Julian's hangovers. During the first of two suicidal reveries, we learn that his greatest fear is that he will eventually lose his wife to

another man. Yet within three days, he sexually propositions two women, succeeding once, with an ease and confidence suggesting this is well-practiced behavior.

On successive days, he commits three impulsive acts, which are serious enough to damage his reputation, his business, and his relationship with his wife. First, he throws a drink in the face of Harry Reilly, a man we learn later is an important investor in his business. In a curious device, repeated for each of the incidents, the omniscient narrator never actually relates us the details of the incident. He shows us Julian fantasising in great detail about throwing the drink; but, we are told, "he knew he would not throw the drink" because he was in financial debt to Harry and because "people would say he was sore because Reilly... was elaborately attentive to Caroline English". The narrator's vision shifts elsewhere, and several pages later we are surprised to hear a character report "Jeezozz H. Kee-rist! Julian English just threw a highball in Harry Reilly's face!"

The second event occurs at a roadhouse, where Julian goes with his wife and some friends. He gets drunk and invites a provocatively clad woman to go out to his car with him. She is, in fact, a gangster's girlfriend, and one of the gangster's men is present, sent to watch her. Both Julian's wife and the gangster's aide see the couple leave. What actually happens in the car is left ambiguous, but that is unimportant, since all observers assume that a sexual act took place. There is not any assumption that violence will ensue. However, the gangster is a valued automobile customer, who in the past has recommended Julian's dealership to his acquaintances. As Julian is driven home, pretending to be asleep, he feels "tremendous excitement".

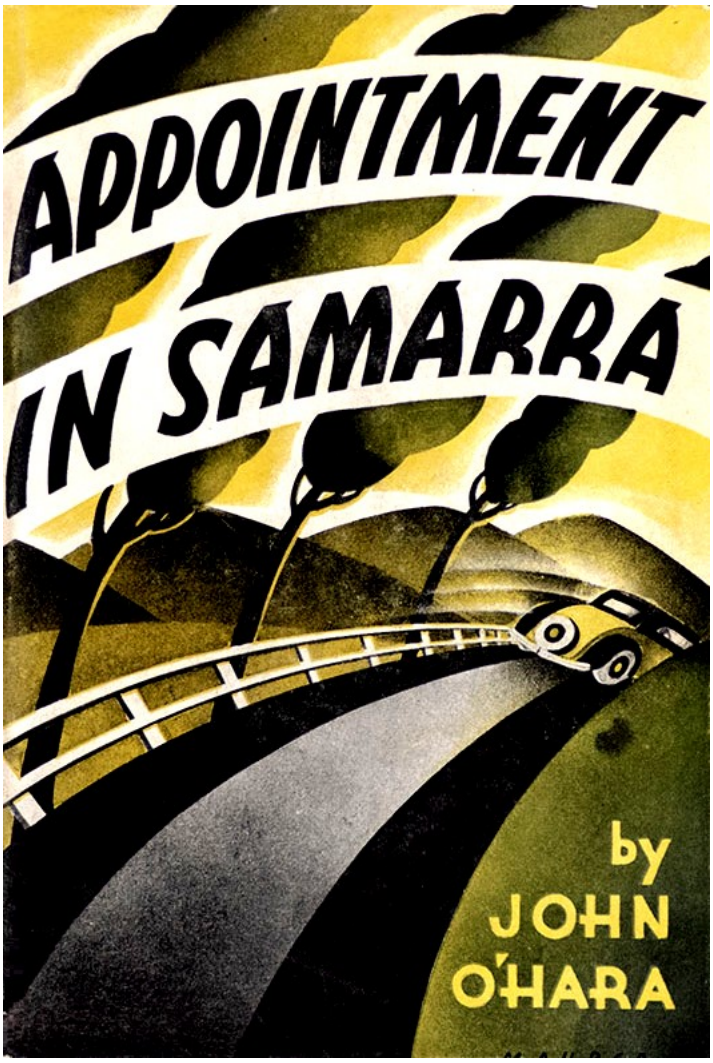
Thirdly, the next day, during lunch at the Lantenengo Club, Julian engages in a complicated brawl with a one-armed war veteran named Froggy Ogden, who is also Caroline's cousin. Julian thought of Froggy as an old friend, but Froggy acknowledges to Julian that he has always detested him and had not wanted his cousin to marry him. In the brawl, which Froggy has arguably started, Julian hits Froggy and at least one of a group of bystanders in the club.

O'Hara's tales are notorious for pushing the limits of what was considered tolerable in a mainstream novel. His second novel, *BUtterfield 8*, was even banned from importation into Australia until 1963. *Appointment in Samarra* was likewise hugely controversial. The novelist Sinclair Lewis openly denounced its sensuality as "nothing but infantilism – the erotic visions of a hobbledehoy behind the barn." Many of O'Hara's descriptions of sexuality are indirect, not openly stating a sexual reference, though this was still unusual for the time.

In spite of his detractors, O'Hara's novel was not without early admirers. The celebrated modernist author Ernest Hemingway was a firm supporter of O'Hara's work and wrote:

> "If you want to read a book by a man who knows exactly what he is writing about and has written it marvelously well, read *Appointment in Samarra*."

Today, it enjoys the status of a vintage modern classic. In 1998 the Modern Library ranked *Appointment in Samarra* as 22nd on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century. The great critic John Updike later declared the novel to be "One of the great novels of small-town American life".



The first edition

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O'Hara, close to the time of publication

TO

F. P. A.

DEATH SPEAKS:

There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

1

OUR STORY OPENS in the mind of Luther L. (L for LeRoy) Fliegler, who is lying in his bed, not thinking of anything, but just aware of sounds, conscious of his own breathing, and sensitive to his own heartbeats. Lying beside him is his wife, lying on her right side and enjoying her sleep. She has earned her sleep, for it is Christmas morning, strictly speaking, and all the day before she has worked like a dog, cleaning the turkey and baking things, and, until a few hours ago, trimming the tree. The awful proximity of his heartbeats makes Luther Fliegler begin to want his wife a little, but Irma can say no when she is tired. It is too much trouble, she says when she is tired, and she won't take any chances. Three children is enough; three children in ten years. So Luther Fliegler does not reach out for her. It is Christmas morning, and he will do her the favor of letting her enjoy her sleep; a favor which she will never know he did for her. And it is a favor, all right, because Irma likes Christmas too, and on this one morning she might not mind the trouble, might be willing to take a chance. Luther Fliegler more actively stifled the little temptation and thought the hell with it, and then turned and put his hands around his wife's waist and caressed the little rubber tire of flesh across her diaphragm. She began to stir and then she opened her eyes and said: "My God, Lute, what are you doing?"

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Don't, will you please?" she said, but she smiled happily and put her arms around his big back. "God, you're crazy," she said. "Oh, but I love you." And for a little while Gibbsville knew no happier people than Luther Fliegler and his wife, Irma. Then Luther went to sleep, and Irma got up and then came back to the bedroom, stopping to look out the window before she got into bed again.

Lantenengo Street had a sort of cottony silence to it. The snow was piled high in the gutters, and the street was open only to the width of two cars. It was too dark for the street to look cottony, and there was an illusion even about the silence. Irma thought she could yell her loudest and not be heard, so puffily silent did it look, but she also knew that if she wanted to (which she didn't) she could carry on a conversation with Mrs. Bromberg across the way, without either of them raising her voice. Irma chided herself for thinking this way about Mrs. Bromberg on Christmas morning, but immediately she defended herself: Jews do not observe Christmas, except to make more money out of Christians, so you do not have to treat Jews any different on Christmas than on any other day of the year. Besides, having the Brombergs on Lantenengo Street hurt real estate values. Everybody said so. The Brombergs, Lute had it on good authority, had paid thirty thousand for the Price property, which was twelve thousand five hundred more than Will Price had been asking; but if the Brombergs wanted to live on Lantenengo Street, they could pay for it. Irma wondered if it was true that Sylvia Bromberg's sister and brother-in-law were dickering for the McAdams property next door. She wouldn't be surprised. Pretty soon there would be a whole colony of Jews in the neighborhood, and the Fliegler children and all the other nice children in the neighborhood would grow up with Jewish accents.

Irma Fliegler had hated Sylvia Bromberg since the summer before, when Sylvia was having a baby and screamed all through a summer evening. She could have gone to the Catholic hospital; she knew she was having a baby, and it was awful to have

those screams and have to make up stories to tell the nice children why Mrs. Bromberg was screaming. It was disgusting.

Irma turned away from the window and went back to bed, praying that she would not get caught, and hating the Brombergs for moving into the neighborhood. Lute was sleeping peacefully and Irma was glad of the warmth of his big body and the heavy smell of him. She reached over and rubbed her fingers across his shoulder where there were four navel-like scars, shrapnel scars. Lute belonged on Lantenengo Street, and she as his wife belonged on Lantenengo Street. And not only as his wife. Her family had been in Gibbsville a lot longer than the great majority of the people who lived on Lantenengo Street. She was a Doane, and Grandfather Doane had been a drummer boy in the Mexican War and had a Congressional Medal of Honor from the Civil War. Grandfather Doane had been a member of the School Board for close to thirty years, before he died, and he was the only man in this part of the State who had the Congressional Medal of Honor. Lute had the French Croix de Guerre with palm for something he said he did when he was drunk, and there were a couple of men who got Distinguished Service Crosses and Distinguished Service Medals during the War, but Grandfather Doane had the only Congressional Medal of Honor. Irma still thought she was entitled to the medal, because she had been Grandfather Doane's favorite; everyone knew that. But her brother Willard and his wife, they got it because Willard was carrying on the name. Well, they could have it. It was Christmas, and Irma did not begrudge it to them as long as they took care of it and appreciated it.

Irma lay there, fully awake, and heard a sound: cack, thock, cack, thock, cack, thock. A car with a loose cross-chain banging against the fender, coming slowly up or down Lantenengo Street, she could not make out which. Then it came a little faster and the sound changed to cack, cack, cack, cack-cack-cack-cack. It passed her house and she could tell it was an open car, because she heard the flapping of the side curtains. It probably was a company car, a Dodge. Probably an accident at one of the mines and one of the bosses was being called out in the middle of the night, the night before Christmas, to take charge of the accident. Awful. She was glad Lute did not work for the Coal & Iron Company. You had to be a college graduate, Penn State or Lehigh, which Lute was not, to get any kind of a decent job with the Coal & Iron, and when you did get a job you had to wait for someone to die before you got a decent promotion. And called out at all hours of the day and night, like a doctor, when the pumps didn't work or something else happened. And even your ordinary work on the engineering corps, you came home dirty, looking like an ordinary miner in short rubber boots and cap and lunch can. A college graduate, and you had to undress in the cellar when you came home. Lute was right: he figured if you sell two Cadillacs a month, you make expenses, and anything over that is so much gravy, and meanwhile you look like a decent human being and you're not taking chances of being crushed to death under a fall of top rock, or blown to hell in an explosion of black damp. Inside the mines was no place for a married man, Lute always said; not if he gave a damn about his wife and children.

And Lute was a real family man. Irma shifted in bed until her back was against Lute's back. She held her hand in back of her, gently clasping Lute's forearm. Next year, according to Hoover, things would be much better all around, and they would be able to do a lot of things they had planned to do, but had had to postpone because of this slump. Irma heard the sound of another loose cross-chain, fast when she first heard it, and then slow and finally stopping. The car was getting a new start, in low gear. Irma recognized it: Dr. Newton's Buick coach. Newton, the dentist, and his wife, Lillian, who had the house two doors below. They would be getting home from

the dance at the country club. Ted Newton was probably a little plastered, and Lillian was probably having her hands full with him, because she had to get home early on account of being pregnant. Three months gone, or a little over. Irma wondered what time it was. She reached out and found Lute's watch. Only twenty after three. Good Lord, she thought it was much later than that.

Twenty after three. The country club dance would just be getting good, Irma supposed. The kids home from boarding school and college, and the younger marrieds, most of whom she knew by their first names, and then the older crowd. Next year she and Lute would be going to those dances and having fun. She could have gone to the one tonight, but she and Lute agreed that even though you knew the people by their first names, it wasn't right to go down to the club unless you were a member. Every time you went, whoever you were the guest of had to pay a dollar, and even at that you were not supposed to go under any circumstances more than twice in any quarter of the year. That was the rule. Next year she and Lute would be members, and it would be a good thing, because Lute would be able to make better contacts and sell more Cadillacs to club members. But as Lute said: "We'll join when we can afford it. I don't believe in that idea of mixing your social life with your business life too much. You get signing checks for prospects down at the country club, and you wind up behind the eight-ball. We'll join when we can afford it." Lute was all right. Dependable and honest as the day is long, and never looked at another woman, even in fun. That was one reason why she was content to wait until they could really afford to join the club. If she had married, say, Julian English, she would be a member of the club, but she wouldn't trade her life for Caroline English's, not if you paid her. She wondered if Julian and Caroline were having another one of their battle royals.

II

The smoking room of the Lantenengo Country Club was so crowded it did not seem as though another person could get in, but people moved in and out somehow. The smoking room had become co-educational; originally, when the club was built in 1920, it had been for men only, but during many wedding receptions women had broken the rule against their entering; wedding receptions were private parties, and club rules could be broken when the whole club was taken over by one party. So the feminine members had muscled in on the smoking room, and now there were as many females as males in the room. It was only a little after three o'clock, but the party had been going on forever, and hardly anyone wondered when it would end. Anyone who wanted it to end could go home. He would not be missed. The people who stayed were the people who belonged on the party in the first place. Any member of the club could come to the dance, but not everyone who came to the dance was really welcome in the smoking room. The smoking room crowd always started out with a small number, always the same people. The Whit Hofmans, the Julian Englishes, the Froggy Ogdens and so on. They were the spenders and drinkers and socially secure, who could thumb their noses and not have to answer to anyone except their own families. There were about twenty persons in this group, and your standing in the younger set of Gibbsville could be judged by the assurance with which you joined the nucleus of the smoking room crowd. By three o'clock everyone who wanted to had been in the smoking room; the figurative bars were let down at about one-thirty, which time coincided with the time at which the Hofmans and Englishes and so on had got drunk enough to welcome anyone, the less eligible the better.

So far nothing terrible had occurred. Young Johnny Dibble had been caught stealing liquor from someone's locker and was kicked in the behind. Elinor Holloway's shoulder strap had slipped or been pulled down, momentarily revealing her left breast, which most of the young men present had seen and touched at one time or another. Frank Gorman, Georgetown, and Dwight Ross, Yale, had fought, cried, and kissed after an argument about what the team Gorman had not made would have done to the team Ross was substitute halfback on. During one of those inexplicable silences, Ted Newton was heard to say to his wife: "I'll drink as much as I God damn please." Elizabeth Gorman, the fat niece of Harry Reilly, whose social-climbing was a sight to behold, had embarrassed her uncle by belching loud and unashamed. Lorimer Gould III, of New York, who was visiting someone or other, had been told nine times that Gibbsville was dull as dishwater the year 'round, but everyone from out of town thought it was the peppiest place in the country at Christmas. Bobby Herrmann, who was posted for non-payment of dues and restaurant charges, was present in a business suit, gloriously drunk and persona grata at the inner sanctum (he was famous for having said, on seeing the golf course without a person playing on it: "The course is rather delinquent today"), and explaining to the wives and fiancées of his friends that he would like to dance with them, but could not because he was posted. Everyone was drinking, or had just finished a drink, or was just about to take one. The drinks were rye and ginger ale, practically unanimously, except for a few highballs of applejack and White Rock or apple and ginger ale, or gin and ginger ale. Only a few of the inner sanctum members were drinking Scotch. The liquor, that is, the rye, was all about the same: most people bought drug store rye on prescriptions (the physicians who were club members saved "scrips" for their patients), and cut it with alcohol and colored water. It was not poisonous, and it got you tight, which was all that was required of it and all that could be said for it.

The vibrations of the orchestra (Tommy Lake's Royal Collegians, a Gibbsville band) reached the smoking room, and the youngest people in the room began to hum Something To Remember You By. The young men addressed the girls: "Dance?" and the girls said: "Love to," or "Sa-well," or "Uh-huh." Slowly the room became less crowded. A few remained around one fairly larger table in a corner, which by common consent or eminent domain or something was conceded to be the Whit Hofman–crowd's table. Harry Reilly was telling a dirty story in an Irish brogue, which was made slightly more realistic or funny by the fact that his bridgework, done before the Reillys came into the big money, did not fit too well, and Harry as a result always whistled faintly when he spoke. Reilly had a big, jovial white face, gray hair and a big mouth with thin lips. His eyes were shrewd and small, and he was beginning to get fat. He was in tails, and his white tie was daintily soiled from his habit of touching it between gestures of the story. His clothes were good, but he had been born in a tiny coal-mining village, or "patch," as these villages are called; and Reilly himself was the first to say: "You can take the boy out of the patch, but you can't take the patch out of the boy."

Reilly told stories in paragraphs. While he was speaking he would lean forward with an arm on his knee, like a picture you have seen of a cowboy. When he came to the end of the paragraph he would look quickly over his shoulder, as though he expected to be arrested before finishing the story; he would finger his tie and close his mouth tight, and then he would turn back to his audience and go into the next paragraph: "…So Pat said…" It was funny to watch people listening to Harry telling a story. If they took a sip of a drink in the middle of a paragraph, they did it slowly, as though concealing it. And they always knew when to laugh, even when it was a

Catholic joke, because Reilly signaled the pay-off line by slapping his leg just before it was delivered. When everyone had laughed (Reilly would look at each person to see that he or she was getting it), he would follow with a short history of the story, where he had heard it and under what circumstances; and the history would lead to another story. Everyone else usually said: "Harry, I don't know how you remember them. I hear a lot of stories, but I never can think of them." Harry had a great reputation as a wit — a witty Irishman.

Julian English sat there watching him, through eyes that he permitted to appear sleepier than they felt. Why, he wondered, did he hate Harry Reilly? Why couldn't he stand him? What was there about Reilly that caused him to say to himself: "If he starts one more of those moth-eaten stories I'll throw this drink in his face." But he knew he would not throw this drink or any other drink in Harry Reilly's face. Still, it was fun to think about it. (That was the pay-off line of the story: Old maid goes to confession, tells priest she has committed a sin of immorality. Priest wants to know how many times. Old maid says once, thirty years ago— "but Faathurr, I like to think aboat it.") Yes, it would be fun to watch. The whole drink, including the three round-cornered lumps of ice. At least one lump would hit Reilly in the eye, and the liquid would splash all over his shirt, slowly wilting it as the Scotch and soda trickled down the bosom to the crevice at the waistcoat. The other people would stand up in amazed confusion. "Why, Ju!" they would say. Caroline would say, "Julian!" Froggy Ogden would be alarmed, but he would burst out laughing. So would Elizabeth Gorman, laughing her loud haw-haw-haw, not because she enjoyed seeing her uncle being insulted, nor because she wanted to be on Julian's side; but because it would mean a situation, something to have been in on.

"Didn't you ever hear that one?" Reilly was saying. "Mother of God, that's one of the oldest Catholic stories there is. I heard a priest tell me that one, oh, it must of been fifteen twenty years ago. Old Father Burke, used to be pastor out at Saint Mary Star of the Sea, out in Collieryville. Yess, I heard that one a long while ago. He was a good-natured old codger. I remember…"

The liquid, Julian reflected, would trickle down inside the waistcoat and down, down into Reilly's trousers, so that even if the ice did not hurt his eye, the spots on his fly would be so embarrassing he would leave. And there was one thing Reilly could not stand; he could not stand being embarrassed. That was why it would be so good. He could just see Reilly, not knowing what to do the second after the drink hit him. Reilly had gone pretty far in his social climbing, by being a "good fellow" and "being himself," and by sheer force of the money which everyone knew the Reillys had. Reilly was on the greens committee and the entertainment committee, because as a golfer he got things done; he paid for entire new greens out of his own pocket, and he could keep a dance going till six o'clock by giving the orchestra a big tip. But he was not yet an officer in the Gibbsville Assembly. He was a member of the Assembly, but not a member of the governors and not eligible to hold office or serve on the important committees. So he was not unreservedly sure of his social standing, and damn well Julian knew it. So when the drink hit him he most likely would control himself sufficiently to remember who threw it, and he therefore would not say the things he would like to say. The yellow son of a bitch probably would pull out his handkerchief and try to laugh it off, or if he saw that no one else thought there was anything funny about it, he would give an imitation of a coldly indignant gentleman, and say: "That was a hell of a thing to do. What was the idea of that?"

"And I would like to say," Julian said to himself, "that I thought it was about time someone shut him up."

But he knew he would not throw this drink, now almost gone, or the fresh drink which he was about to mix. Not at Harry Reilly. It was not through physical fear of Reilly; Reilly was more than forty, and though a good golfer he was short-winded and fat, and unquestionably would do anything in the world to avoid a fist fight. For one thing, Harry Reilly now practically owned the Gibbsville-Cadillac Motor Car Company, of which Julian was president. For another thing, if he should throw a drink at Harry Reilly, people would say he was sore because Reilly always danced a lot with and was elaborately attentive to Caroline English.

His thoughts were interrupted by Ted Newton, the dentist, who stopped at the table for a quick straight drink. Ted was wearing a raccoon coat, the first season for it if not actually the very first time he had had it on. "Going?" said Julian. That was all he felt like giving to Newton, and more than he would have given him if Newton had not been a Cadillac prospect. Had a Buick now.

"Yeah. Lillian's tired and her folks are coming tomorrow from Harrisburg. They're driving over and they'll be here around one, one-fifteen."

Never mind their schedule, thought Julian. "Really?" he said aloud. "Well, Merry Christmas."

"Thanks, Ju," said Newton. "Merry Christmas to you. See you at the Bachelors'?"

"Right," said Julian, and added in an undertone, while the others said good-night to Newton: "And don't call me Ju."

The orchestra was playing Body and Soul, working very hard at the middle passage of the chorus. The musicians were very serious and frowning, except the drummer, who was showing his teeth to all the dancers and slapping the wire brushes on the snare drum. Wilhelmina Hall, six years out of Westover, was still the best dancer in the club, and was getting the best rush. She would get twice around the dance floor with the same partner, then someone would step out of the stag line and cut in. Everyone cut in on her, because she was such a good dancer, and because everyone said she was not in love, unless it was with Jimmy Malloy, and she certainly wasn't in love with him. At least that's what everybody said. The males who cut in on her were of all ages, whereas Kay Verner, now at Westover, and much the prettiest girl, got her rush almost exclusively from the prep school–college crowd. And she was in love with Henry Lewis. At least that's what everyone said. Constance Walker, the little fool, was not wearing her glasses again, as if everyone in the club didn't know she couldn't see across the table without them. She was known on the stag line as a girl who would *give you a dance;* she was at Smith, and was a good student. She had a lovely figure, especially her breasts, and she was a passionate little thing who wasn't homely but was plain and, if she only knew it, didn't look well without her glasses. She was so eager to please that when a young man would cut in on her, he got the full benefit of her breasts and the rest of her body. The young men were fond of saying, before leaving to cut in on Constance: "Guess I'll go get a work-out." The curious thing about her was that four of the young men had had work-outs with her off the dance floor, and as a result Constance was not a virgin; yet the young men felt so ashamed of themselves for yielding to a lure that they could not understand, in a girl who was accepted as not attractive, that they never exchanged information as to Constance Walker's sex life, and she was reputed to be chaste. The worst thing that was said about her was: "Yeah, you may think she isn't attractive, and I agree with you. But did you ever see her in a bathing suit? Hot-cha!"

The band was playing Something To Remember You By.

The stag line was scattered over the floor by the time the band was working on the second chorus of the tune, and when Johnny Dibble suddenly appeared, breathless, at

the place where his cronies customarily stood, there were only two young men for him to address. “Jeez,” he said. “Jeezozz H. Kee-rist. You hear about what just happened?”

“No. No,” they said.

“You didn’t? About Julian English?”

“No. No. What was it?”

“Julian English. He just threw a highball in Harry Reilly’s face. Jeest!”

III

Al Grecco knew the road from Philadelphia to Gibbsville pretty much as an engineman knows the right-of-way. On a regularly scheduled run, an experienced engineman can look at his watch and tell you that in four-and-one-half minutes his train will be passing a schoolhouse to the right of the tracks. Or, he can look out at a haystack or a barn or other landmark, and tell you to the half-minute what time it is. Al Grecco could do almost the same thing. He knew the 94½ miles from Philadelphia to Gibbsville — he knew it cold. And it certainly was cold tonight. The gasps of wind told him that. It was warm in the car, with the heater on. He was driving a V-61 Cadillac coach, and he had lowered the window in the door at his right about three inches from the top. He was an expert driver. He had made the trip to Philadelphia several times in under two hours, leaving Gibbsville in the early morning; and tonight he automatically checked his time as he was passing the gate posts which marked the entrance to the Lantenengo Country Club: two hours and a little over forty-five minutes from his hotel in Philadelphia. Not bad, considering the snowdrifts and the condition of the roads down on the lower entrance to Reading, where cars were scattered all along both sides of the road. He was going as fast as he could with safety. It was a business trip.

Although he never had seen anything but the roof of it, Al knew that the country club was built on a plateau. The clubhouse was scarcely visible from the state highway. Cars leaving the club did not come into view from the highway until they were a third of the way down the long drive, which opened upon the highway at the gate posts. Al Grecco noticed as he was passing that another Cadillac, a big sedan job, was just coming into sight on the drive. The moment he saw the car he recognized it. He more or less made it his business to be able to recognize important cars, and this sedan looked important. It was a demonstrator, and would be driven by Julian English, the Cadillac distributor.

“The louse,” said Al. But he was not angry with Julian. It was because of an order from Julian that he had had to go to Philadelphia. It looked like Julian was going to have a good party some time between Christmas and New Year’s, because he had asked Ed Charney, the big shot, if he could get him a case of champagne, good champagne, and deliver it the day after Christmas. Ed, of course, said he’d be only too glad to get some good champagne, and he had attended to the matter himself. Ed had phoned Philadelphia and made sure that it was good champagne. Ed liked Julian English. Julian English belonged to the Lantenengo Street crowd and he was the kind of a guy that was a high class guy and would be a high class guy in any crowd. You could tell by looking at him he was a high class guy. And he always spoke to the boys on the street. He wasn’t like some of them (mostly the older guys), who would do business with Ed, say business at the bank or insurance or something on that order, but they wouldn’t even see Ed when they met him on the street. Or even guys who didn’t know Ed, they would call up and say this was So-and-so, president of such and

such a company, and could Ed do them a favor and get a case of genuine Scotch at a good price. In the early days Ed would try to put himself out for the respectable people, the ones that thought they were high class. But Ed saw it didn't pay; they didn't appreciate it when he did them a favor, and they didn't even say hello to him the next time he saw one of them on the street. So there were only a few of the Lantenengo Street crowd who could get a favor out of Ed without paying cash on the line for it. But Julian English certainly was one of them. And it wasn't only because he spoke to you; it was the way he did it. He spoke to you like a human being, and now and then he even sat down for a cup of coffee with Ed. "That English, he's my boy," Ed once said, and that was enough. "For my money," Ed said, "I will take that English. He's a right guy." That was plenty. In Ed's position you had to be a good judge of what a man was like, and the English was copacetic. And Al agreed with Ed. Not that it would have made any difference if he didn't agree with Ed. You either agreed with Ed, between Reading and Wilkes-Barre, or you got a job in the mines. That was the *least* that could happen to you if you didn't agree with Ed: you just weren't in the mob any more. The worst could happen to you was you would get held by a couple of the boys while a couple others kicked you till they got tired kicking you, and then they would put a couple of slugs in you and that was that. But Ed very seldom had occasion to do that kind of thing. In the beginning, yes. There were several cases that the state police were still bothering about that Al knew more about than he wished he knew. That was when Ed was beginning to organize booze and the girls and the numbers racket. He had to put the screws on a few people here and there, or they would have become pests. You had to be tough in this business, or you weren't anything. You didn't get anywhere. Just the same, you had to be regular, you had to be on the up-and-up with those that treated you right. Al Grecco turned up his coat collar. He had felt a chill, and even though there was no one else in the car he felt a little ashamed, because he recognized that the chill was kid stuff; the way you feel when you have done something very good for somebody, or the way you feel about your mother. That was the way he felt about Ed Charney. He felt loyal.

Recognizing this he wanted to do something to show how loyal he could be, and the nearest thing at hand that gave him any chance to do something for Ed was the champagne. He turned to see that the champagne was still covered with blankets and secure against bumps. Ed would want the goods delivered in the best possible shape. Then he remembered the sedan, with English in it. He reduced his speed to thirty miles an hour and allowed the sedan to overtake him.

In a short time the sedan did overtake him and Al Grecco could see by the way English was driving that he was sore about something. As a rule English was an artistic driver, as good to a car as men used to be to horses. And this particular job that English was driving was a demonstrator, which he kept tuned up all the time. But now English shot the car up over a rut and pushed through a six-foot drift in passing Grecco. Not that there wasn't plenty of room, and not that Al Grecco wouldn't have moved over or stopped if English had blown his horn. English didn't blow his horn, though. He just tramped on the gas and gave the sedan hell. The sedan hit the drift with a hard wallop, swaying from side to side, and almost as soon as he hit the drift and punched a hole in it, English swung the steering wheel and got back on the cleared part of the road. If you could call it cleared.

Stew stuff, Al Grecco decided.

In the few seconds that it took English to pass him Al Grecco noticed that English had his hat on the back of his head, which wasn't like English. English wasn't what you would call a snappy dresser, but he was always neat. Al also noticed that there

was a woman in the car, slumped low in the front seat, low and as far away from English as she could get. That would be Mrs. English. It never occurred to Al Grecco that it could be anyone else, because Al never had heard anything about English and other women — and if English had been a chaser Al would have heard about it. Around Gibbsville if you were a chaser it meant you had to go to the roadhouses, and Al made it his business to know who went to the roadhouses. A lot of wise guys in Gibbsville thought they were getting away with murder by taking their girl friends to the country hotels in the Pennsylvania Dutch part of the county. The wise guys thought they were pretty smart, going to those places instead of showing at the Stage Coach, which was the big roadhouse, where the drinks were six bits apiece and there was dancing and a hat-check girl and waiters in uniform and all that front. But if the chasers only knew how wrong they were! Al made it his busìness to know about the chasers, because you never could tell when it would come in handy to know that So-and-so was cheating, especially if So-and-so happened to be some local big shot that could be useful to Ed up at the courthouse or in politics or even at a bank. Al remembered one time such information had come in handy. There was a councilman who was not on the take. Ed for some reason hadn't been able to get to him with a dime, not a dime. One night Ed got the tip that this councilman was going to shoot off his mouth about a couple of speakeasies which Ed was interested in. This councilman was making a big play to get the Republican nomination for mayor. So Al happened to be there when Ed got the tip, and Al said: "Who did you say's going to do that?"

"Hagemann," said Ed.

"Oh, no he isn't," Al said, and told Ed why Hagemann wasn't going to shoot off his mouth. And was Ed pleased! He went to Hagemann's office and he said to him something like this: Mr. Hagemann, you're a great Church man and you represent the good element in this town and all that, so if it gets around that you've been going places with a certain lady about thirty years old that wears glasses…. And Ed didn't have to say any more. Hagemann just got up and shut the door and when Ed left they were the best of friends and still were. Ed even arranged it that Hagemann could get away with cheating on the one with glasses. Oh, in this business you had to look for all the angles.

Al Grecco stepped on it to keep up with English, who now had the accelerator down to the floor, and was keeping it there. You could tell that that was what he was doing, because when the wheels of the sedan got out of the tracks the car would leap up to the side of the road, slapping the long pile of snow. Al noticed that Mrs. English, who had her fur collar turned up higher than her ears, did not turn on English. That meant she was mad. Any woman ordinarily would be sitting up on the seat and bawling her husband out. But if he was any judge, Al was sure she was not saying a word. He began to wonder about this English dame.

He just had a feeling, that was all, but he went back in his memory and tried to recollect something, anything at all, that fitted in with the idea he was beginning to get about her. The idea he was beginning to get about her was that she might be a cheater herself. But he could not remember anything. He knew she never had been to any of the country hotels. She got loud once in a while at the Stage Coach, but no worse than a lot of others, and English was always there when she was. No, it was just one of those things. You got an idea about some person and you didn't have any reason for it; but Al Grecco in his twenty-six years had learned one thing, namely, that if you had a hunch about a person, a real hunch that kept bothering you, something usually happened to prove that your hunch was either dead wrong or dead right.

It was seven miles and just a little over from the country club to the Gibbsville Bank & Trust Building, and practically all of the last three miles was a new and nearly straight stretch of road, which had been easier to clear; it was protected from winds by a railroad embankment on one side. Al Grecco had to step on it some more when English hit the stretch, because English was letting it out for all the sedan would take. Al kept his mind on the driving now. He did not want to get too close to English, and make English sore; but he did not want to lose him; he wanted to be close by if English got into trouble. But English was all right. One of those guys that can drive when they're drunk or sober, the only difference being that when they're drunk they have no consideration for what they might be doing to the car.

When the two cars reached Gibbsville Al Grecco made up his mind that he would best please Ed Charney by following English all the way home, so he turned up Lantenengo Street after the sedan. He followed about a block behind the sedan, all the way out Lantenengo Street to Twentieth Street. The Englishes had their house on Twin Oaks Road, but you could see all of Twin Oaks Road from Twentieth and Lantenengo. Al stopped. English had shifted into second for the uphill grade and the snow of Twentieth Street. He made the turn all right, and in a few seconds he stopped in front of the house. The lights of the car went out, and then the porch light went on, and Al could see Mrs. English on the porch, opening the door, the light on in one of the rooms of the downstairs floor. Then English himself on the porch, the downstairs light snapped out just as a light was turned on in a bedroom upstairs. English was leaving the car out all night. He must be cockeyed. Well, that was his business.

Al Grecco put his car in reverse and backed into Twentieth Street and then turned the car and drove down Lantenengo Street. He would go right to the Apollo, the all-night restaurant where you usually looked for Ed Charney. But suddenly he realized he wouldn't find Ed there. This was the one night of the year you wouldn't find Ed there. "Jesus Christ," said Al Grecco. "Me forgetting it was Christmas." He lowered the window of the car and addressed the darkened Lantenengo Street homes that he was passing: "Merry Christmas, you stuck-up bastards! Merry Christmas from Al Grecco!"

2

JULIAN ENGLISH SNAPPED awake, and knew that he had beaten the arrival of Mary, the maid, by one step. He was correct: Mary appeared in the doorway and said: "Mrs. English says it's eleven o'clock, Mr. English." In a lower key she add: "Merry Christmas, Mr. English."

"Merry Christmas, Mary. Did you get your envelope?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. English give it to me. Thank you very kindly, and my mother says to tell you she made a novena for you and Mrs. English. Shill I close the windows?"

"Yes, will you please?" He lay back until Mary left the room. Such a pretty day. Bright; and there were icicles, actually icicles, hanging in the middle of the windows. With the holly wreath and the curtains they made you think of a Christmas card. It was quiet outside. Gibbsville, the whole world, was resting after the snow. He heard a sound that could mean only one thing; one of the Harley kids next door had a new Flexible Flyer for Christmas, and was trying it out belly-bumpers down the Harley driveway, which was separated from the English driveway only by a two-foot hedge. It would not take long for the room to get warm, so he decided to lie in bed for a few minutes.

There ought to be more days like this, he thought. Slowly, without turning his head, he pulled himself up to a half sitting position and reached out for the package of Lucky Strikes on the table between his bed and Caroline's bed. Then he remembered to know better than to look in the direction of Caroline's bed — and looked. He was right again: Caroline had not slept in her bed. Everything returned to him then, as though in a terrible, vibrating sound; like standing too near a big bell and having it suddenly struck without warning. His fingers and his mouth lit a cigarette; they knew how. He was not thinking of a cigarette, for with the ringing of that bell came the hangover feeling and the remorse. It took him a little while, but eventually he remembered the worst thing he had done, and it was plenty bad. He remembered throwing a drink at Harry Reilly, throwing it in his fat, cheap, gross Irish face. So now it was Christmas and peace on earth.

He got out of bed, not caring to wait for warmth and luxury. His feet hit the cold hardwood floor and he stuck his toes in bedroom slippers and made for the bathroom. He had felt physically worse many times, but this was a pretty good hangover. It is a pretty good hangover when you look at yourself in the mirror and can see nothing above the bridge of your nose. You do not see your eyes, nor the condition of your hair. You see your beard, almost hair by hair; and the hair on your chest and the bones that stick up at the base of your neck. You see your pajamas and the lines in your neck, and the stuff on your lower lip that looks as though it might be blood but never is. You first brush your teeth, which is an improvement but leaves something to be desired. Then you try Lavoris and then an Eno's. By the time you get out of the bathroom you are ready for another cigarette and in urgent need of coffee or a drink, and you wish to God you could afford to have a valet to tie your shoes. You have a hard time getting your feet into your trousers, but you finally make it, having taken just any pair of trousers, the first your hands touched in the closet. But you consider a long, long time before selecting a tie. You stare at the ties; stare and stare at them, and you look down at your thighs to see what color suit you are going to be wearing. Dark gray. Practically any tie will go with a dark gray suit.

Julian finally chose a Spitalsfield, tiny black and white figure, because he was going to wear a starched collar. He was going to wear a starched collar because it was Christmas and he was going to have Christmas dinner with his father and mother at their house. He finally finished dressing and when he saw himself in a full-length glass he still could not quite look himself in the eye, but he knew he looked well otherwise. His black waxed-calf shoes gleamed like patent leather. He put the right things in the right pockets: wallet, watch and chain and gold miniature basketball and Kappa Beta Phi key, two dollars in silver coins, fountain pen, handkerchiefs, cigarette case, leather key purse. He looked at himself again, and wished to God he could go back to bed, but if he should go back to bed he would only think, and he refused to think until after he had had some coffee. He went downstairs, holding on to the banister on the way down.

As he passed the living-room he saw a piled row of packages, obviously gifts, on the table in the middle of the room. But Caroline was not in the room, so he did not stop. He went back to the dining-room and pushed open the swinging-door to the butler's pantry. "Just some orange juice and coffee, Mary, please," he said.

"The orange juice is on the table, Mr. English," she said.

He drank it. It had ice, glorious ice, in it. Mary brought in the coffee and when she had gone he inhaled the steam of it. It was as good as drinking it. He drank some of it black, without sugar, first. He put one lump of sugar in it and drank some more. He put some cream in it and lit a cigarette. "I'd be all right if I could stay here," he thought. "If I could just stay here for the rest of my life and never see another soul. Except Caroline. I'd have to have Caroline."

He finished his coffee, took a sip of ice water, and left the dining-room. He was standing in front of the table, with its pile of gifts, when he heard someone stamping on the porch, and almost immediately the door opened and it was Caroline.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he said. "Merry Christmas."

"Yeah," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Where've you been?"

"Took some things to the Harley kids," she said. She hung up her camel's hair coat in the closet under the stairs. "Bubbie said to wish you a Merry Christmas and he told me to ask you if you wanted to ride on his new Flexie. I told him I didn't think you would, this morning." She sat down and began to unbuckle her arctics. She had beautiful legs that not even the heavy woolen plaid stockings could distort. "Look," she said.

"I'm looking," he said.

"Don't be funny," she said, and pulled her skirt down. "I want you to listen. This is what I want to say: I think you'd better take that bracelet back to Caldwell's."

"Why? Don't you like it?"

"I like it all right. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, but you can't afford it. I know how much it cost."

"So what?" he said.

"Well, just this. I think we'll probably need every cent we can save from now on."

"Why?"

She lit a cigarette. "Well, you fixed it last night. No point in going into *why* you threw that drink at Harry, but I just want to tell you this much, you've made an enemy for life."

"Oh, no. Naturally he's sore, but I'll be able to fix it. I can handle that."

"That's what you think. I'll tell you something. Have you any idea how news travels in this town? Maybe you think you have, but listen to me. I just came from the Harleys', the only people I've seen except Mary since last night, and almost the first thing Herbert Harley said when I got in the house was, 'Well, I'm glad somebody put Harry Reilly in his place at last.' Of course I tried to laugh it off as if it were just a joke between you and Harry, but do you realize what that means, Herbert Harley's knowing about it so soon? It means the story's got all over town already. Somebody must have told the Harleys over the phone, because I know Herbert hasn't had his car out. There aren't any tracks in their driveway."

"Well, what of it?"

"What *of* it? You stand there and ask me what of it? Don't you realize what that means, or are you still drunk? It just means that the whole town knows what you did, and when Harry realizes that, he'll do anything short of murder to get even with you. And I don't have to tell you that he won't have to commit murder to get even with you." She stood up and smoothed her skirt. "So — I think you'd better take the bracelet back to Caldwell's."

"But I want you to have it. I paid for it."

"They'll take it back. They know you."

"I can afford it," he said.

"No, you can't," she said. "Besides, I don't want it."

"You mean you don't want to take it from me?"

She hesitated a moment, and bit her lip and nodded. "Yes. I guess that's what I mean."

He went to her and put his hands on her arms. She did not move except to turn her head away from him. "What's the matter?" he said. "Reilly doesn't mean anything to you, for God's sake, does he?"

"No. Not a thing. But you'd never believe that."

"Oh, ridiculous," he said. "I never thought you were having an affair with him."

"Didn't you? Are you sure you didn't?" She freed herself. "Maybe you didn't actually think I was having an affair with him, but part of the time you wondered whether I was. That's just as bad. And that's the real reason why you threw the drink in his face."

"I might have thought you kissed him, but I never thought you were having an affair with him. And the only real reason why I threw a drink in his face was I just happen to dislike him. I can't stand his stupid Irish face, that's all. And those stories."

"His face looked pretty good last summer when you needed money, and by the way, here's something you'd better not overlook. Perhaps you think people are going to be on your side if it comes to the point where people take sides in this. Perhaps you think all your friends will stick by you, and maybe you think that's going to frighten him because he wants to run the Assembly. Well, just don't count too much on that, because practically every single one of your best friends, with one or two exceptions, all owe Harry Reilly money."

"How do you know?"

"He told me," she said. "Maybe Jack and Carter and Bob and the rest would like to be on your side, and maybe in any other year they would stick by you, but I don't have to tell you there's a depression in this country, and Harry Reilly's practically the only man around here with any money."

"I'll bet he comes to our party," said Julian.

"If he does you can thank me. I'll do my best, but my heart won't be in the work." She looked at him. "Oh, God, Ju, why did you do it? Why do you do things like that?"

She began to cry, but when he went to her she held him away. “It’s all so awful and I used to love you so.”

“I love you. You know that.”

“It’s too easy. The things you called me on the way home — whore and bitch and a lot worse — they weren’t anything compared with the public humiliation.” She accepted his handkerchief. “I’ve got to change,” she said.

“Do you think Mother and Dad know about it?”

“No, I doubt it. Your father’d be over here if he knew. Oh, how should I know?” She walked out and then came back. “My present is at the bottom of the pile,” she said.

That made him feel worse. Under all the other packages was something she had bought days, maybe weeks, before, when things were not so bad as they now appeared to be. When she bought that she was concentrating on him and what he would like; rejecting this idea and that idea, and deciding on one thing because it was something *he* wanted or something *he* would want. Caroline was one person who really did put a lot of thought into a gift; she knew when to choose the obvious thing. One time she had given him handkerchiefs for Christmas; no one else had given him handkerchiefs, and they were what he wanted. And whatever was in the package, she had bought with him alone in mind. He could not guess from the size of the box what was inside it. He opened it. It was two gifts: a pigskin stud box, big enough to hold two sets of studs, with plenty of room inside for assorted collar buttons, collar pins, tie clasps — and Caroline had put in a dozen or so front and back collar buttons. The other gift was of pigskin, too: a handkerchief case that collapsed like an accordion. Both things had J. McH. E. stamped in small gilt letters on the top cover, and that in itself showed thought. She knew, and no one else in the world knew, that he liked things stamped J. McH. E. and not just J. E. or J. M. E. Maybe she even knew why he liked it that way; he wasn’t sure himself.

He stood at the table, looking down at the handkerchief case and stud box, and was afraid. Upstairs was a girl who was a person. That he loved her seemed unimportant compared to what she was. He only loved her, which really made him a lot less than a friend or an acquaintance. Other people saw her and talked to her when she was herself, her great, important self. It was wrong, this idea that you know someone better because you have shared a bed and a bathroom with her. He knew, and not another human being knew, that she cried “I” or “high” in moments of great ecstasy. He knew, he alone knew her when she let herself go, when she herself was not sure whether she was wildly gay or wildly sad, but one and the other. But that did not mean that he knew her. Far from it. It only meant that he was closer to her when he was close, but (and this was the first time the thought had come to him) maybe farther away than anyone else when he was not close. It certainly looked that way now. “Oh, I’m a son of a bitch,” he said.

II

In the middle of the front page of the *Gibbsville Sun,* the morning paper, there was a two-column box, decorated with Santa Claus and holly doo-dads, and in the center of the box was a long poem. “Well, Mervyn Schwartz finally got it.”

“What?” said Irma.

“Shot in a whorehouse last night,” said her husband.

“What!” exclaimed Irma. “What are you talking about?”

"Here it is," said her husband. "Right here on the front page. Mervyn Schwartz, thirty-five, of Gibbsville, was shot and killed at the Dew Drop—"

"Let me see," said Irma. She took the paper out of her husband's hands. "Where?…Oh, *you,*" she said, and threw the paper back at him. He was laughing at her with a high, soft giggle.

"Think you're funny," she said. "You oughtn't to say things like that where the children might hear you."

He continued to laugh and picked up the paper and began to read Mervyn Schwartz's Christmas poem. Mervyn Schwartz formerly had contributed his holiday poems (Christmas, Washington's Birthday, Easter, Memorial Day, July 4, Armistice Day) to the *Standard,* the afternoon paper; but the *Standard* had not run his Armistice Day poem on the front page, so now he was in the *Sun*. Lute Fliegler read the first verse aloud, very sing-song and effeminate.

"What time do you want dinner?" said Irma.

"Whenever it's ready," said Lute.

"Well, you only had breakfast an hour ago. You don't want dinner too early. I thought around two o'clock."

"Okay by me," he said. "I'm not very hungry."

"You oughtn't to be," she said. "The breakfast you ate. I was thinking I'd make the beds now and Mrs. Lynch could put the turkey on so we could eat around two or ha' past."

"Okay by me."

"The kids won't be very hungry. Even Curly was stuffing himself with candy a while ago till I hid the box."

"Let him eat it," said her husband. "Christmas comes but once a year."

"Thank heaven. All right. I'll give them the candy, on one condition. That is, if you take care of them when they have stomach ache in the middle of the night."

"I'll be only too glad. Go ahead, give them all the candy they want, and give Teddy and Betty a couple highballs." He frowned and rubbed his chin in mock thoughtfulness. "I don't know about Curly, though. He's a little young, but I guess it'd be all right. Or else maybe he'll take a cigar."

"Oh, you," she said.

"Yes-s-s, I think we better just give Curly a cigar. By the way, I'm going to take Teddy out and get him laid tonight. I—"

"Lute! Stop talking like that. How do you know one of them didn't come downstairs without you hearing them? They'll be finding things out soon enough. Remember what Betty said last summer."

"That's nothing. How old is Teddy? Six—"

"Six and a half," she said.

"Well, when I was Teddy's age I had four girls knocked up."

"Now stop, Lute. You stop talking that way. You don't have any idea how they pick things up, a word here and there. And children are smarter than you give them credit for. You don't have to go anywhere today, do you?"

"Nope. Why?" He lit a Camel, taking it out of the package in the lower right pocket of his vest.

"Well, no reason. Last Christmas remember you had to drive to Reading."

"That was *last* Christmas. Damn few Caddies being given for Christmas presents this year. I remember that trip. That was a sport job. A LaSalle, it was, not a Caddy. That Polish undertaker up the mountain, Paul Davinis. He wanted it delivered Christmas and he didn't want his kid to see it so we asked to keep it in Reading. And

then when we did deliver it the kid knew he was going to get it all along. His mother told him beforehand. He smashed it up New Year's Eve."

"You never told me that," said Irma.

"You never asked me, as the snake charmer said to her husband. By the way, did Mrs. Lynch say she'd mind the kids tonight?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, then I better phone Willard and tell him we'll go along. I'll get that Studebaker sedan. We can get six in it comfortably. It's a seven-passenger job, but we can sit three in the front and three in the back and we won't have to use the extra seats. How many are going?"

"I think twelve. Ten or twelve. It depends. If Emily's father and mother come down from Shamokin she and Harvey won't be able to come along, but it won't make any difference. They were going in Walter's car, so if they don't go, that makes two less in that car."

"I better call the garage and make sure about the Studebaker." He went to the telephone. "Hello, this is Lute Fliegler. Merry Christmas. Listen, that Studebaker sedan, the black one. The one we took on a trade-in from Doc Lurie. Yeah. Doc Lurie's old car. Well, listen. Don't let anybody take it out, see? I asked the boss if I could use it tonight and he said okay, see? So I just wanted to make sure none of you thieves took it out. If you want to go any place you can use my Rolls. Seriously, Joe, you want to do me a favor, you can put the chains on the Studie. Okay? Swell." He hung up, and addressed Irma. "Well, that's settled."

"You can call Willard later," she said. "I told him we'd call if we couldn't go, so he'll take it for granted we're going."

"What about liquor?" said Lute.

"Well, it's Willard's party. I should think he'd supply the liquor."

"Oh, yeah? Do you know how much liquor costs at the Stage Coach? Seventy-five cents a drink, baby, and they won't sell it to everybody. I don't think Willard intends to supply the liquor, not at six bits a shot. I think I better make some gin and take a quart along, just in case. It wouldn't be right to expect Willard to buy all the liquor and everything else for a party of twelve people."

"Maybe there'll only be ten."

"All right. What if there *is* only ten? They have a cover charge of a dollar and a half or two dollars, and there goes twenty bucks already, not including ginger ale and White Rock, and sandwiches! You know what they charge for a plain ordinary chicken sandwich at the Stage Coach? A *buck*. If Willard gets away under forty bucks he's lucky, without buying a single drink. No, I better make some gin. Or on second thought, there's that quart of rye the boss gave me. I was going to save it, but we might as well use it tonight."

"Oh, the gin's good enough. You make good gin. Everybody says so."

"I know I do, but gin's gin. I think I'll turn square for once in my life and take the rye. Maybe the others will bring their own, so we won't have to get rid of the whole quart."

"I don't want you to drink much if you're going to drive," said Irma.

"Don't worry. Not over those roads. I know. I'll put the quart into pint bottles and keep one pint in my overcoat pocket when we get to the Stage Coach. Then the others will think I only have a pint and they'll go easy. But I imagine everybody will bring their own, if they have any sense."

"I imagine," she said. "I'm going upstairs now and make the beds. I'll see if the pants of your Tux need pressing."

"Oh, God. That's right. Do I have to wear that?"

"Now, now, don't try and bluff me. You look nice in it and you know it. You like to wear it and don't pretend you don't."

"Oh, I don't mind wearing it," he said. "I was just thinking about you. You'll be so jealous when all the other girls see me in my Tux and start trying to take me outside. I just didn't want to spoil your evening, that's all."

"Applesauce," said Irma.

"Why don't you say what you mean? You don't mean applesauce."

"Never mind, now, Mister Dirty Mouth." She left.

What a girl, he thought, and resumed reading his paper; Hoover was receiving the newsboys for Christmas….

III

It was about two o'clock, U. S. Naval Observatory Hourly By Western Union time, when Al Grecco appeared in the doorway of the Apollo Restaurant. The Apollo was a hotel and restaurant. There had been a hotel on the site of the Apollo for close to a century, but the Pennsylvania Dutch family who had the restaurant before George Poppas took it over had not kept the hotel part open. Then when George Poppas, who actually was wearing those white Greek kilts when he arrived in Gibbsville, began to make money on the restaurant, someone mentioned that the building had been a hotel for nearly a hundred years, and George spent a lot of money on making the place a hotel again. The rooms were small and had a fireproof look about them, with steel beds and other furniture. The hotel was clean, the rooms were small and cheap, and the Apollo got a big play from salesmen who had their swindle sheets to think of. The John Gibb Hotel, Gibbsville's big inn, was expensive.

Al Grecco was one of the few permanent guests of the Apollo. He had a room there, for which he paid nothing. Ed Charney had some kind of arrangement with George Poppas, in which no money changed hands. Ed wanted Al to be at the Apollo to receive messages and so on. Whenever there were strangers from other mobs in town on business, or friends who just happened to be passing through Gibbsville, they always looked up Ed Charney at the Apollo. And if Ed was not there, he wanted someone to be on hand, and that someone usually was Al Grecco.

Al had his hat on but was carrying his dark blue overcoat. There was not a customer in the place. Smitty, who was a taxi driver and two-bit pimp, was sitting at the marble counter, drinking a cup of coffee, but Smitty was always at the counter drinking coffee. George Poppas was standing behind the cigar counter. He looked as though he were sitting down, but Al knew better. George leaned with his fat hands folded, supporting himself on the cigar counter, and appearing to be in great pain. George always appeared to be in great pain, as though he had eaten, an hour ago, all the things that can give you indigestion. Al once had seen him in a crap game make fifteen straight passes and win over twelve thousand dollars, but he still appeared to be in great pain.

Loving Cup was behind the counter, and seemed to be the only waiter in the place. Loving Cup was about twenty, perhaps less; slight, with a bad complexion and a terrible breath. The boys were always kidding Loving Cup about his ears, from which he got his name. They were at least a third as long as his whole head, and stuck out. Also, the boys often had kidded Loving Cup about his lonely sex life, until one night for a gag they took him to the Dew Drop and paid for his entertainment. But when he came downstairs Mimi said to them: "Well, you wise guys, this kid got more than any

of you. Howdia like that? He's the only man in the crowd." And Loving Cup listened delightedly, his eyes bright and gleaming and wicked and small. From that night on the boys made no cracks about Loving Cup and his lonely sex life. They still referred to him as Loving Cup, and called him Bertha, but they had some respect for him.

Al did not speak to George Poppas. They had a mutual contempt for each other; George for Al, because Al was a minor member of the mob; and Al for George because George did not belong to the mob at all. They never spoke, except in crap games, when they confined their remarks to "You're faded" and the other language of the game. Al placed his coat on a hanger and removed his hat, using both hands in taking off the hat so as not to disturb his hair.

He took the *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* which was lying on the counter in front of George. He sat down at the mob's table, which was in the very front of the restaurant, in a corner just back of the front window, where various crustaceans were squirming about in a pool. Al looked at the front page and saw that that Hoover was going to entertain some newsboys for Christmas. He turned over to the sport pages.

"Hyuh," said a voice. It was Loving Cup.

"Oh, hyuh, Loving Cup," said Al.

"Two over? Bacon well done? Coffee?" said Loving Cup.

"No," said Al. "Gimme the bill of fare."

"What for?" said Loving Cup. "You can read the paper."

"God damn it! Get me the bill of fare before I cut your heart out."

"All right, all right," said Loving Cup, running away. He came back with a menu and laid it beside Al's right arm. "There."

"What are you, a Jew or something? Didn't they tell you it's Christmas, or don't they have Christmas where you come from? Say, where *did* you come from, anyway, sweetheart?"

"That's my business," said Loving Cup. "The turkey is all right. You want some of that? I thought you was having breakfast."

"It's Christmas, you lug," said Al.

"Yeah, I know," said Loving Cup. "What are you gonna have, or do I have to wait here all day while you spell out the words?"

"Crack wise, Bertha," said Al. "I'll have that a dollar and a half dinner."

"What kind of soup you want?"

"I don't want any soup," said Al.

"It goes with the dinner, so you don't have to pay extra. I'll bring you the cream of tomato. I just seen the chef spit in it." He jumped away as Al reached out for him. He went laughing to the kitchen.

Al read his paper. There was always some stumble bum from Fargo fighting in Indianapolis. Every time you picked up the paper and looked under Fight Results there was somebody from Fargo doing a waltz somewhere. Either they were all would-be fighters in that town, or else they just used the name of the town and didn't come from there at all, like the Gibbsville Miners, the pro football team. Practically every man on the team was an All American, but they never heard of Gibbsville before they came there to play football. They all talked like Snake Eyes O'Neill, who came from Jersey City and was one of the mob. Snake Eyes never said r. Dollah. Fawd. Hoit. Boint. Thoid. Likka. Never said r. Al wondered where Fargo was. It was past Chicago. He knew that. They had one good boy from that town. Petrolle. Billy Petrolle, the Fargo Express. But the rest of them! God, what a gang of tankers they were. He wondered just what was the angle on there being so many fighters from

Fargo. Maybe Ed would know. Ed could usually tell him when something puzzled him.

Ed had said he wouldn't be down till around four o'clock. He had to spend Christmas with the wife and kid, God knows why. Al did not like to think of Annie Charney. The kid was swell; six years old and fat and healthy-looking. He wasn't like Ed, but for the present more like Annie. She was fat and healthy-looking and blonde, like most Polacks. Ed didn't care for her any more. Al knew that. Ed cared for Helene Holman, who was a torch singer like Libby Holman and sang at the Stage Coach. Ed really cared for Helene. He played around a little, but Al knew Helene was the only one he really cared for, and Helene really cared for him. With her it was slightly different, because nobody else would even look cockeyed at Helene as long as Ed cared for her, but even taking that into consideration Al knew Helene really cared for Ed. And she was good for him. You could tell when Ed and Helene were getting along. Ed was easier to get along with then. Tonight, or this after', when Ed showed up at the Apollo, he probably would be in a bad humor. That was the way Annie affected him. Whereas if he had spent the day with Helene he would have been in a good humor. But Al knew that Ed wouldn't think of spending Christmas with Helene. Ed was a family man, first and last, and that was the one day in the year he would spend with the kid, at home.

"Here," said Loving Cup.

Al looked at the blue plate. "For a buck fifty I don't call that much turkey," he said.

"What's the matter, Mr. Grecco? Is it too small?" said Loving Cup.

"Small? For Christ's sakes. And wuddia say, how about giving me some white meat? If I'm gonna pay a buck fifty for turkey I wanna get some white meat, not this God damn dark meat."

"Shall I take it back?"

"Sure, take it back," said Al. "No, wait a minute. The hell with it, and the hell with you. You'll take a couple hours."

"That's right, Mr. Grecco. It's Christmas. You said so yourself just a minute ago."

"Screw, bum," said Al. Loving Cup pretended to pay no attention to him and dusted off the table cloth, but out of the corner of his eye he was watching Al, and when Al made a grab for his wrist Loving Cup leapt away. Then he snickered and went back to the counter.

Al usually had breakfast at this time, if he was up. He ate eggs and bacon for breakfast, had a small steak or something like that at seven in the evening, and then after midnight he usually ate what he called his big meal: a thick steak with boiled potatoes, piece of pie, and many cups of coffee. He was about five feet six with his high heels, and weighed about 130 pounds with his suit on. He had been with Ed Charney and eating regularly for four years, but he still did not gain much weight. Stayed about the same. His bones were small, and he was a thin little man in every part of him. He was born in Gibbsville, the son of Italian parents. His father worked on a navvy gang and supported six children, of whom Al was the third. Al's name was not Al, and it was not Grecco. His real name was Anthony Joseph Murascho, or Tony Murascho, until he was eighteen. He had been kicked out of the parochial school for striking a nun when he was fourteen; carried newspapers, stole, was house-man in a poolroom, served a year in prison for burgling the poorbox in one of the Irish Catholic churches, and was arrested several other times: once when a false alarm was turned in (he had an honest alibi); once for attempted rape (the girl could not positively identify more than two of the six suspects); once for breaking the seals on a freight car (the

railroad detectives listened to his father's plea, and they had a good case against four other boys, so out of kindness to the old man they did not prosecute Tony); once for stabbing a colleague in a poolroom argument (no one, not even the victim, could swear Tony had done it; and anyway it was only a slight wound).

It was when he was eighteen, the same year of his life that he went to the county jail, that he got the name of Al Grecco. At that time he decided to be a prizefighter, and though he had a lingering touch of gonorrhea, he went into training and studied the sweet science under Packy McGovern, Gibbsville's leading and only fight promoter. Packy told him he was a born fighter, had the real fighting heart, and that the clap was no worse than a bad cold. He made Tony lay off women, alcohol, and cigarettes, and do a lot of bag-punching. He showed Tony how to hold his elbows and how to keep his right foot in position so he could move his body backward without taking a backward step; that was footwork. He taught Tony how to scrape an opponent's eyes with the palm of the glove, and also how to use his thumb, and also how to butt. He of course instructed Tony never to enter a ring without first knocking a few dents into the aluminum-cup supporter which is supposed to be a protection against foul blows. You never know when you can claim foul and get away with it, and if the cup is not dented no club physician would dare allow the claim. Tony Murascho, who up to that time had been known only as a tough little guinny, was matched to fight a preliminary bout at McGovern's Hall.

As it happened, Lydia Faunce Browne was assigned to write a feature story about that fight card. Lydia Faunce Browne was not a Gibbsville girl originally. She came from Columbus, Ohio, and had been in Gibbsville five years when her husband deserted her. He was younger than Mrs. Browne, who at the time of the desertion was forty-nine, and he left behind, besides Lydia, a large bill at the Lantenengo Country Club, another big bill at the Gibbsville Club, and several other bills. For a time Mrs. Browne eked out a living and paid a little on the bills by teaching auction bridge to the wives of the Jewish storekeepers, but she finally flattered Bob Hooker, editor of the *Standard,* into giving her a job on the staff of the *Standard.* She told him he was a real man for his editorial on his dead dog. She became the pest of the *Standard* office on her own hook, and was being built up big by Bob Hooker, who regarded himself as the William Allen White–Ed Howe–Joseph Pulitzer of Gibbsville. He began to regard Lydia as the local Sophie Irene Loeb, and paid her $35 a week, with three exceptions the highest journalistic salary in the town.

Lydia was always being sent down in the mines, much against the wishes of the miners, who think it is unlucky for a woman to enter a mine; or riding in locomotive cabs, or spending a night in prison, or interviewing visiting celebrities, such as George Luks (who later wanted to know where in the name of God they dug her up) and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Gifford Pinchot (five times). Lydia's secret favorite adjective for herself was keen; and she went around looking keen during all her waking hours. She felt sorry for prostitutes on all occasions; she thought milk for babies ought to be pure; she thought Germany was not altogether responsible for the World War; she did not believe in Prohibition ("It does not prohibit," she often said). She smoked cigarettes one right after the other, and did not care who knew it; and she never was more than five minutes out of the office before she was talking in newspaper argot, not all of it quite accurate. She had a hell of a time with the spelling of names.

She went out to cover the prizefights with Doug Campbell, sports editor of the *Standard.* No nice women ever went to prizefights in Gibbsville, no matter what they did in New York, and Lydia's story the next day began:

I went to the boxing match last night.

I went to the boxing match, and to be completely frank and honest, I enjoyed myself. What is this taboo that man-made convention has placed upon women going to boxing matches? Can it be that men are just a little selfish, depriving women of the fun and beauty of the boxing match? And I use the word beauty advisedly, after long and careful consideration. For there was beauty in McGovern's Hall last night. Let me tell you about it.

To you women who cannot attend boxing matches because of the aforementioned masculine taboo that has been placed on attendance at the "fights" by women, permit me a few words of explanation. The principal contest of the evening, like all good things, is called the "wind-up" and it comes last. It follows the introductory "bouts" which are known as "preliminaries" or "prelims" I believe they were called by my friend Mr. Doug Campbell, popular sports editor of the *Standard,* who escorted me to McGovern's Hall and showed me the "ropes." In the "prelims" one sees the lesser known lights of the boxing fraternity, and it is considered a kind of obscurity to be relegated to the "prelims." But it was in a "prelim" that I saw real beauty.

A mere strip of a lad, hardly more than a boy he was, and his name is Tony Morascho. Doug Campbell informed me that it was the début of Tony Morascho but I sincerely trust it will not be Tony's last, for there was beauty personified, grace in every ripple of his lithe young frame, symmetry and rhythm and the speed of a cobra as it strikes the helpless rabbit. Beauty! Do you know El Grecco, the celebrated Spanish artist? Surely you do. Well, there was El Grecco, to the life….

That was how Al Grecco got his name.

He could not live the name down. The gang at the poolroom and at the gym called him El Grecco, and for a gag Packy McGovern billed him as Al Grecco on the next card. The name followed him into prison — was, in fact, waiting for him there; Lantenengo County Prison was ruled by a warden who, though no deep student of penology, believed in permitting his wards to have newspapers, cigarettes, whiskey, assignations, cards — anything, so long as they paid for it. And so when Al Grecco was sent up on the poorbox burglary matter he was not altogether unknown at the Stoney Lonesome, as the prison was called.

When Al had served his time he came out with some idea of turning square. He wanted to turn square, because he had seen so many ex-convicts in the movies who came out with one of two plans: either you turned square, or you got even with the person who got you sent up. He could not get even with Father Burns, the curate who had caught him burgling the poorbox, because it was a sacrilege to hit a priest, and anyhow Father Burns had been transferred to another parish. And so Al decided to turn square. First, though, there were two things he wanted to do. There was no one to give him money while he was in prison, and he felt he had been deprived of the two most important things you can have. He had about ten dollars, his earnings in prison, but that was not enough for a big night. He wanted twenty. So he got in a game of pool, to get his eye and his stroke back, and surprised himself by being pretty good. That gave him confidence, and he asked if he could take a cue in a money game. He lost all his money in the game and Joe Steinmetz, the crippled man who owned the place, would not stake him. Steinmetz would give him a job, he said, but no money to shoot pool with. So Al walked out of the place, wishing he had insulted Joe. Outside the poolroom, which was the next building to the Apollo hotel and restaurant, Al saw Ed Charney, sitting in his Cadillac sedan. Ed was smoking a cigar, and seemed to be waiting for someone. Al waved his hand and said, "Hyuh, Ed." All the poolroom gang

spoke to Ed, although Ed did not always answer. Now he beckoned to Al. Al made the distance to the car in three jumps.

"Hello, Ed," he said.

"When'd you get out? Somebody spring you?" said Ed. He took his cigar out of his mouth and smiled benevolently at Al. Al was surprised and pleased that Ed Charney should know so much about him.

"No, I did my time," he said. "I got out today." He leaned with one arm on the rear door of the sedan. "I didn't know you knew me."

"I make it my business to know a *lot* of people," said Ed. "How'd you like to make a sawbuck?"

"Who do you want knocked off?" said Al.

Ed glared and put the cigar back in his teeth, but then took it out again. "Don't talk tough, kid. That don't get you any place. That don't get you any place except up in that jail house or else—" he snapped his fingers. "Nobody has to knock anybody off, and the sooner you get them ideas out of your head the better off you are."

"You're right, Ed," said Al.

"I know I'm right. I make it my business to be right. Now if you want to make that sawbuck all I want you to do — can you drive a car?"

"Yeah. What kind? This one?"

"This one," said Ed. "Take it out to the Gibbsville Motors or whatever you call it. English's garage. Tell them I sent you out to have it washed and wait till they're done with it and then bring it back here." He reached in his pocket and took a ten-dollar bill from a roll. "Here."

"A sawbuck for that? Do you want me to pay for washin' it?"

"No. Charge it. I give you the sawbuck because you just got outa the can. Keep your nose clean." Ed Charney got out of the car. "Keys in the car," he said. He walked toward the Apollo, but turned after a few steps. "Say," he said. "Who the hell ever told you you was a prizefighter?"

Al laughed. There was a guy for you: Ed Charney, the big shot from here to Reading and here to Wilkes-Barre. Maybe the whole State. What a guy! Democratic. Gave a guy ten bucks for doing nothing at all, nothing at all. Knew all about you. Made it his business to know all about you. That night Al Grecco did not get quite so drunk as he had planned; he waited until the next night, when he had thirty dollars from a crap game. *That* night he got good and drunk, and was thrown out of a house for beating up one of the girls. The day after that he took a job with Joe Steinmetz.

For three years he worked for Joe Steinmetz, more or less regularly. No one could beat him shooting straight pool, and he had great skill and luck in Nine Ball, Ouch, Harrigan, One Ball in the side and other gambling pool games. He saw Ed Charney a couple of times a week, and Ed called him Al. Ed seldom played pool, because there were only six tables in the place, and though he could have had any table by asking for it or even hinting that he wanted to play, he did not take advantage of his power. When he played he played with Snake Eyes O'Neill, the wisecracking, happy-go-lucky guy from Jersey City, who was always with Ed and, everybody said, was Ed's bodyguard. Snake Eyes, or Snake, as Ed called him, carried a revolver unlike any Al ever had seen. It was like any ordinary revolver except that it had hardly any barrel to it. Snake was always singing or humming. He never knew the words of a song until after it was old, and he used to make sounds, "Neeyaa, ta ta ta tata, tee ta tee, laddie deetle," instead of singing the words. He was not called Snake Eyes because he had eyes like a snake. Far from it. The name was a crapshooting term. He had big brown eyes that were always smiling. O'Neill was tall and skinny and in Al's opinion was

the snappiest dresser he had ever seen. Al counted up one time and he figured O'Neill had at least fourteen suits of clothes, all the latest cut from Broadway, New York City. Ed Charney was not a very snappy dresser. Ed had quite a few suits, but he did not change them much. His pants often needed pressing, and he often put his hat on so that the bow on the band was on the wrong side of his head. There were always cigar ashes on the lapels of his coat. But Al knew one thing: Ed wore silk underwear. He'd seen it.

In the last year before he got a job with Ed, Al frequently sat at Ed's table in the Apollo. By that time Al was shooting such good pool that Joe cut him in on the weekly take of the poolroom, and Al had permission to use house money when he wanted to play pool for money. He was only twenty-one and thinking of buying a half interest in the place. He spent plenty, but he made plenty; anywhere from fifty to two hundred bucks a week. He had a car — a Chevvy coop. He bought a Tuxedo. He went to Philadelphia when there was a musical comedy and he knew a girl there that worked in night clubs and shows, who would sleep with him if he let her know he was coming to town. He liked the name Al Grecco, and never thought of himself as Tony Murascho. The boys who sat at Ed Charney's table would not have known who was meant if the name Tony Murascho had been mentioned. But they knew Al Grecco for a good kid that Ed liked well enough to ask him to eat with him once in a while. Al Grecco was no pest, and did not sit at the table unless he was asked. He never asked any favors. He was the only one who ever sat at the table who had nothing to do with the stock market, and that was a big relief. All the others, from Ed Charney down, were in the market or only temporarily out of it.

Al lived then at Gorney's Hotel, which was not quite the worst hotel in Gibbsville. He never went near his home and did not go out of his way to speak to any of his brothers or sisters if he saw them on the street. They did not try to persuade him to come home, either. When they needed money badly they would send one of the younger lads to the poolroom and Al would give the kid a five or a ten, but Al did not like this. It put him off his game. After giving away a five or a ten he would get overanxious in trying to make it up, and the result would be he would lose. He wished the old man would support his family himself. And what about Angelo and Joe and Tom; they were all older than Tony — Al. And Marie, she was old enough to get married and the other kids didn't have to go to school all their life. *He* didn't. The old man ought to be glad he didn't have to work in the mines. Al knew that the old man would have worked in the mines, and glad to get the bigger wages, but all he could do was navvy gang work. Even so, the old man ought to be glad he had outdoor work instead of mucking in a drift or robbing pillars or being on a rock gang in tunnel work. That kind of work was hard work. Or at least Al thought so. He never had been in the mines himself — and never would, if he could help it.

One afternoon Joe Steinmetz didn't come to work and he didn't come to work. Joe did not like the telephone, because it interfered with a man's privacy, and the next day when he again did not show up, Al took the Chevvy up to Point Mountain, where Joe lived with his wife. There was a crêpe on the door. Al hated to go in, but he thought he ought to…. It was Joe, all right. Mrs. Steinmetz was alone and hadn't been able to leave the house except to have a neighbor get a doctor. Joe had died of heart disease and was good and dead by the time the doctor had sent the undertaker.

Joe left everything to his wife. She wanted Al to work for her, keep the poolroom going, and at first he thought it would be a good idea. But a few days of taking the

day's receipts all the way out to her house showed him he didn't want to work for her. She offered to sell the good will and fixtures for five thousand dollars, but Al never had had that much money all at once in his life and there were only two ways he could borrow it: from the banks or from Ed Charney. He didn't like banks or the people who worked in them, and he didn't want to ask Ed. He didn't think he knew Ed well enough to ask him for money. Anyhow, not that kind of money; five grand. So the poolroom went to Mike Minas, a Greek friend of George Poppas's, and Al went to work for Ed Charney. He just went up to Ed and said: "Yiz have any kind of a job for me, Ed?" and Ed said yes, come to think of it, he had been thinking of offering him a job for a long time. They agreed on a fifty-dollar-a-week salary, and Al went to work. At first he merely drove Ed around on business and pleasure trips; then he was given a job of some importance, that of convoy to the booze trucks. He would follow two or three Reo Speedwagons, in which the stuff was transported. If a state policeman or a Federal dick stopped the trucks, it was Al's business to stop too. It was an important job, because he took a chance of being sent to prison. When he stopped, it was his job to try to bribe the cops. It was an important job, because he carried up to ten thousand dollars cash of Ed's money in the Nash roadster which he used on these trips. It was up to him to use his head about bribing the cops; one or two of them wouldn't be bribed, but most of them would listen to reason unless they had been sent out to pinch a truck or two to make a showing. He had to be smooth in his bribery offers to some of them. Some of them would take anything from a gold tooth to ten thousand dollars, but hated to be approached in the wrong way. On the few occasions when the cops refused to be bribed, it was Al's job to get to the nearest telephone, tell Ed, and get Jerome M. Montgomery, Ed's lawyer, working on the case. Al never was arrested for attempted bribery. In fact he was so successful generally that Ed took him off the convoy job and made him a collector. Ed trusted him and liked him, and made a lot of money for him, or gave him a lot of money. Sitting there at breakfast on this Christmas morning Al Grecco could write a check for more than four thousand dollars, and he had thirty-two one-thousand-dollar bills in his safety deposit box. For a kid of twenty-six he was doing all right.

Now Loving Cup suddenly was standing at his table. "On the phone, you," said Loving Cup.

"Who is it? Some dame?" said Al.

"Don't try and bluff me," said Loving Cup. "I know you're queer. No, it's a party I think they said the name was Jarney or Charney. That was it. Charney."

"Wise guy," said Al, getting up. "I'll cut your ears off. Is it Ed?"

"Yeah," said Loving Cup, "and he don't sound like Christmas to me."

"Sore, eh?" Al hurried to the telephone. "Merry Christmas, boss," he said.

"Yeah. Same to you," said Ed, in a dull voice. "Listen, Al, my kid got his arm broke—"

"Jesus, tough! How'd he do that?"

"Oh, he fell off some God damn wagon I bought him. So anyhow I'm staying here till he gets the arm set and all, and I won't be down till I don't know when. Annie is all hysterical and yelling her head off — shut up, for Christ's sake, can't you see I'm phoning. So I'm staying here. Now listen, Al. Do you have a date for tonight?"

"Nothing I can't break," said Al, who had no date. "I had a sort of a date, but it can wait if you want me to do anything."

"Well, I hate to ask you, but this is what I want you should do. Drive up to the Stage Coach and stay there till they close up and keep an eye on things, see what I

mean? And tell Helene I'll be there if I can make it, but you stay there anyhow, will you kid? There's fifty bucks in it for you on account of lousing up your date. Okay?"

"Kay," said Al. "Only too glad, Ed."

"Okay," said Ed. "Just stick around and keep an eye on everything." He hung up.

Al knew what he meant. Helene was not a teetotaler by any means. In fact Ed encouraged her to drink. She was more fun when she drank. But she was liable to get drunk tonight, because it was Christmas, and Ed didn't want her to become reckless with the spirit of giving.

End of Sample