An Order of Magnitude

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Chapter I

"Vulgar serving woman! Low creature!"

The epithets, in classic Italian, reverberated across the courtyard. Allan Pond, his vision blinded by the molten glare of the white wall opposite, quickly withdrew his head from the small window and turned to face his prospective landlady. He started to speak but stopped short, disconcerted by his flaming retinas which seemed to be imprinted with the encaustic admonition that: If you can read this you're too damn close.

Absurd. Fatigue -- nerves...
"Base person! Peasant oaf!"
"Ignore that unfortunate on the court's other side, Signore," the landlady advised with an easy chuckle. "She is not right in the mind. You like the room, yes?"
"Fool!"

Pupils overly contracted, tense, alien, Pond stepped toward the fading, fiery, feverish letters and, tripping lightly over a squat stool, found himself grappling in lurching embrace with the giggling Padrona. At first he saw only her laugh, then, in a merciless rush, the sunlight left his eyes and the room and the woman took form, defined in gloom.

"So big! So strong! And a musician yet!" The landlady patted his shoulder warmly. "Ah, you will love this room -- yes, and you will find delight in the celesta I have promised. See! It will fit here, tight snug in the embrasure of this window. You, bent over your instrument, will be a shining jewel set in a ring of light!" The landladylike hand wandered idly upon Pond's drooping shoulder.

He retreated distractedly from the chance intimacy. "Well, yes," he began at random, "but my kind of music -- it's moody -- and sad... I mean not sunny -- that wall across there -- the sun on it -- blinding! Absolutely blinding! And..."
"Only at this hour of day!"
"Yes, but -- but this, er, celeste?? -- I, uh, had hoped to find a room with a piano."
"But my dear Signore! A celesta is a piano -- practically. It..."

"Slave!" The classical voice intoned, resurgent. Pond startled. "And -- and that woman over there -- not quite right in the mind, you say?"

"A former occupant of this room, many years ago, once did her some slight injury; her rage is not personal you see. Besides, she is like this only in the late forenoon."

"Mmmm."

"And besides, these, ah, deficiencies may be only quite temporary. Here -- regard." And she took his arm to lead him across the hall to the room opposite. Throwing open the door she indicated, with her fine Italian hand, an expansive interior, neither plunged in darkness nor seared by glare. "This may soon become vacant; we may somewhere stumble-- across a real piano -- and then!"

Pond sighed in confusion.

"And besides, there is the kitchen. You can cook your meals. You will find nothing so cheap in all of Rome, I swear to you."

"Uh -- how -- how cheap would that be, exactly?"

"Seventeen thousand lire!"

"For this larger room?"

"Yes -- when it becomes vacant."

Pond reflected. The rent would be less than a dollar a day. Room with kitchen privileges -- and celesta. Very cheap indeed. He was paying three times that at his pensione. It would be worth the saving just to have the room as a temporary base from which to seek a proper studio. Besides, he had to have some place to put his baggage. Storage costs at Roma Termini came to more than a dollar a day.

"Fine. I'll take it, Signora."

"Over my dead body you will, Signore."

Pond startled. The voice had been neither the Padrona's nor the raging neighbor's. He turned to see a pair of hostile, nightblack-- but almost predictably beautiful-- eyes.
Portrait in a Gesso Frame
"Ma, scusi, Signorina! I was just showing the gentleman how tranquil and lucid is your room here! You have spoken of returning to Padova. Till then he would dwell opposite. He -- he is..."

"Fascinated by tranquil rooms, what?" The sensual face studied Pond indolently.

"He is a musician, a composer. I guess you would call him an artist."

The shoulders of the undeniably over-rich body shrugged.

"So was da Vinci an artist, but I don't care for da Vinci. I don't like him one little bit -- not the littlest, tiniest bit."

"Not the littlest possible bit. He leaves me strictly cold." The Signorina seemed not to hear Pond.

"...was also a great mathematician," Pond persisted, "who formulated..."

"You will excuse me. I am so very fatigued." And already the young woman, in evident preparation for her siesta, was loosening her belt and tugging it impatiently from its reluctant loops.

"Ah, che corpo! What a fine thin waist! You have seen it, Signore!" the landlady shouted pleasantly at Pond, who could not help but see the fine thin waist. "Here in Italy," the landlady persisted, "-- I say here in Italy a woman is very much admired for..."

But ostentatiously Pond had turned and was peering stiffly about the tiny room, dark yet sun-scorched. But he was not thinking of that wretched cubicle, nor was it the focus of his ungartered stare.

"Very fatigued." And a click told Pond the Signorina had passed through the doors to the large tranquil room, that very click articulate with indolence.

He turned, anew blinded by the sudden surcease of sunlight, and heard the landlady's ecstatic groans of admiration.
for the fine thin waist, and even in his darkness he could sense her graphic gesticulations of description.

"Yes," he mumbled finally, more than ever at a loss, "a fine thin waist."

"And about da Vinci -- she doesn't dislike him all that much. It's just that she has -- or had -- a boyfriend named da Vinci, a gas-station attendant in Venice who..." The Padrona paused. "But before you go you will see the kitchen. Here -- come." And again she gripped his arm and led him down the darkened hall, turning left into a series of doorways which finally opened onto the room in question.

A swarthy man smoking a long, crooked cigar was hunched over a kerosene pressure-stove, pumping furiously at the tank. The flame was sickly but widespread -- ugly, bilious, hissing gaseously. There was, bluntly, something wrong either with the stove or with the way it was being operated.

"Body of Christ!" the man roared, his passion extravagant. The flame, notwithstanding, guttered. Then, extravagance becoming prodigal, the man stooped, huffed and puffed in rage against the flame, and succeeded finally in extinguishing it utterly. An intense, grey spume of kerosene vapor rose high in the stricken air of the kitchen. The man drew back and surveyed his accomplishment in perverse satisfaction. The vapor, a malodorous genie, flooded through the room.

"He is an American -- a composer," the landlady announced, pointing to Pond. "He will take the room. I will borrow Odylla's celesta for his use. Perhaps you will be able to put it into working order."

Pond stared at her.

"If we are lucky," the Padrona concluded, "we will be able to fit it into the window-corner; otherwise we are lost I fear." She paused. "Signore Pond, this is my husband, Signore Fragopani."

"Buongiorno, Signore," Pond greeted, advancing with outstretched hand. But the spouse signaled him away, busily groping in his pocket for a match with which to relight the stove. Pond, seizing his intent, quickly proffered his lighter.
The man took it, studied it intently, then, after several awkward tries, finally succeeded in igniting it. A small, ugly, but uneventful explosion resulted, the most interesting effect of which was the revived operation of the stove, glowing now with a sapphire flame. The man turned to Pond.

"You have been to the Colosseum."

"Yes. I..."

"And you saw there the Fall of Rome, the broken epitaph of all our glory, the cynical judgment of corrupt history -- Time turning thumbs down on Truth and Goodness and Beauty -- Fate snarling its..."

"No -- it was closed when I was there; the hours..."

"We will then acquaint you with the hours, Signore Pond," the landlady laughed graciously. She turned to her husband. "Do not forget to return our new friend's cigar lighter."

Fragopani sighed, relinquished the chromium gew-gaw. "It's a good lighter, that. You Americans aren't much at grandeur and sublimity, but you are without peers technologically."

"Thank you." Pond pocketed the lighter.

Fragopani crossed to the sink, took a skinned rabbit from a pot of water, laid it on a wooden slab on the marble drainboard, took a cleaver and split the skull open with a single clean blow.

"Please do not take offense, Signore, for surely I mean nothing personal -- but when I see such things from beyond the sea --- you and your lighter and your American dollars and your passion for the celesta, I realize that despite the horrors of the past two thousand years Rome is still falling."

He severed the rabbit neatly with a series of six blows.

"Falling, falling -- falling..."
Chapter II

Allan Pond, Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Eagle Foot College, Eagle Foot, Maine, age thirty-three, unmarried, not thoroughly practical, perhaps overly idealistic, had at last come to Rome. Now, with the aid of a gigantic map, he made his way back from Porta Pia to his pensions on the Via Nazionale. Intensely uncomfortable in his heavy tweed suit, faintly nauseated by his gnarled, shag-filled pipe, he walked the deserted noon-hour streets -- the domain of siesta -- and reflected on the wryness of dreams-come-true.

For four solid years he had saved money, saved with this end in mind, had studied Italian incessantly, spending more on conversation lessons than on clothing, had memorized the whole of the Divine Comedy in an attempt to imbue himself with the Italian essence -- and had arrived in Rome only to find, not a museum of classic beauty, but a superannuated simulacrum of Buenos Aires with words by dialect and music by tin pan alley.

That disappointment had been substantial, certainly. But now, threading his way through the torrid streets, moving slowly and uncertainly like a fumbling forefinger on an ill-printed map, he wondered again, for the hundredth time in as many seconds, what, exactly, was a celesta.

He hoped, again for the hundredth time, that it had a keyboard.

But then it was impossible that it should not.

Utterly impossible.

At the pensione lobby Pond met Clyde Spillway, the Texan who rented the room next to his own, waiting for the slow descent of the telephone-booth-shaped elevator.


"Hello," Pond replied. He gave no reaction to Spillway's witticism. None was necessary. None, in fact, was possible.
Spillway had himself exhausted the complete gamut of appreciation.

"Wall," Spillway drawled conversationally, "what've you been doin' with yourself? -- out oglin' all the fine old Roman ruins-- and some of them really are ruins! Ha."

"Yes."

"No, sir! The girls here in Rome ain't like our U.S.A. ones."

The affirmative alternatives to Spillway's negative statement were too profuse for offhand choice. Pond wordlessly entered the elevator and the slow ascent began.

"Wall," Spillway pursued, "I spent last night at the opera. Saw Madame Butterfly, the opera. You should have come like I said. Had a lot of real familiar areas in it."

"Areas?"

"Yep -- areas. That's the Italian word for tune --- ditty. I was surprised I knew so much, never having seen it before. You ever seen it?"

"No. No, as a matter of fact, I...

"No??"

"No. Funny. Puccini's a favorite of..."

"Never seen Madame Butterfly, the opera! Why, you can't call yourself cultured without you've seen Madame Butterfly!"

Despite himself Pond started feeling nettled.

"Never seen Madame Butterfly," Spillway clucked persistently. "Gripes-a-mercy, seein' as how you never been to Africa or Spain or France or England or Switzerland or Germany you ought to go to the opera more. Hell, they keep sayin' us Americans ain't cultured, but..."

All yesterday afternoon Pond had heard in tedious detail of the Texan's motor trip through Africa, Spain, France, England, Switzerland, and Germany -- had been made to feel provincial on the grand scale, here in the Eternal City. Yet less than a month ago Spillway had never so much as eaten in a foreign restaurant.

"You got to open your mind to this odd-ball stuff," Spillway remonstrated. "You owe it to America."

Pond stared at him sharply.
"Now take my wife, for instance," Spillway drawled elaborately; "she's real hot for it."
"Hot?"
"For this odd-ball culture kick."
"Your wife?"
"Yes. My wife back in Texas."
The elevator lurched to a stop. Pond lurched out of the elevator, as if in flight. Spillway lurched after him. To drown out the latter's drone, Pond pounded more loudly than usual on the heavy oak doors of the pensione -- then stopped in amazement as the Texan, suave, superior, slightly smiling, delicately pushed a small electrical button, which certainly Pond had never noticed before. "Sometimes you intellectuals don't seem none too bright."

Pond smiled, as if in pain.
The housegirl answered the door, peering in the Italian style.
"Buongiorno, eccoci ancora," Pond greeted, his accent flawless.
"R-right," Spillway simultaneously drawled, pushing past the peering girl.
But he did not push past her adoring stare. The ten-gallon hat obviously fascinated her, as did the string bow-tie, the high-heeled boots, the jingling spurs.
It was only by quick maneuvering that Pond succeeded in entering on Spillway's train. Even then the quickly closing door harshly galled his kibes.
"R-right!" murmured the housegirl echoingly, fascinatedly.
Chapter III

At supper -- to which Pond came late through having overslept -- Spillway beckoned elaborately across the room. Of necessity Pond joined the American and the man with him, for the five other tables in the dining room were occupied by a full complement of Egyptians, Germans, Swiss, and French. Spillway's companion was, at first sight, a repellent, grossly perspiring personage of leonine appearance, but a tooth-less and mangy leoninity -- hag-ridden, run-down. Indeed, he pawed at his food, in a brutish manner, and bent his head fully to the table to sip his coffee, the cup never leaving the saucer, the saucer never leaving the table. He seemed strangely keyed up, and glanced continuously over his right shoulder, peering sharply behind him, though there was naught to be seen there save a chromo of a collie saving a small boy from drowning. Pond attributed this to a nervous tic, which indeed it was.

"Mr. Pond, I'd like you to know Mr. Smith, on duty with the Finnish Embassy here in Rome."

"American Embassy in Finland," Mr. Smith corrected, staring fixedly at Spillway.

"'American Embassy in Finland,'" Spillway recited. "I'd like for you two to meet each other."

Smith, satisfied with the emendation, turned heavily to Pond. "Pleased to make your acquaintance," he said flatly.

"Hello," Pond retorted, only somewhat less flatly.

"R-right," Spillway drawled.

Then silence settled about them.

At length, having finished eating, Spillway and Smith made loud noises stirring their caffe latte, that liquid flower of the cow and the coffee bean. Pond ate on in silence, staring only every now and then, apprehensively, at the chromo and its cheated watery grave, under the contagious spell of Smith's kinetic fear. Spillway finally tilted backward in his chair, his coffee finished, and lit a second cigarette. He offered one to Smith, which was refused, and sighed contentedly.
"Yessir, yessiree -- you can't beat this Italian air for appetite. Makes this foreign food really taste good." He turned benignly to Smith. "Pond here is a piano player from Milwaukee."

"Maine," Pond corrected.

"That's nice," Smith said.

"Smith here," Spillway informed Pond, "is on holiday from his ambassadorial duties in Finland. I tried to talk him into going to the opera tonight but he says no soap. How about you?"

"No -- I've got to move out of here tonight, and..."

Spillway's eyes slitted. "I think I can contact us some femmes -- real party girls who..."

"No. I've got to move to this new room of mine." Pond paused, uncertain. "Thanks anyway."

Spillway squinted at him tensely. "You got a new room?"

"Yes, on the Corso d'Italia. It..."

"What's the matter with this one here?"

"Well, it's got no piano, for one thing. And the cost is another factor. The Corso room is very cheap. Also there're kitchen privileges."

Smith had been staring fixedly at Pond. "You're movin' to a new room?"

"Yes. I -- well, I -- uh -- to write music in, is why. You see..."

"That's fine. A musician needs a room to write music in. I think you done good."

"Well, actually..."

"I mean, as a composer, you done exactly the right thing."

Pond reflected. No, he really should make this clear. "Well, actually I'm a mathematics teacher -- Assistant Professor, really. What I mean is I'm not a real musician -- not an actual composer. I..."

"Who all knows you're movin' -- I mean what about the police, for instance?"

"Police?"
"Look," Smith hissed, leaning to within three inches of Pond's startled ear, "I know I can trust you: you got a good face; I could tell that a mile off. Besides, you're a loyal American, aren't you?"

Pond stared at his fellow citizen in annoyance. "Certainly I'm a loyal American," he replied testily. "What're you two whisperin' about?" Spillway whined. "If it's dirty jokes you're tellin'..."

"I just found out this guy's a fraternity brother of mine," Smith mumbled. "We both went to Ohio State together."

Pond was shocked at the lie. He had never even been in Ohio, though he had always heard it is a very nice state. He gaped, at a loss.

But Smith was more than equal to the tense situation. "Speaking of dirty jokes though," he said, "I heard a good one the other day. It seems there was this traveling farmer's daughter, see, and..."

"Traveling farmer's daughter??" Spillway was dubious. "Yeah, see, and she's on this train and finds she's lost her bag with her ticket in it, see, and the conductor, he comes and says to her, hey, miss..."

Pond sat in glass-eyed fascination as his two companions ploughed their way through filthy joke after filthy joke, guffawing coarsely on their way, much to the well-registered dissatisfaction of the Egyptians and French and Swiss and Germans. Finally he gulped the last of his coffee and rose to go.

"Hey, where you off to so sudden?" Spillway shouted anxiously.

"I've got to pack."

Smith lunged forward importunately. "I'll help you -- anything for an old fraternity brother," he shouted in ill-registered good humor. "Which is your room?"

"But..."

"Hey, you fellas, where...?"

"We'll see you later," Smith shouted to Spillway. "See you afterwhile." He grabbed Pond's elbow. "Let's hurry."
"Good heavens!" Pond hissed, "I can pack alone! I'd appreciate..."

"You're a loyal American: aren't you? Matter of great urgency."

Pond did not reply. He knit his brow, clenched his teeth, then sighed. Was he being subjective about this? Was he following a well-reasoned course of behavior?

"C'mon," Smith hissed, "hurry."

They were at the door of Pond's room now. He knit his brows even more tightly, paused, then said, "Well, if you insist, you can come in. But I assure you I can pack alone."

Smith closed the door behind him and sat heavily on the bed. "I didn't want that guy out there to get any idea there was anything fishy between you and me," he said. "That's why I told him we both went to Ohio State together and was fraternity brothers. For the same reason I told all them dirty jokes -- just to remove suspicions."

"What suspicions?"

"Listen. I'll level with you. I'm in a position to offer you a substantial amount of dough just for a little unimportant favor -- and as a matter of loyalty to the United States Government, probably." Smith was sweating heavily now, constantly mopping his face with an unclean handkerchief and compulsively staring over his right shoulder, at what would seem to be his own reflection in the wardrobe mirror. "All you got to do is keep a little bundle for me until I'm able to pick it up. And if I can't pick it up, all you got to do is bring it back with you to the states when you return."

Pond cleared his throat nervously. "Oh, come now," he remonstrated, "you can't expect me to believe that just for keeping this package of yours -- substantial sum of money -- till you pick it up -- or take it with me to America -- loyalty -- but what's in the package?"

"Very possibly important documents concerning the welfare of the United States of America. I mean indirectly, anyway. Only they're not exactly documents. That's why
you can't tell the customs people you got this bundle. You can't even..."

"If they're documents they could be transmitted by top secret cable without waiting till I go home, which will be late in September. Your problem is simple. Just get in touch with the American Embassy here in Rome and have them transmit..."

"Well, they're more drawings, like, more than just writing --I mean not exactly documents the way I said, and..."

"Well then, you can have them transported by top secret courier. Just go to the Embassy and..."

"You're not being a loyal American," Smith interrupted angrily.

"No, you misunderstand me, my dear Smith," Pond objected. "The point is that if there's risky work of this sort to be done, then the people to entrust it to are the experts, the folks in the diplomatic corps." He paused, suddenly struck by the absurdity of it all. "Why, for all you know I might be an unloyal American. I mean you have no proof to go on, nothing positive, and..."

"But there's a substantial amount of dough in it for you!" Smith mumbled angrily.

"Yes, Smith, but the point is I might bungle the job!"

"You refuse then. As a loyal American, you refuse."

"I don't refuse. It's just that..."

"You are a fine fellow and I respect your judgment. No! No, say no more," Smith protested. "But you will let me drive you to your new room."

"That's very kind of you, but I..."

"Let me do you this favor," Smith commanded. "Let me help you. I'll see you in ten minutes."

"But..."

But Smith had already lurched from the room.

Accordingly, in ten minutes he reappeared. In fifteen minutes he and Pond made the slim descent in the elevator, entered Smith's rented Simca, drove by fits and
starts till they reached Porta Pia on the Corso d'Italia, and entered the lobby of Pond's new abode.

"It's on the seventh floor," Pond said. "I'll take the things up myself, and I want to thank..."

"I'm gonna help you."

And Pond's persistent companion, breathing most heavily and sweating most profusely, followed him up the seven flights to Interno Sette -- Apartment Seven.

Pond had been bothered from the beginning by Smith's carrying a brown-paper bundle tied with coarse black string, evidently a laundry bundle, which, for no apparent reason, he had elected to bring with him from the pensione. Now, turning from the room, preparatory to a final exit, pursuant to prolonged adieux, Smith blurted out suddenly: "And oh, would you mind keeping this dirty wash for me till I can stop by and pick it up. And thanks a lot."

And with that -- and without the bundle -- Smith was gone.
Chapter IV

For a moment Pond gazed dumbly at the slammed door. He stood rooted in a paralysis of surprise. Then, becoming aware of the heavy breathing on the other side of the door and of an awkward fumbling with the lock, noticed the business end of a key protruding through the keyhole. Incredulous, he advanced upon the door, tried it - and found it locked. He grabbed at the handle, twisted and pulled -- only to sprawl backward on the terrazzo floor as the handle, flimsy affair, wrenched loose from its socket. He scrambled forward and clawed at the door but could find no grip on its simple panelling. He drew back to hurl himself at the obstacle but perceived in time that it was hinged to open inward.

There was nothing to do but knock for help.
Or call for help.

One of the two, and either quickly: for even now Smith must be speeding away in the scarlet Simca.

Pond watched in fascination as his hands advanced toward the door, as his palms began slapping at the panels importunately, as, finally, his voice began its quavering call of "Signorina! -- Signorina!"

At first there was no response whatsoever. Pond increased the force of his knocking and calling and was rewarded at length with an annoyed cry from the room opposite:
"Stop banging on my door!"
"Signorina??"
"Go away!"
"Would you kindly turn my key, Signorina? I..."
"Turn it yourself!"
"But -- you will pardon me assuredly -- but I am unable..."
"Go away. I turn no one's key."

Pond hesitated for some moments. Then, being unable to decide on any alternative, resumed his pounding on the door though timorously holding his vocal peace.
"I ignore this boorish outrage!" the Signorina cried at length. And no further response eventuated.
Pond, made bold by desperation, heightened his pounding. Finally he was rewarded. The landlady approached his door, stopped dubiously.

"Signore Pond?"

"Yes -- will you -- will you unlock the door please? I can't get out."

"But there is no handle."

"Yes -- it has fallen..." But that was another story. "Just turn the key, Padrona. Just unlock the door from where you are. The key's there in the lock. Just turn it."

The door bayed open.

"Signore Pond. Without meaning to be discourteous, we are not accustomed to this sort of behaviour in this abode. The noise is not welcomed by the other occupants, of which there are ten, inasmuch as..."

"I'm sorry, Padrona. It was an accident. I was..."

"Indeed -- accident"

The voice was the Signorina's. She stood now at her open door, cold anger in her eyes.

"An accident?? -- the door being locked on the outside?"

The Padrona's doubt was audible.

Pond was one of those who flinch from falsehood. But now he did not flinch.

"Yes, Signora," he insisted soberly, "an accident."

Assuredly meeting up with Smith was an accident of the worst sort. Certainly he was justified in being somewhat subnormally candid in elaborating his explanation: the brown-paper, black-string bundle on the bed shrieked for discretion, even unto dissimulation. Pond's conscience was salved by the odorless unguent of rationalization. "Yes, Signora," he perorated, "an accident -- but an accident, let me assure you, which most assuredly shall never happen again."

"Well, certainly anyone can make a mistake, Signore. None of us is perfect, eh, Signorina Maria?"

The maiden smiled. "Assuredly, Signora -- least of all him."

Pond bowed stiffly, from lack of practice. "Have you a phone I might use for a moment, Padrona?"
"Well, yes. Twenty lire a call, though. It's right down there in the hall, and..."
"Thank you."
"Twenty lire a call, remember."
"Yes."
Quickly Pond phoned the pensione. Spillway was out. Pond spoke to the landlady and found that Smith had just returned, had picked up his scant baggage, had paid his account and had departed hastily, leaving no forwarding address.

There was nothing to be done.

Pond replaced the receiver, returned to his room, studied the brown-paper bundle but did not undo the coarse black string. He reflected on what course of action to follow. Had Smith left a forwarding address he could simply post the bundle to him. That being impossible, perhaps the best thing to do was to turn it over to the Roman police. Yet if the bundle were of top secret importance to the U.S., mixing the Italians up in it would be bad business: they had been, after all, enemies in the last European war. Should he take it to some American Civil Servant or other here in Rome, relaying Smith's message and...?

But Smith really had conveyed no message.

Maybe the thing to do was keep the bundle till the Ohio State alumnus returned, follow a course of calculated inaction as it were. But what if Smith did not return? What kind of vacation would it be with this bundle business preying on his mind all the while?

In dismay he sat on the bed. The bundle rolled to the floor with a noisy rattling sound. Pond stared at it uneasily, sighed, lay back on the pillow to think the whole matter through.

And after a bit turned over on his side. Assumed a kind of worried foetal position. And, all unsuspectingly, fell into a deep and distracted sleep.
Chapter V

Almost eighteen hours later Pond awoke. The new day, fully articulated and stifling hot, pounced upon him fiendishly. Convulsively he stirred upon the sweat-moist bed, then, shocked by knowledge he bolted to his feet. The bundle crushed softly beneath his shoe. He stared down at it in horror.

"Wretched fellow!"
He startled. It was the across-court neighbor.
"Knave!"
He glanced at his watch, incredulous.
"Base creature!"
Then all the clocks of Rome began striking noon. And across the court the sun flooded across the white-stone wall and made it Apollo's own. Blinded, Pond crouched back, twisted in retreat.
"Oaf!"
In the bathroom the Padrona's husband, Signore Fragopane, was busily engaged in tapping the towering watertank of the toilet with a small hammer. Pond watched curiously as the spectacle continued for some minutes. Finally a deafening flush occurred. The landlord grunted and, with a piece of chalk, marked the spot, first smudging out a previous one.

"It's moved again," he said. "If you have a need of nature -- as indeed who at times does not -- hit the tank here now; the old location no longer serves!"

In the kitchen the landlady, shrouded in gloom, sat shelling peas. Pond greeted her hesitantly. She shushed him, explaining tersely that she was keeping count -- a wager with one of the other tenants.

Pond pottered depressedly about the kitchen. He would have to go shopping for pots and pans and dishes and whatnot. Next to the kerosene stove there stood a gas-ring, fed through a rubber tube, the worn brass handle newly tagged "S. Pond". It hissed when turned. Pond gave a final
glance to the Signora, then wordlessly departed from the kitchen.

Downstairs, the sunlight from the sidewalk was blinding. Pond hesitated a moment in the doorway, was about to walk off toward the marketplace right, but was caught up abruptly by Spillway's precipitate entrance.

"Pond!" he shouted, blinking uncertainly -- "That you, Pond? Just looking for you -- wanted to make sure you hadn't moved again, ha-ha."

Pond regained his balance, stared stolidly at the Texan. "Why should I move again?"

"No reason. Jest wanted to make sure. I jest figger us Americans should keep in touch. What's your apartment number up there -- seven, ain't it?"

"Yes. Seven."

Spillway whipped out an address book, flipped the pages, and checked an entry. "Fine," he grunted, "I got it good and exact now. I got to dash now, ol' pal, but I'll stop around see you tonight maybe or tomorrow or next day sure." He paused. "You'll still be here, you're sure now?"

Pond nodded, fascinated.

The Texan turned to go, paused. "By the way, you missed a good opera last night -- by some Frenchman -- Law V-D Boheem. You could'a learned a lot about bein' an artist from it -- sordid it was, and tragic."

"Mmm."

"You wanna go tonight?"

"To the opera?"

"Yeah."

"No, I don't think so, I..."

"It's some American opera -- about Texas."

"American?"

"I don't know the guy's name -- it's cowboy stuff -- called The Girl From the Golden West."

"I don't think so, Spillway. Thanks anyway."

"You're sure you won't reconsider. I mean you realize there's nothing more cultural than going to operas -- you know that, don't you?"
"Yeah."
"You just ain't in the mood, that it?"
"Uh-huh."
"Okay, okay." The Texan turned on his high heel, paused again. "Rome sure is a great old town, ain't it? Place where dreams come true." He seemed to quiver beneath the surge of some inner thrill.
"Yeah."
"Wall, podner, hasta la vista."
"Yuh."

Pond watched morosely, watched till the jingle of spurs could be heard no more, till the tremendous ten-gallon hat disappeared through the Porta Pia in the Aurelian wall. Again the Texan's presence had discomfited him.

Him and his operas.
Texas.

Maybe it was because of Fluffy.
Probably it was because of Fluffy.

Again, as he had so unrelievedly done these past ten years, he shut her from his mind. Immediately he felt a great hunger and sat down at a table in the sidewalk bar just to the right of the lobby entrance.

The sole waiter on duty sprang like a panther to his side.

"Commandi, Signore."

Pond paused, noting that the establishment was not, after all, a cookshop, was simply a coffee bar. He was about to ask directions to the nearest trattoria, then decided to order some sweet pastries and a cup of hot-milk-and-coffee. He pondered. Hell yes: he just had to have something to eat right away.

"Commandi, Signore?"

"Gia -- parecchie dolce -- dico dolce, parecchie dolce e caffe latte. Dolce e caffe latte -- mi senti? Dolce ho detto -- mi sono spiegato?? -- dolce e caffe latte..."

In dismay he perceived that the waiter -- strangely crew-cut -- seemed to hear not a word of his reiterated order, his eyes fastened gimlet-like on some focus further
up the street. Pond peered closely at the blue eyes behind the horn-rim glasses, noted that they were contracting upon each other, as if the acme of their burning gaze was approaching, approaching...

He turned his head in time to see a woman pass. She was thin in the waist, wrists, and ankles: elsewhere, otherwise. Fat, almost. As Pond glanced, she disappeared behind the cars parked at the sidewalk curb, Pond's table being on a low platform, fern-rimmed, which projected far into the broad expanse of the Corso.

Pond glanced inquiringly at the waiter. The latter was biting his lip in indecision. "Wait," he commanded in barefoot English, "if I rush into the sidewalk I'll be able to watch her for another ten paces or so -- it's worth the effort. Wait here."

Incredulous, Pond watched as the lithe and lanky, tuxedo-trouserered, white-jacketed figure spurted across the platform to the sidewalk where he posed rigidly to ogle the receding female. Then of a sudden, the tension sagged from the straining form, the gold-braided shoulders drooped. And Pond knew that at that moment the woman had turned the corner into Via Alessandria.

Slowly the waiter turned.
And returned.
He glanced at Pond. "You speak English, I take it?" The barefoot quality was now shod in white bucks, ivy-stained.
"Yuh."
"Well, sorry to have kept you waiting, but that -- just now -- that item was a classic of its sort. Did you see her?"
Pond pondered. "Only in profile."
Lavishly, with a baroque Italian gesture, the waiter deprecated. "Then you saw nothing. Her approach -- her approach was superb. And the approach, not the retreat, is the real test. Head-on sexuality -- smooth, superb!!" The waiter paused. "You noted the dress -- the material, the cut, the color?"
Pond nodded uncertainly.
"White silk jersey it was, gold figured, loosely swathed, tightly belted, so that" -- his hand slashed a descriptive X in the air -- "each step turned her torso to the limit of the luminous fabric, caught in the taut folds a wealth of supple shadow..."

Pond blinked, at a loss.
"...ecstatic shadow, its base the belt, its convergence now the right breast, now the left, the fabric falling free in mid-step, tightening and twittering in a flip-flop, clip clop rockabye rhythm that..."

Pond's brow became a Gordian knot. He stopped breathing.
The waiter stared at him in concern. "What I'm saying is, simply, that with each step, the diagonal shadow across her -- well, across her rib cage -- the shadow shifted at each step -- alternated, neon like, the fabric being what it was, and..."

Pond tried to speak. He could not.
The waiter was concerned. "I'm afraid you don't get my meaning. Pity you missed seeing it yourself."
"Yes, I -- I -- well..."
"A less inspired woman would have clad the torso either tighter or looser. Superb showmanship -- showmanship -- that just now. I find our American girls have the taut tendancy, bodice-wide. Emphatic, yes. But static. Such gifted use of chiaroscuro as this woman – hmm..."

Pond waited discreetly for the other's reverie to end. It didn't.
"Mind you I do not minimize her exit from the purview of the beholder. No. It's simply that it was, perforce, anticlimactic -- though superb, superb. The ankles, especially, were excellent. Completely strapless heels, you know -- mules, actually -- high-heeled mules. They don't have then in the States, more's the pity." He bit his lip thoughtfully. "Waist, too, was excellent. That's much admired here."

Pond cleared his throat. "I -- I'd like..."
"Especially with quite full hips, such as hers just not. Much admired."

Pond waited, then began again. "I'd like to..."

"I don't suppose you noticed her deltoids -- shoulder development?? Well pronounced and..."

"I'd like to order -- we -- you could talk after I order -- if that's all right with you. I..."

"Order?? Of course -- that's my job. What'd you want -- a drink? --aperitif?"

"No, just some pastry and coffee -- caffe latte -- dolce..."

"The Earth Mother, she, idle now till autumn, at which time she serves as Symbol." The waiter chuckled. "That's a line from -- from --now who...?"

Pond was caught up short by this relapse of the other's reverie. He stared almost in annoyance.

The waiter repeated the line musingly, hemmed, hawed.

Pond arose.

The waiter pressed him to his seat. "Come now! -- you wanted--coffee?? -- dolce, was it?"

"Yuh."

The waiter scrawled the order on a pad. "My name's Firestone -- Jed Firestone," he announced absently. "Yours is Pond, I understand -- Allan, right? I heard about that ruckus you pulled last evening. Well, hell, it's natural to cut up a bit at first -- a lot of tourists do -- Americans especially. You'll season-in after a while." He turned. "Be right back with the dolce and coffee. You wait here." And, so saying, he went off -- but not quite off. He got as far as the sidewalk, then stood rooted, his burning gaze directed to the left, aslant the sidewalk, again screened from Pond by the parked autos. Pond glanced quickly but could glimpse nothing. A moment later, however, the woman in the gold-print dress repassed, now clutching a small melon. Pond was amazed to find himself annoyed that he again saw her only in profile. She passed on. He watched, almost idly --then found himself rising and hurrying to the
sidewalk. He watched her until she rounded the corner at
the far end of the block.

Then slowly, thoughtfully, he wandered back to the
rusty green iron table, only mildly miffed that Firestone
had followed the compelling creature down whatever alley
she had turned.

In resignation he raised his eyes wonderingly to
heaven: halfway up he caught sight of the Signorina
staring down at him from the eighth story of the
apartment house facade.

Caught short, discomfitted, confused, he waved.
She did not. Instead, withdrew.
Piqued, Pond was alone.
He lowered his eyes.
Chapter VI

The siesta hours were almost ended when Pond remounted the myriad stairs leading to Apartment Seven. He was burdened now with pots and pans, crockery and glassware, produce and groceries, bread and wine. He was hungry again, for Firestone had been exhausting in his conversation, had used the whole cosmos as a conversation piece and all history as anecdote; he had said nothing of himself, nothing unmomentous, nothing unrelated, nothing loth. The Encyclopedia Britannica, annotated by Freud, now stalked the streets of Rome in the person of the expatriate American.

And all Pond had wanted was dolce and caffe latte.

Wearily he entered the kitchen and placed his purchases on the table. In the gloom he did not at first perceive the Signorina Maria, and only after he had spent some minutes in stowing his equipment on various shelves did he hear her voice:

"You are going about it wrong, Signore Pond. You are presuming upon the Padrona's elasticity of habit."

Pond spun around. "Ah -- the Signorina! I did not see you -- I..."

She moved forward from the gloom where, evidently, she too had been shelling peas. "I merely attempt to tell you that lodgers must store their food and kitchenware in their own rooms -- that is, excepting pots and pans." Her voice was cool and impersonal, as was the thought expressed.

"I see." Pond's own voice was stiff.

She did not speak. She continued to gaze at him dispassionately.

Pond felt awkward and began to gather up his scattered belongings. The Signorina watched him until he was completely encumbered and could hold no more. Then she gathered up the bread and wine and cheese:

"I will carry these for you. Come."

Pond followed her to his room.
"Place everything on the table -- use the celesta if you need more room. I will dispose all items for you. Sit, for I see you are hot."

Pond could not wrench his startled gaze from the celesta, wedged as it was in the embrasure of the window; yet chivalry stirred within his distracted bosom. "No, no," he protested, "you -- you must let me help. I..."

"You are a stranger to our life here. I will dispose. Sit, pray, and allow me to atone in some small measure for my curtness of yesternoon." She paused. "For my curtness of yesternoon and yestereve -- and my unkindness of this past midnight."

"Last midnight??" Pond guffawed protestingly. "You weren't unkind last midnight! As a matter of fact, I slept all through yesterday evening till this morning. I..."

"For my unkindness of this past midnight in refusing to fetch you to the phone."

"Phone??"

"There was a call from one Smith. He spoke through an interpreter -- a Swiss interpreter who spoke wretched Italian."

Pond was dumbfounded. "Did he -- er -- leave a message -- this Smith??"

"He said: 'Be careful the cops don't catch you with the bundle.'"

"Cops??"

"Yes. They must not intercept the laundry, he said."

"He said that?? -- the Smith interp-- Swiss interpreter said that??"

"The cops must not intercept the laundry. Yes. Those were his words; the grammar, of course, is my own."

"Hmmm."

Maria spent the ensuing silence arranging her hair. Pond was too self-absorbed to note that she used only her downstage arm and that no hair turned.

"And," Pond queried, "if they do intercept it?"
Maria made amorphous shrugs. "Dire consequences -- perilous developments -- tragic outcome -- words to that effect."

Pond was at a loss.

Maria moistened her lips. "Finally the message concluded: 'Tell him I salute his loyalty, and if I can't get in touch with him in two weeks take the bundle back right away...''

"Take it back right away!"

"'Take it back immediately and earn the gratitude of the entire American people. The code word is Flabbergast.'" She paused. "He once again saluted your loyalty and then other voices were heard, an argument ensued, and the line was dead for a while. At length a woman began talking in German, very querulously, asking, I believe, who I was and..."

Pond was incensed. The stupid phone call gave an air of hugger-mugger to his presence on the Corso and had only too obviously activated the interest -- the curiosity -- of the Signorina. Yesterday she would not even speak to him: today she was telling him the most awkward secrets about himself. It was stupid of Smith to go around confiding such delicate facts of statesmanship to utter strangers -- to himself, to chance interpreters, to querulous inn-keepers, to Maria.

That repository again arranged, among other things, her hair. "So you're some kind of spy, then, tapping out messages on a piano or something, eh?"

Pond could not tell if she was joking. He gave a nervous little laugh. "Oh, it -- the call -- that was probably just a prank. I mean, for example, I -- I know a fellow from Texas here in Rome -- he'd do something like that -- just as practical joke..."

"And yet," Maria interrupted, "here is a bundle..." She pointed to the floor of the wardrobe. "It is the bundle?" she mused. "Hmmm. I think so." She crossed, stared at the package closely. "S-m-i-t-h. It spells Smith, no?"

Pond could not reply.
Maria considered further, then clucked delicately. "'Gratitude of the entire American people'??" she persisted; "Of the entire people??"

Pond averted his gaze mulishly.

She clucked again, this time less delicately.

"I did not wish the bundle," Pond said stiffly.

"Yet you have it, no?"

"Things happen."

She stared long at him, then said quietly, but with conviction: "You are on a fool's errand, Signore -- but perhaps you are the right man for the job."

"I did not wish the bundle," Pond repeated.

"You did not refuse it, however. But no more of that."

Her eye caught upon an open notebook on the table; it was cluttered with musical notation, and was entitled "Cantata". She stared for some moments, then began to hum

Pond regarded her anxiously. Interestingly she turned the page --then the next and the next, her bell-like voice facilely following the written melody, transmuting images into sound.

She sang well, with natural technique, and as Pond watched he heard, not the music he had written, but the voice which gave it body; for it was as though her whole being had become orchestrated, and sound found its home anew in flesh.

At the end she remained long silent.

Finally Pond prompted: "What -- what do you -- what do you think of..." he paused, "it?"

She smiled sombrely. "It admirably expresses the Anglo-Saxon spirit -- chill, dank, dark, dismal." Her smile died. "What it does, it does well. I imply no moral judgment thereby, you understand."

"Hmm."

She thumbed through the thick notebook absently. "Your work reminds me, oddly enough, of Van Gogh: no talent -- all drive. Except that you have far less drive, I would say, than Van Gogh -- far, far less. Obviously mine
is but a random reaction, but I doubt that music is your proper field."

Pond stared dubiously at his critic, but there was no saving twinkle in her eye for him though, under his anguished gaze she rolled, among other things, her luminous eyes, in which process her peasant blouse started its own movement back to the land. At that moment, without the ceremony of a knock, Spillway strode into the crowded room, effusive with twangy greetings and southern salutations. But at the sight of Maria he stopped short.

"Wall!" he ejaculated, "she a model or something -- a seamstress, maybe? She talk English?"

Pond was taken aback. "Of course she's not a model -- she's the girl who lives across the hall."

Spillway seemed disturbed. "I don't much approve of the idea of her being here," he said severely.

Pond was annoyed, but held his peace. Briefly he introduced the two, and mutually unintelligible greetings passed between them. The situation rapidly went to pot: Maria busied herself with rearranging her undisheveled attire; Spillway divided his time between scowling disapprovingly at Pond and gaping goggle-eyed approval of Maria's rearrangement. At length he broke his attention loose long enough to explain to Pond the purpose of his visit.

"I popped over here to warn you the cops've been around the pensione after that Smith character. Now I kept my mouth shut about that fishy business between you two, and since I don't think no one else knows about your relationship I'd say you're pretty safe as yet. I covered up good for you but I wanna warn you the cops are wise to Smith, and if you don't wanna wind up in the hokey you better be real careful of your movements."

Pond was touched, but unnerved. "My dear Spillway, there was no fishy business between Smith and myself. And while I want to thank you for -- for your kindness -- 'covering up', as you put it -- I want to point out that I'd
never so much as seen him before you introduced us, and I
never saw him after that. If there..."

"But you and him left together, right before he lammed
for good." Spillway cracked his knuckles nervously. "You
got to keep your nose real clean, Pond, or you'll wind up in
the clink. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Pond stared uncertainly at the Texan. He found himself
resolving to post the bundle immediately to the American
Embassy in Finland; that way...

"And besides," Spillway persisted, "I don't think this
kind of situation you got here with this, er, model, helps
your position either. I mean I just don't think it's moral,
her half undressed and..."

"She isn't a model!"

"What the hell then, neighbor -- that's far worse. I may
not go to church every Sunday, Pond, but..."

Pond did not argue. The essential thing was the bundle,
to get rid of it quickly -- and Spillway had put the cops off
the trail. Pond cleared his throat. "Well, Spillway, I
appreciate your warning about the cops, but let me assure
you that I am above reproach in this Smith affair,
appearances perhaps to the contrary. And as to Maria
here, she..."

"Are you talking about me?" the girl whispered thickly.
"What are you saying?"

"I was about to tell this man that you are in this room
solely to help me in arranging my..."

"What're you two talkin' about?" Spillway interrupted.
"If it's dirty jokes..."

"It's not dirty jokes! Good gracious!" Pond expostulated.
"Why must it always be dirty jokes!"

"I'm not tellin' any dirty jokes," the Texan retorted
severely. "Why drag me into -- into this -- sordid situation?"
He stopped short, as if struck by memory. "Oh, by the way,
my wife's finally flyin' in from the states -- arrivin' at
Ciampino Airfield tonight at seven. I thought maybe you'd
like to come with me to greet her. We don't get along none
too good and I always feel better if someone else's with us. I'll stop by here at six, that'll give us time enough to..."

"Is he talking about me?" Maria purred.

"No."

"So can you come?" Spillway asked anxiously, oblivious of the Italianate interruption.

Pond was taken aback by the request. "It -- it's, uh, very nice of you to ask me along," he began haltingly, "but..."

Spillway cracked all eight fingerknuckles at once. He did this by placing both hands together, knuckles-to-knuckles, and pushing hard. "But what?" he quavered in ill-concealed desperation.

"Well, I -- I'm really awfully busy. I mean, I lost a lot of time looking for a place, and..."

"If you're busy I'll leave right now -- not hold you up anymore..." He glanced uneasily at Maria. "I mean, I'll leave at once, see, and..."

Pond stared curiously. "You will?"

"Sure, sure. I -- I wouldn't ask you this favor, but my wife and me -- I -- well, it's like a complex or something, and..."

Pond stared wordlessly.

"You'll be able to make it at six then? -- for Ciampino, I mean?"

"Well, really, Spillway, I -- I..."

"I covered up for you with the cops," Spillway protested almost angrily. "If it wasn't for me you might be in the pogey right now!"

"But you've got to understand..."

"Please!" The Texan's voice was hollow. "Please, Pond."

"All right, I'll go, I'll go," Pond muttered uneasily. "But..."

"Good! Wonderful!! Since you're busy, like you said, I'll lam immediately." He threw one final soul-torn glance at Maria, shuddered, and started off. "See you at six."

Pond nodded, and Spillway disappeared.

Then there was silence in the room. Maria arose abruptly. "I must go, Signore." She paused. "May I point
out that you must yet purchase a water carafe, a wine bottle, and a wicker breadbasket. Though if you are to return to America very soon as the interpreter advised, possibly you might forego the breadbasket."

Pond took a bite of his thumbnail.

Maria paused by the celesta, idly placed her fingers in a pattern of C-sharp minor, impressed the design upon the keyboard.

Pond contorted in agony as the jangling sound of padded hammers striking metal plates filled the room.

"Assuredly," Maria murmured, her shock apparent, "Fragopane does not propose to put that into working order!" Incredulous, she struck again. The cacophony reburgeoned.

Quickly she departed.
Chapter VII

Immediately Pond closed the door behind her. He grabbed up the bundle from the floor of the armadio. Post it at once to Helsinki! He ground his teeth. Smith. Fool's errand. Cops. Swiss interpreters. The Signorina. Flabbergast. National gratitude...

He stopped abruptly in his teeth-grinding: Post it?? But that would involve declaring the contents, signing papers, having the scheme backfire if... He sat heavily on the bed. Yes, he might unwittingly sabotage Smith's whole scheme by sending the bundle to Finland. Also he wouldn't be keeping the faith, would not be playing the game.

He stood up.

No, the best thing, the safest thing, the sanest thing would be to take the bundle directly to, say, the American Embassy in Rome and request it be forwarded home by Top Secret Courier.

What had they to lose?

Accordingly, a half hour later Pond stopped at the intersection of 20th of September Street and Veneto Way, and, placing his bundle on the sidewalk wall, unfolded his gigantic map and sought to orient himself.

"Hold it!" The voice, a verbal thunderclap, pierced Pond's ear pointblank. He startled in agony, grabbed for the bundle.

"Holding it? Fine! Got it!"

Pond turned to face the shouter. He saw a man with a Leica camera, a beaming, grimacing man, half-wizened, with straggling goatee, clad in weatherbeaten British costume.

"My name is Herbert Hymnsinger, Englishman," he announced. "I'm spending the summer traveling through Italy, and since there's a tight restriction on the amount of money we can take from the Isles, I'm forced to scrape up money as I wander. Thus, with your permission, I'll send this snap to your hometown in the U.S. with a brief blurb -- Local Resident Conquers Rome -- Roman Road Puts American on Map -- something like that, what? I assume, of course, that
you're from a fairly small community with a newspaper of its own. Otherwise it's not much use, you know."

"You're a journalist?"

"You are a bit slow, aren't you? Yes, a journalist. I take pictures of tourists, American tourists in the main, and send the pix to their home-towns, where..."

"Yes, I got that part."

"What's your natal village, may I ask?"

"Well, I'm living now in Eagle Foot, Maine, but I was born in Evanston -- that's in..." Pond stopped short, acutely regretting his disclosure. But he could not afford to be too suspiciously reticent, clutching, as he was, the bundle, the map crumpled and forgotten at his feet. "But about Eagle Foot -- no one back there would be interested in a picture of me. You see..."

"Ah, modest! Much too modest! Don't you worry about admirers! Let us see, let us see." And quickly the Angle thumbed through a small directory: E -- Ea -- Eag -- Eagle -- Eagle Foot, Maine. Pop. 5,280. Newspaper: The Eagle Foot Post-Intelligencer, circ. 850. Great! Fine, fine, fire!"

Pond was about to protest when abruptly a white-clad policeman carrying a long, gilt-scabbarded sabre hove into view. Impulsively Pond turned away, then awkwardly retrieved the map. In confusion he turned left down Veneto Way, closely followed by Hymnsinger nervously clinging to his sleeve.

"Hey! You with the camera!" It was the policeman. Hymnsinger either did not or feigned not to understand, but suddenly struck up an animated conversation with Pond. The latter turned. The cop was approaching quickly, gesticulating at Hymnsinger.

"He wants to talk to you."

"About the camera, I think,"

"Signore has a permit for taking street-pictures??"

"He says he was watching you and he thinks you're a street photographer; he says you need both a permit and working papers," Pond interpreted nervously.

"Tell him we're quite good friends -- that we had an appointment to meet there on the corner and that just for a candid effect I up and snapped your picture."

Pond hesitated. This was perjury, or something very like. Yet he could not callously deliver the islander over to a harsh, bureaucratic fate.

"We're quite good friends and we had an appointment to meet there on the corner and he just took the picture of me for a candid effect." Pond's mouth went dry as he repeated the lying words.

The policeman eyed him superciliously. "And how is it, Signore, that you did not at once volunteer this information when I asked if your 'friend' was a street photographer and had a permit?"

Pond reflected.

"Tell him we're very good friends," Hymnsinger interposed, "and that..."

Pond turned on the Englishman angrily. "I've already told him that obvious lie! That's what's causing the present trouble. Why didn't you get a permit and working papers?"

"It seemed like a pointless formality at the time, and besides..."

"What are you two 'friends' growling about?" the cop inquired acidly.

"Distract his attention for a moment -- keep him occupied!" Hymnsinger hissed.

But Pond needed no such directive: already he was engaged in a spirited exchange with the cop. Then suddenly there was a crash of glass on the other side of the broad street -- a shrill medley of terrorized cries, a sudden chaos of mob panic. The policeman turned, Pond and the photographer forgotten. With a shrill blast of his whistle he halted traffic and raced to the scene of hysteria.

Pond and Hymnsinger stood alone on the sidewalk.

"What do you suppose it is?" Pond asked uneasily.
"Someone apparently threw something through that large window over there," the Englishman volunteered. "I do hope nobody got cut up." He snapped the scene quickly. "Fine drama, that."

Pond had already started off, but the other was quickly at his heels, insisting on his right to accompany Pond till they were well quit of the cop. Pond protested. He was still protesting as they entered a large building festooned with American flags. It might have been the United States Embassy.

Hynmsinger popped inside, claiming sanctuary.
"Can I help you?" The receptionist sounded dubious.
Pond explained his mission.
The receptionist, perhaps invisibly impressed, got up and plodded off. Some minutes later she meandered back via the water fountain route, resumed her seat and her stare, and announced: "A Mr. Quillercouch will see you. Ask the guard to lead you to him."

Accordingly Pond -- minus Hynmsinger, who languished now in the outer reception hall -- entered the office of a Mr. Quillercouch, a minute later, to find that indefinitely identified individual posing upright behind a sturdy slab of mahogany, knuckles lightly quelling the shining desktop, his stern gaze only partially preoccupied by the coffee perking on a hotplate in the desk's lower righthand drawer.

Pond, for lack of any prologue more pertinent, blurted out: "I bring greetings from Undercover Agent John Smith, and further, I bring this bundle." He was glad, suddenly, to have a part, however small, in this obscure charade of history.
"Fine," the public servant intoned genially. "But who is John Smith?"
"He stayed awhile at the DeMedici Pensione, down on the via Nazionale."
"You have a password?"
"Flabbergast."
"Flabbergast?"
"Flabbergast."
"F's are not in use this year," the State Servant said sternly.

"That's the one I got," Pond said candidly. "Flabbergast -- might have been Blabbergast or Clabbergast or Dabbergast... You see, it was in a telephone message transmitted by..."

"You've made your point but I'm afraid you're stuck with it. Three-syllable words are out this year. Whole concept's wrong anyway. We're using Greek godesses this year -- personification stuff -- like the Weather Bureau." He paused. "I think it's Greek godesses."

"Well," Pond persisted, "Greek godesses or not, I've got this actual bundle here -- from Smith himself."

"And what, pray tell, is in 'this actual bundle'?"

"Well, plans, I suppose. And documents. And I imagine confidential data. Smith didn't go into any details. He..."

"And why wasn't he explicit, pray tell?"

"The cops were after him and he hadn't much time."

"What 'cops'?"

"The Roman ones."

"And just what do these 'plans, I suppose' concern?"

"Finland, possibly."

"Finland, possibly!" At this point Quillercouch stooped to unplug the boiling coffee. He arose, resumed his stately pose, then asked sardonically: "Why not 'Latvia, likely'?"

Pond's jaw dropped.

The Servant screwed up his thin face into a contortion of concentration. "Or -- or Paris, perhaps, or -- or Moravia, maybe -- or -- or Albania, actually, or -- or..."

"I'm only asking you send this bundle home. Maybe you could check with some higher-ups and get their okay before...

"I am not at liberty to go around giddily 'checking with higher-ups'," the Servant said with calm finality; "I am at liberty for completely different reasons." He paused, then snickered: "Paris, perhaps!"

Pond was annoyed. "Well, I certainly think..."

"Oh, sure, sure -- you 'certainly think'! Sure you do! You just don't happen to think what this nonsense would do to a man in my position!"
"And just what is your position?"

"What is my position??" The Servant allowed anger to tinge his tone.

Silence caromed off the walls as though the room were a squash court. Pond started to speak then decided to hold his peace.

"What is my position??" Quillercouch repeated acidly.

"What I meant," Pond backtracked, "is that I don't even know what your job is -- I mean are you an Ambassadorial Assistant or a Vice-Consul or -- or a Nuncio -- or what exactly is your job?" He stopped. "Maybe I'm in the wrong office, I mean."

Quillercouch was silent for several severe seconds. Then he spoke: "Don't you concern yourself about 'what exactly is my job', my friend, or whether you're in the 'wrong office'. I am a Servant of the American People. This building is leased by the U.S.A. That should be good enough for you, my friend. My job is seeing that it is good enough."

Pond's head was beginning to ache. "Well, fine," he said. "Then perhaps you'll just be kind enough to open this package and..."

"Isn't it obvious to you that it is merely a bundle of dirty laundry? It even has a list of items on it."

"Well, the list may be a code. The contents may be chemically treated so that..."

"You got more imagination than's good for you, my friend. Show me some 'secret documents' and you got a case. This laundry jazz is strictly from -- what are you doing there! What are you doing!"

Triumphant Pond ripped open the laundry. The two men stared. There was silence.

"'Plans, and documents, and confidential data!'" Quillercouch spat contemptuously. "And this you wanted me to send to the States -- by Top Secret Courier yet!"

"But I keep telling you they're probably chemically treated -- that this laundry is just a blind! Certainly the Secret Service doesn't operate wearing cloaks and daggers and
masks! This whole business is just an ingenious scheme for transmitting..."

"Do you know how much I make a year?" Quillercouch interrupted severely. "Do you know what you're costing the American taxpayer with this tomfoolery? I make well in the neighborhood of $15,000 a year -- exclusive of living allowances, overseas-differentials, cost-of-living increments, and in-grade salary steps! I..." He paused, considered. "That may be fifteen thousand inclusive -- I can't just remember at the moment. But anyway you slice it, friend, it's an awful lot of money. And where does it come from? Out of the pockets of the American taxpayer -- yes, and yours too, Pond! Yet how many people come traipsing here with..."

Pond gazed dumbly at the Servant as the angry apostrophe billowed forth. He blinked dubiously, a bit overawed, a trifle ashamed. The other, regaining at last his icy calm, resumed his majestic pose, knuckles perfectly poised -- and glared now silently and imperiously at the bundle-carrier. The latter, his reason shattered by the fifteen thousand dollar stare, found himself gazing gauchely at the empty desk top, his eyes holding stupidly on a small indiarubber figurine of a cross-legged belly-dancer, a small crank protruding from the back of the box on which she sat.

"Please don't take me personal, Pond," the Servant added conciliatorily. "I mean, a guy goes abroad, the sun's hot here, he goes a little nuts. They all do. The only ones here not slightly nuts are the outright loonies. You're new here, a duffer. I'm the pro on the course. Put back the divot and scram. Don't lug it around like a cross."

Pond stared sharply.

"I mean, don't feel you're the only one who's ever goofed. You've got a bunch of dirty laundry there, right? Okay. Your problem's..."

"But I happen to have faith in this dirty laundry as you call it, Quillercouch, faith that it is what Smith says it is," Pond interrupted quietly. "I -- I'm glad you make a good salary, and I appreciate the fact that a lot of people..."
We'll if you appreciate it you'll realize you're wasting the taxpayers...
"...bother you with foolish..."
"...money. For that matter, I'm a taxpayer. You're wasting my money, standing there moonshining away about a bunch of..."
"Moonshining"?
"...rags." He considered. "You could probably buy ten times that much laundry -- new -- with the money you've wasted here...
"Good heavens, Quillercouch! I'm not interested in brutish monetary considerations! I'm here in a spirit of altruism and patriotism. It is..."
"Brutish!"
"...certainly possible, as you insist, that this is merely a bundle of dirty laundry. But the alternate possibility that it is what Smith says it is must not be ignored!"
"Brutish monetary considerations!"
"Oh, come now, Quillercouch, let's not argue about irrelevancies. I'm trying..."
"I don't call fifteen thousand a year irrelevant," the Servant interrupted acidly. "How much do you make, pray tell?"

Pond told him. It was a high salary as college salaries go. "Did you -- did I hear you say -- five thousand -- five thousand a year?"
"Well, when you consider that I actually work only nine months...
"Five thousand a year!"
"...it really amounts to a lot...
"Five thousand a year! My god, you make less than a third what I make! How the hell did you ever get abroad? What are you," Quillercouch quipped, not unacceptably, "a stowaway or something?"

Pond was offended.
"Five thousand a year! Less than a third..." He stooped, reached into the top drawer of his desk and removed its contents, a tall crock cup. He half clucked, half chuckled, in
amusement, in amazement. He filled the cup with coffee. He sat down then, vastly at his ease, seemingly oblivious of Pond altogether, throwing its feet up to the mahogany desk-top, the large tap-dancer heel-cleats further enriching an already lush pattern of similar scratches, and chuckling softly set to shining his fingernails with a chamois buffer.

"Five thousand a year!" The Servant repeated the amount in wonder, then, glancing up, noticed in surprise Pond's continuing presence.

He waved the silver-mounted buffer with a courtly gesture. "You may as well go now," he laughed. Then, crouching awkwardly, his heels scratching for foothold on the gleaming desk-top, he managed to reach his coffee. He sipped it with a little squeal of delight.

Pond, bewildered, began to re-wrap the dirty laundry.

"No, no!" the bureaucrat snapped sharply. "Wrap it up outside -- I mean, my god, here I am drinking coffee and there you are shoving a bunch of dirty laundry around..." He grimaced. "I mean, for god's sake, be a little considerate, will you?"

Hastily Pond gathered up the scattered items. He turned and opened the door.

"There's still a sock here -- come back and get this sock!"

Pond obeyed. His final, and vivid, impression was of the Servant, a cigarette dangling crookedly from a long ivory holder, his slim feet high on the enormous desk, coffee steaming at his elbow, the india-rubber belly-dancer in his hand, the long fingers turning the tiny crank in the pedestal-box, the figurine undulating jerkily beneath the impetus of the hidden mechanism.

Awkwardly, fearful lest his loose burden fall to the floor, Pond turned the knob and entered the corridor.

"Crikeys! Is that the stuff you wanted to send Top Secret!" It was Hymnsinger, strangely present in the ringing hall. "Hold it, guv!" And a sudden flash inscribed the awkward moment forever.

"S'Death!"
Chapter VIII

It's a fairly long drive from Rome to Ciampino. More than fairly if one is upset by an afternoon such as Pond had had. Longer still if one is the stunned, captive audience of a Tex Spillway who, conversationally at least, was not above flogging a dead horse.

"You ain't listenin' to what I'm sayin'," Spillway suddenly interrupted himself to observe. "What've I, been yakkin' away at a deaf-mute or somethin'?"

The ensuing split-second of silence, broken only by the rattling grind of the taxi-cab's progress, crashed noisily against Pond's left eardrum. Though seated, he executed what psychologists term a startle-response.

"What're you, jumpy or somethin'?" Spillway asked suspiciously.

"Maybe I've got cause to be jumpy," Pond muttered noncommittally, his mind trammeled up with thoughts of Hymnsinger, escaped to who-knew-where, compromising, thereby, Pond's peace of mind, his summer, and the laundry so graphically recorded.

"You got cause!" Spillway exclaimed in surprise. "You got cause!! I'm the one that's meetin' my wife -- not you!"

Pond was annoyed. "I'm not meeting your wife then?" he asked dryly.

"What I mean is," Spillway continued querulously, "I'm the one that's meetin' his wife,--- not you!"

"Whose wife?" Pond asked, confused.

"My wife. I mean, I'm the one that's meetin' one's wife -- not you. I mean I'm meetin' my wife -- you're not meetin' your wife. Sure, you'll meet mine -- but that's completely different."

"Uh-huh."

"So you certainly got no cause to be jumpy."

"Hmm."

At Ciampino the plane was hours late in landing. Spillway chose to utilize this period in narrating the story of his life in an apparent effort to edify and entertain Pond. The account
was fitful and disjointed, now invoking the Alamo, now all Texas, at times specific oilwells, one of which he had fallen into at the age of eight. All memories seemed to fall into the pre-puberty period. Maturity was one yawning gap.

The main point, Pond gathered, was that Spillway was hopelessly wealthy. Spillway pere had discovered the family oil. Spillway fils, in turn, had discovered nothing, or at least nothing to speak of. Despite this, Spillway fils spoke incessantly of himself, of Texas, and more of himself, never really distinguishing between the two. A half-dozen times he mentioned his wife, in formula as follows: "My wife...(groan)...she... (sigh)...", followed by a mulish silence broken only by the cracking of knuckles and the creaking change of topic.

It was the cracking of knuckles that periodically disturbed Pond's fitful doze. Then finally it was a "Babydoll, babydoll -- Allie, oh, Allie doll," that murdered sleep.

Pond gaped, blinking. It was impossible, it was incredible, but there it was, there she was -- but where was Spillway.

"Allan... Doll..." the voice murmured.
"Fluffy."
"Oh, doll, doll, doll. We meet again -- at last -- in Rome."

Pond gazed about, at a loss. "Well, Ciampino -- really," he corrected. "I -- I, uh, I'm here with a friend. We came to meet his wife -- a, uh, a Mrs. Spillway."

"I'm a Mrs. Spillway. And I came here to meet you, doll."

Obscurely Pond had already divined both facts. "But -- but how did --how did you...??"

"Clyde's postcard listed your name -- among many others. When Clyde communicates it's always just names -- proper names, place names."

"Where is -- where is, uh, your, uh...?"

"Him? He's in with Customs." Fluffy smiled. "Some trouble about the cat. It'll take some time to clear. We'll go on ahead, you and me. Will you like that, doll?"

"How's your father, Fluff?" Pond's query was compulsive. He made no move to go.
"Who?? -- oh, my father?? Oh, he's same as usual." She hooked into his flaccid arm. "Ten long years, doll." She set him into motion.

"But -- but your husband, Fluff..."
"Ten long, long years, doll..."
Chapter IX

It was dark now. They had eaten in a trattoria not far from Pond's lodgings, an arcaded affair off the Via Salaria. The wax dripped from the pulsing candles the more quickly now, now that there was so little wax remaining. Somewhere across the rear yard a poet played the guitar in its natural state. The waiter leaned, lost in time and space and thought, against the rusty green iron railing of the patio.

And Fluff was quoting, had quoted, T.S. Eliot -- his Hysteria, his Portrait of a Lady, his La Figlia Che Piange. Perhaps uncomprehendingly. But fired with emotion for the rhythm -- of the poems possibly; of life assuredly.

Despite himself, Pond was compelled. This was the way it could have been, should have been, had too briefly been, ten years earlier. Another time, another city. Philadelphia. This same girl. For Fluff was still the girl she had been back in the ivy of Brauron-Meyer.

It was when her rounded hand with its perfect nails slid smoothly, slowly across the red-check tablecloth that he arose abruptly and again phoned the airfield. Spillway, it now seemed, would definitely have to spend the night with the cat. Customs had gone off duty -- or the animal man had at least. And Fluffy insisted the cat be comforted by some member of the family.

And Spillway was the only such member available.

Another hour, accordingly, slid past. And Pond recited Eliot -- his Hysteria, his Portrait of a Lady, his La Figlia Che Piange. New candles had been brought, and their flame burrowed ever more snugly into the fugitive level of the fine red wine -- they had foregone Frascati, he could no longer remember why. Certain psychic veils had begun to fray, unravel, rip. The guitar had begun to sound again, was spreading its tango pattern across the night, was lifting Fluffy into a terpsichorean apotheosis of time past, a living memory reanimating, awaking strong in the stimulus of the umbilical web of sound.
Portrait in a Gesso Frame
Pond watched, the waiter watched, Fluff danced, a single movement only, an arabesque of pure desire. Then with an incredibly deft grand chat, she was in Pond's tangled, tingled arms.

And the Wedge of Time, that asunder-putter, was destroyed utterly.

For one unanchored moment, Fluffy floating in his lap, Pond wavered -- then, praise god, heard his own firm voice shout: "Waiter! The check!"

"Doll! You almost deafened me!"

"Fluff, you're drunk -- you don't realize what you're doing..."

"I don't want to realize. I just want..."

"Waiter! The check -- at once!"

Then, the check paid, Pond, with the impetus of desperation, raised Fluffy to her dazed feet, gathered his own numbed energies, his shattered wits, and shepherded Spillway's wife -- for that she was -- to the street.

But he had not reckoned with the moon, and later he never quite dared dissect his motivation at that moment of tenth-rate decision there on the sidewalk: there had been a taxi, parked and waiting; in the distance a laggard carriage approached.

He had hailed the carriage.

And even so the route to her hotel had been far from direct.

The rhythm of the hoofbeats, the soundless glide of shadow and moonlight, the silver glint of the Tiber below, the abundant, undulant, opulance of Fluffy's form and flesh, aroma and odor, silence and murmur beside him -- had been like salted peanuts: he knew he should stop, at once; but he could not.

She was humming a Cantata he had knocked off one evening together ten years earlier. He couldn't get the laundry out of his mind. He failed to notice that she was more off-key then she had ever been.

He flexed his masticator muscle grimly.
At length she spoke.
"You're very silent," she said. "Very silent and moody." The carriage had now carried them many miles and several hours.
A thought ran afoul of his clenched teeth, ricocheted to some chasm within, transmuted to a sigh.
"Very moody," she emended.
"And you..." That thought again, resurgent.
"I?"
"You're very married."
Her silence fell about him like a net. His chest tightened. His heart struggled.
Her flesh against him squeezed the trigger of speech.
"I've thought about it so often," he blurted out, "about why you made the choice you did – though till tonight I had no idea what he was like -- him, I mean -- and then tonight -- I mean really like -- finding him your husband... But I pictured him pretty well, I guess -- those years -- that he was rich, from Texas -- that's all I knew. Rich, yes -- and in his own way determined -- I mean he got you and I didn't -- more determined than I had wit nor will to be -- I mean the way I was then -- that Cantata you hummed just now -- back in Greystaunche College -- trying to decide whether to write Cantatas or evolve my New Theory of Mathematics, making a living teachings I mean, what choice had you concerning me? I was confused -- and confused by redundancies. You -- you were the Eternal Feminine. You knew what you wanted. All you had to do was find out who had it. I was confusion and he was clarity; you were animal cunning and craving, cruel almost, in your gifted drive, ruthless in your creation of the world you wanted." He paused. "I? I wasn't even functioning for survival then, either for myself or for anyone else. Hardly for a wife. Certainly not for progeny. You got any kids now?"
"Huhn uh."
"Mmmmm."
"We, uh, planned it that way."
"I mean I was full of questions. He was full of answers."
"Wrong ones, maybe."
"There are no such things as wrong answers. Any answer is right if it is positive enough."

"Maybe I was asking wrong questions," Fluff offered thoughtfully, her voice chockablock with that old inept intellectual pose.

"They compelled their answers: yes from him; no from me." He was angry now and hurt with the old self-pitying hurt again.

"Allie, for god's sake -- what do college kids know about love?"

He was sullen. "What does anybody know about anything?"

She was silent some long while. Then: "Don't do you still love me, Allie?"

The question compelled its answer.

"No!" he said, the monosyllable compacted of pure positiveness.

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, her hands encircled his arm more tightly.

"I'm glad," she said quietly. "I'm so very, very glad..."
Chapter X

It was almost seven when Pond, badgered by the risen sun, staggered through Porta Pia to the Corso and home. He was tired. And late. For they had returned to the Tiber, and she had kept him above those sparkling waters with off-key hums and misquoted verse and chaste restraint.

Love, improvident love, with holes in its pockets, out at the knees, dawdling and dallying in its arrangement with, and rearrangement of, Eternity, had made him Fate’s prodigal, Time’s Square, Schedule’s Caricature.

And she had kept him above the Tiber as the night drifted away the while they gazed at the shattered, darting, submarine moon.

Passing the Bar Italia, that at which the articulate Firestone, served, Pond’s eye caught upon a newspaper lying across a tablet: "Englishman Dead!" the headline blared. Beneath the grim legend a picture of the Colosseum leapt forth subtitled, "Scene of Tragic Accident". Dazed, Pond sank to his glutei maximi and read the short dispatch:

"Incredible End of Englishman. A subject of her Royal Highness, Queen of Britain, as yet unidentified, lies dead beneath a fallen arch in our fair city’s historic edifice The Colosseum. This was ascertained by extricating the unfortunate’s passport, the signature on which, lamentably, can’t be deciphered because it has been rendered illegible, whether through natural or unnatural causes the authorities as yet refuse to say.

"The victim is defunct because, apparently taking a siesta in the shadow of this archway, said archway collapsed, causing instantaneous death at 2:37, if his watch was right...

Pond’s heart ceased beating. He read on.

"...the same being of cheap British manufacture. It’s the first such accident in this location in an extremely long time. The police are investigating. The unfortunate shouldn’t even have been in the Colosseum at that hour of day, it has been pointed out."

Bewildered, Pond sank to a rusty green iron chair.
"He died a good Christian death, that guy, huh?" It was Firestone, surprisingly present behind Pond, who spoke. "Colosseum yet, what?"

Pond did not reply, which was unfortunate, for the young man continued, taking silence as his cue.

"We are, of course, each of us our own executioners, our own hangmen. Something within us tells us it's our time to die -- and subtly we find the means -- in this case with overtones of sexual symbolism -- ovular amphitheater, collapsing arch, whatnot. I knew a girl once, named Olga Portcullis; she...

Pond gaped at him, shocked. "You -- you're being rather -- rather flip about it, aren't you?"

Firestone gaped at him in turn. "Flip? No I think not -- unless one's approach to metaphysics is primitive in the extreme. Consider: What are the bases, the causative factors which could create so bizarre a denouement as Death in the Colosseum? One: Pure Fate?? Nonsense. There is no such thing. Probably this fellow was lured to the Colosseum by its lore or gore --a sort of Liebestod motif, see? -- and of the thousand archways he could sleep under, cunningly, subconsciously, he chose that one, that single one, due for imminent collapse; thus gratuitous Fate falls sway to logical analysis and banal Free Will." The raisonneur paused, cleared his throat, then continued. "Or, Two: Foul Play?? Suppose this guy was lured or forced into the Colosseum; suppose some powerful gang had prepared this set-up -- an arch which they could collapse just by pushing a certain secret stone --and they get this guy under it and..."

Pond started to rise from his seat, unmindful of the lowered ceiling of fatigue which now gauged him, and into which he smashed his skull painfully, at once again reverting to his haunches, ineffectual.


"Hmmm." "You see, people have a great tendency to split up cause and effect, like Zeno and his Paradoxes -- like Zeno in his
Paradoxes, I should say the static arrow, et cetera. Can't do it. Every moment is a flower, with stem, leaves, roots, et al." He paused. "You see that, do you?"

Pond nodded.

"So all I'm saying is never bow in dumb awe before an Effect: inquire always into True Cause, get me?"

Pond began to struggle to his feet.

"Lotta good men have wound up cooling their heels in the Hallway of Fame just because they refused to -- because they were blind to True Muse -- such as just now I related to you, that genre, type -- this fellow willing his own death." Firestone here rapped the journal. "Well, he's dead, and all my magic can't help him now."

Pond continued to struggle to his feet, had almost reached his goal.

"What I mean by True Cause," Firestone resumed urgently, "is, for example, recognizing the actual existence within this man, of an active death wish: recognizing and accepting. A subconscious wish, of course. With some other cultures it's different. You may or may not know that the Eskimo, on feeling his usefulness in the community life ended, can consciously will -- actually will -- his own death. He announces, on retiring one night: 'By morning I shall be dead.' And when morning comes, the ghost has departed. In any given college class, a greater percentage will die within one year after graduation -- auto accidents principally -- than in any year there..."

"Firestone, you'll pardon me but -- I -- I just got to get some sleep." And, with this ado only, with none further, Pond stumbled off.

The waiter gaped amazed at the retreating figure. "That I've been trying to say," he shouted desperately, "is, as you journey through life keep your eye on the do-nut and not on the hole!"

Incredulous, Pond turned; but his timing had been faulty and his execution overslow: the raiosnneur had re-entered the bar, whence now came only the strains of that old Italian morning song, "Quant'e bello'l lavoro"...
Chapter XI

Roughly ten hours later, at nine of the clock that same morning, Pond was rudely awakened by a thrashing administered to the door of his room, which, he had been gratified to learn, Fragopane had fixed the prior evening. Now he awoke to consciousness first of a splitting headache, his own, and secondly to the chaos beneath the lintel. He lay athward the bed, confused, an eternity sluggishly straggling by, before he could collect his thoughts and answer the door.

A young man who looked as though he had crawled from betwixt the pages of The Yellow Book loomed gauntly on the threshold. He had the pointiest ears Pond had ever seen.

"I hope you can speak English: it's obvious you don't know Nahuatl," the knocker said, tripping the words as he went on a light fantastic tongue and beating time upon his boots to the verbal rhythm with an ivory-hafted riding crop.

"Yuh," Pond replied, awakening.

"My name is Tchaccahmwr," the young man announced, pushing past Pond "Catalan y Sidney y Assentor Tchaccahmwr: Baron Catalan y Sidney Y Assentor Tchaccahmwr, if the troof be known. I'm an Aztec aristocrat from way back, and a personal friend of Mister Quillercouch's who's been kind enough to lend me some money."

"Your name is Jackhammer?" Pond queried uncertainly.

"That's right: Tehaccahmwr," the other assented, only the orthography differing. "In the Nahuatl language it means -- but never mind that. I'm here to fry completely different fish."

Pond was only now absorbing the fact that everything the Aztec wore was white, as were the balls of his eyes, exceedingly so.

"Fish?"

"I'm here," the Baron said, pushing onward into the room, "I'm here to unburden you of the india-rubber figurine you filched from Mr. Quillercouch yesterday afternoon."

"Filched?"

"Come, come now. Don't stand there gaping as though butter wouldn't melt in your hair. You might have
'mistakenly' wrapped it up in your dirty laundry; the effect is the same, Freidianly speaking."

"I don't have the figurine, " Pond blurted startled. "As a matter of fact I remember distinctly Quillercouch was playing with it when I went back for the stray sock -- he had it in his hands when I went out, as I shut the door..."

"That figurine was a gift from General Standcastle," the young man said sternly.

"So?"

"So" the young man mocked in amazement. "So! You, an Italian, should know the significance of a personal gift from General Standcastle, the unsung liberator of your city. You, a Roman, certainly ought..."

"There's some mistake here," Pond began, "I'm neither a Roman nor an Italian..."

The young man snickered. "What are you then -- an Arab? "I happen to be an American," Pond replied with belabored patience.

"An American!" the indigenous one snickered. "That tells me nothing -- less than nothing. A rose by any other name. A Phoenician of any other birthplace. You tell me you're an 'American'?" He laughed bitterly. "I'm probably talking way above your pointy little head. Give me the figurine and I'll divest myself of your presence toot toot." A wry smile crossed the chattering lips as he relieved himself of the aborted gallicism.

Pond held his temper. "I do not have the figurine."

The visitor, in turn, smiled patiently. "I am as a king in a lofty castle upon a towering hill speaking to a man in the street. Very well then. I will modulate my voice accordingly. I will shout.

"I must have the figurine!" he bellowed at Pond, cupping his far from whispering palms to the mouthful of adamantine pearls. "I must, positively must have that figurine!"

"I guess you must," Pond replied quietly, "because I certainly do not."

"I absolutely, positively, extraordinarily, ultraistically must have that..."
"What does he shout about?" It was Maria who asked, quite calmly, the obvious question, the Aztec's high-decibel words being, quite naturally, unintelligible to non-American speaking ears.

"Man! That's some tomatoe!" Jackhammer rasped agape. Pond explained the situation to Maria. She said, "Oh."

"Man!! Six years I spend at Berkeley U., and never seen nothin' like!"

Pond began to clear his throat, reasonably.

"The stuff is there, Man, and it's mellow!" the young man gasped, progressively more agape as Maria, her eyes obliquely upon Pond, performed a ritual of rearrangement with her silken wrapper.

"Man! Come in, Texas!"

Maria had for some time been oblivious of Jackhammer's presence. She remained so. "You did not return till well past dawning," she said quietly. "The last rooster of Rome had crowed before I slept -- and still you were not home."

"Ca-raaaaaazy, Man!"

"I -- I'm sorry if I -- if I unsettled you." Pond was contrite.

She sighed. "Happiness comes but in moments."

"Ca-ha-ra-ha-hay-zy, Man!"

Maria's eye caught on Jackhammer. She mused. "Can you rid us of this, ah, Spaniard?"

"He is not Spanish; he is one truly native to the American Continent." Pond paused, turned to the intruder. "Are you all Aztec -- or partly Spanish?"


"You have told him he must go?"

"Well, he's here on..."

"I have waited all night to speak with you."

Pond coughed uneasily. What could she want to talk about; he wondered.

"Bid him go."

"Cool, Jack! Cool! Frisco was never like this." He snortled noisily. "She got the bearskin I love to touch!"
Pond turned on the shouter in some annoyance. "You must go now," he said quietly.
"Cool, Man! Cool and crazy!"

Pond's words obviously hadn't registered. He guided the crop-carrying character by his white brocade sleeve. "Go now."

Jackhammer frond-fingered hands pawed the air, made turning, tuning motions. "Come in, Texas!" he reiterated raspingly.

Pond's annoyance grew. It grew still more when, having shoved the American's flailing form halfway through the door, and, furthermore, having halfway closed the door on the half-shoved-through young man, the latter began struggling frantically to re-enter.

"You've got to go now," Pond said testily.
"The figurine!" the young man shrieked. "I must have the figurine!"

"I guess you must 'cause I certainly don't," Pond said quietly. The joke sounded better this second time.

People were beginning to gather in the hall.
"Go now," Pond said softly.
"Man, you give me that figurine, Man, or you'll find yourself in a mess of hot water. I'm warnin' you, man! Quillercouch won't buy this! General Standcastle's gonna..."

"Tell Standcastle to see me if he doesn't like it," Pond retorted with some acerbity.
"Standcastle..."

The door was almost shut now, only one riding-boot-toe, one fillet-type hand remaining as obstruction. Pond shoved gingerly. The spade-shaped boot-toe slipped suddenly, the fingers an agonized split-second behind.

The young man's shrieking crescendoed. Mob noises were heard. Rough hands soundlessly laid hold, evidenced to the ear only by contorted inflections in the insane shrieks as, one surmised, the Inca was beaten about the head and shoulders, shoved down the long, unfriendly, marble hall. A foyer door closed upon him. The shrieking continued. The door opened. Fragopane, presumably, exerted himself. The shrieking stopped. The door re-closed.
Pond slumped down in the chair by the celesta. Maria had already sunk to the bed.

"The wrong kind of people are seeking you," she said. "It is the wash bundle. First last night the man with the false beard and twisted eyes; now, this creature."

"False beard? Twisted eyes? Do you mean Smith? -- did he say his name was Smith?"

"Yes. He of the Swiss interpretation. So he said."

Pond sprang to his feet. "What did he want -- the laundry?"

"He has used dictionary, opening and pointing to words -- 'laundry', 'desire', 'me' -- the while pointing the thumb into the chest."

"You gave it to him, yes?"

"No. How can I know it was right?"

Pond slumped to the chair again.

"He is flying last night to Paris, I think. He desires the laundry there immediately." She paused. "Or such were the words he pointed out."

"Paris?"

"Yes."

"He didn't say Helsinki - in Finland?"

"He indicated Paris -- in France."

"Mmmmm."

She arose, crossed to him, sat on the arm of his chair. "Your state grows ever more nervous. It is the wet wash. You must destroy it before it destroys you. I am unhappy at the sight. I will destroy it for you."

"No!" Pond was unnerved at the idea. "No, no," he murmured at length. "It is my problem. I will cope with it."

She looked at him long and searchingly. "Well enough, then. But I perceive you are pale from -- is it lack of food? I will have coffee and pastry sent up from the bar below."

She went into the hall to phone. Pond sat, his mind a blank, or nearly so. It was, more precisely, a smudge, a blurred medley of impressions of Fluffy and Spillway,
Quillercouch, Jackhammer -- and Standcastle?? And of course Maria, who now re-entered:

"Dress yourself, and I too will dress myself. I will return to you to share the repast when it shall have arrive."

And Hymnsinger. Poor, unfortunate Hymnsinger. Maria turned. Pond's glazed eyes, unwitting, played back the reel of memory. Then he too arose and went forth to make his toilette.

When he returned from the bathroom he was confronted by a white-jacketed waiter lounging at his ease in the chair by the celesta, his lap a-litter with a dozen-odd of Pond's musical notebooks.

Of course it was Firestone. "Third door down the hall on the right -- coffee end dolce. That is you, right?"

"Yeah -- I mean, I guess I'm the third door on the right," Pond muttered, aback. Firestone, who, momentarily at least, had craned forward in a pose of civility, now leaned back again at his ease in the chair. Only with difficulty did Pond succeed in hanging his damp towel on the rack behind his visitor, which latter now urbanely indicated the double-service silver tray on the marble-top table. "You owe me 450 lire." He carefully replaced the notebooks to the celesta, apparently simultaneously manipulating some large thought. "How ya been?" he asked almost absently.

Pond stared at him, half in perplexity, half in annoyance. "Whatsa matter?" the waiter asked.

"It's two hours since I saw you last and you ask me 'How ya been?''"

The American mused. "Guess you're right. I'm not much on smalltalk, I suppose. Actually I was thinking of this music of yours as I asked that. Interesting that each culture in history has made some provision for the madman -- some status -- as
the shaman with the Plains Indians -- abstract painters, cacophonous musicians in our own..."

Pond was startled. "You -- you're not implying I'm mad, are you?"

"Goodness, no! I only meant to say I don't think much of your ability as a musician -- composer, I mean. Mind too orderly -- too logical, unemotional. Do much better as, say, a design engineer, or time and motion stuff, or even mathematics, say. Private industry's your proper niche, I'd say."

Pond was rooting for his sox.

"You see," Firestone continued, "ours is a technical age; therefore sanity devotes itself to technology, just as, in the artistic age of the Renascence, when the aesthetic dog had its day, sanity devoted itself to art, insanity to engineering -- as today the poor put-upon arts must give shelter to the boobs and nuts, the loons and..."

Pond could nowhere find a shirt.

"Yes sir, you're definitely in the wrong metier. Work in industry -- technology. Avoid commerce like the plague. Industry's your apple; you got the gift. You'll find more money there too. And happiness."

Pond, for the moment, gave up on the shirt.

"Better drink that coffee before it gets too cold," Firestone advised.

Shirtless, Pond heeded the advice, began sugaring the milk-and-coffee mixture which, tentatively, he poured himself.

Firestone watched, quietly critical. "Why don't you pay me now," he suggested, "and don't forget the tip -- make it about twelve percent; that's usual."

Almost in annoyance Pond complied. His teeth clenched as the waiter, instead of departing, again relaxed in the easy chair, seemed suddenly on the verge of sleep.

At length, during his second cup of caffe latte, Pond spoke. "Firestone," he said, "am I right in being amazed that you, an American -- and obviously a college man of some seasoning -- should be playing the waiter here in Italy?"
"Yes, it is unusual -- perhaps unique. But I have my reasons, if thus I can dignify causation, which I'd hazard are more amazing than their effect -- not to give you a short answer, certainly. It's not money; that's understood. I've got a couple hundred thousand I'll never use. Say instead it has to do with happiness -- defined as the absence of acute agony, say -- like this music of yours here."

"Absence of agony?"

He grimaced, unveiling sincerity. "Pardon me: that was facile. Let me say, rather: the optimum segregation and arrangement of agony." He paused. "You've never by any chance run a corporative enterprise, have you -- I mean just before, I assumed you hadn't. Have you?"

"No."

"Mmmmm. Well, no point my describing -- I was about..." He stopped short. "By the way, you had a visitor last night. Guy with a false beard -- killed a couple hours down at a table in the street there. Conversed with me in abominable Italian by means of a pocket dictionary. He'd been up here, then came up again. Did he catch up with you at all?"

"What makes you say he had a false beard?" Pond asked, irked.

"Hell, it had wire hooks going over his ears -- plus you could tell it was false every time he sipped his coffee - had to hold it down each time he moved -- hardly lifted the cup from the saucer when he drank. Besides, he kept glancing behind him, and the beard'd swing out from his chin each time he jerked his head."

"What did he converse about?" Pond asked apprehensively.

"Asked a lot of questions about you -- did you always carry a large bundle with you when you left the house? -- did people follow you stealthily? -- did I think you were loyal...?"

"Loyal to what?" Pond snapped in annoyance.

"He didn't say. Just loyal."

"What was your answer?"

The waiter made a quick inhalation of ozone as if to use it as raw material for speech, then, suddenly, in a paroxysm of aposiopesis, his lungs flexed rigid, and he permitted the
oxygen to re-enter the atmosphere formlessly, unless perhaps a faint sigh may be said to partake of shape and substance, form, in fine.

Pond was miffed. "Well, if you'd rather not divulge your reply..."

"I think it best not to," the American asseverated, rising abruptly to his feet. "You owe me 450 lire -- plus 12 percent for tip. That's usual. I..."

"I paid you before," Pond muttered coldly.

The waiter felt in his pockets. "Oh -- yes. Yes, so you did." He turned, his eye catching on the celesta. "I'll pick up the tray later." His large right hand straddled an augmented ninth on the keyboard. He clucked concernedly at the ensuing sound.

Pond winced.

Firestone rapped an open notebook behind the outrageous keys. "That two-bar rest was a happy choice of inspiration; that's the vein you ought to tap." And with that, he was gone, the heel having come full turn.

Pond sat, listening in annoyance to the irregular beat of footsteps down the hall. He had never thought of anybody as being crazy before, but Firestone seemed over-ripe for the suspicion.

And Hymnsinger. Unfortunate Hymnsinger...

And the afterlife. And loyalty. Choice of inspiration...

Pond only half heard the mumble of voices at the foyer door, Firestone's and a female carbonated-type voice mixing in an acoustical highball. Dead. In the Colosseum...

"Doll, oh biddely, bubbly, baby doll!"

It was Fluffy.

"I just couldn't sleep -- not after last night. I'd have phoned you but of course I can't speak Italian so I popped right over..." Her eye caught upon the double service of coffee. "Expecting company."

Pond found himself wishing Fluff had been able to sleep. "It was delivered here by mistake," he lied, immoralized by fatigue.
"Oh?" The monosyllable was a lariat, slipping silkily over Pond's flexing pharynx.
"Yuh." He grasped for the big concept, the overriding generality, which would color the specific lie. "They often deliver things here by mistake -- not here, just: everywhere. Like life -- especially life," he mumbled tiredly.
"Life is delivered here by mistake??" Fluff arched her voice in thinly veiled sarcasm.
"Not here -- everywhere."
"I don't like you when you talk this way, Allan."
"Yuh. It does make me less lovable, I guess."
"Allan?"
"Yes."
Fluff got a firm hold on her hair and rearranged her torso.
"Clyde has flown back with Princess."
"Princess?"
"My Persian."
"Persian what?"
"Cat."
"Oh.
Pond's stomach executed a series of barrel rolls. His mind went blank. Fluff stared at him fixedly. "Allan, don't do this to me."
"I'm just sitting here. Sitting isn't doing anything to someone. It's..."
"Don't do this to me, Allan."
"Fluffy, I'm not doing anything! Can't you understand I'm upset -- about about -- worried about the laundry and the figurine and a guy named Hymnsinger -- the Colosseum -- and Smith and his phony beard..."
"Allan, you're upset. You're worried about us, aren't you?"
Pond gazed at her wildly. In his ten years teaching at Eagle's Foot he had known less turmoil than here in Rome in a scant twenty-four hours. In despair he tried, unsuccessfully, to crack a knuckle.
She observed him critically. "Angst, isn't it?" she said crisply. "Are you sure you're not displacing?"
He tried harder. This time the knuckle cracked.
"Remember, Allan, love is fundamentally an animal thing, and maybe if we talk about..."

"Animals don't talk about love, Fluff." His voice was strained.

"Maybe I'm not asking you to talk about it, lover."

"Well that's quite an implication -- or am I, uh, displacing again?"

"Well, if you must know, Clyde's and my sex life has never been what it should be. Never. We've tried ever so many different..."

"Fluff – please!"

"But, Allan, we used to be able to talk about anything."

"That was before you had a sex life."

"Well, I don't really now, you know -- not anymore. Not yet, anyway."

Pond tried again to crack his knuckles, to no effect. He glanced across the hallway. Maria's room, like his handbones, emitted no sound. He... 

"Doll, do you hear that -- those voices -- are they at the door?"

"Hah?"

"Voices, American voices -- out there in the hall."

Pond's ears perked up. By now footsteps mingled with the voices in a crisp choreography of intrusion, and one voice, more strident than the others, was shouting: 

"We're not to be fobbed off, Signore -- Pond -- and the figurine -- where are they?! Lead us to him at once!"

To which Fragopane replied by beseeching the visitors to speak Italian.

A moment later Quillercouch and Jackhammer crowded into the doorway of Pond's room, the American's riding crop now replaced by a badly cracked mush-ball bat.

The sight of the two annoyed Pond. "Well?" he snapped sharply.

"Pond," Quillercouch announced unceremoniously, "you must return the figurine at once -- that is, assuming you still have it. You understand, of course..."

"I don't have it," Pond replied patiently. "You have no..."
"You understand, of course, that I'm here strictly in the capacity of private citizen -- strictly; so let's not..."
"...cause to suspect that I should have it. None whatsoever."
"...mix it up with any or this moral turpitude jazz. Private citizen all the way, get me?"
"Quillercouch, I do not have the figurine."
"I'm sure you'll find it got mixed up with your laundry: I'm almost certain you'll find it there."

It was then Pond noticed for the first time the nuncio carried a large soft pillow under his arm tricked out only in coarse ticking; it was of a size as could be used, say, in a mushball game as a base-pad.

"Man! Lamp that wide-screen stuff there in the corner!"

This from Jackhammer who had just caught sight of Fluffy.

Quillercouch stared disdainfully. "A mere panorama of flesh," he pronounced dryly. He made an ambiguous gesture with his free hand. "Enough of that," he snapped. "We're here to..."

Pond did not listen. He was absorbed by Fluffy, who in turn obviously was absorbed by the Aztec: each were making small, sinuous flexings of various muscles -- of the body, the face, the eye.

"Fluff!" Pond gasped, amazed.
"Just look at the size of that polo stick he's carrying," she murmured as if to herself, her eyes bulging at the Inca's mushball bat. "Why has he brought it here, I wonder."

Pond was irritated. "As polo mallets go I'd say that's a ---" He stopped short. "But it's irrelevant in the extreme, to..."
"The word is 'irrelevant' Jackhammer corrected."
"Please, please, please!" Quillercouch shouted. "Must I be interrupted so!"

At that moment the Padrona appeared beyond the threshold. She made a show of knocking on the door, though both were now ajar, then, shouting, "Signore Pond, c'e postal", stooped and slid a letter across the sill. "Postal" she called again, then rose, turned, and padded off.
"What is all this shouting!" Quillercouch shrieked, gaping about him wildly.

Pond advanced to retrieve the letter. "He's escaping!" Quillercouch screeched, crouching, cringing, clutching the pillow to his head. "Hit him, Sidney -- hit him!"

That worthy grabbed his bat uncertainly. "Hit?? Hit who?" he asked, puzzled.

Further directions were shouted from behind the pillow, now tightly ensconced, and were accordingly inaudible. Jackhammer fired a series of questions at the cushioned Quillercouch who, in turn, obviously heard not a one of them. Jackhammer therefore shouted louder. Quillercouch, blinded, deafened, careened crazily in the doorway.

Pond read the letter.

It bore a Roman postmark and was dated the preceding day. It was from Smith, composed of words and letters out from magazines and newspapers and dictionaries and pasted on a piece of fairly heavy cardboard. It read: "Action is urgent. I waited four hours. Leave for Paris. Bring bundle there. Cafe Pigalle de l'Etoile. Third table from right. Urgent. Leave at once. You know who."

Pond's eye caught on Fluffy as he finished reading. She had undergone some sort of transformation. Her eyes were heavy-lidded now, her lips fullswollen, her faceflesh taut, her figure, heaving. And embedded was her glance. Its object, Jackhammer.

Quillercouch in his caroming had by now fallen from vertigo, had out an ankle upon the lower door hinge in the fall, lay now more tightly clutching the pillow to his hidden head and making muffled outcries.

Jackhammer, Fluff's focus, was squatting beside the supine figure and making strident incries, endeavoring to cancel out the layers of goosedown by the raucousness of his shouts. As if in concert, the hall filled: menacing figures -- Fragopane's predominating -- advanced upon the motley pair. Jackhammer stared up in fright, winced, whimpered. He flourished his badly cracked mushball bat. "One more step, you guys," he quavered uncertainly, "and – and..."
Fragopane's clutching fingers reached down at the Aztec; the bat dropped.
"Enough," Pond said quickly.
Fragopane stared in amazement.
"They're my guests; I'll dispose of them." Pond said quietly.
"Yeah, Man!" Jackhammer, who apparently understood some Italian, shouted.
"We're your guests!" He arose, tugged at the prostrate nuncio. "C'mon, boss -- this guy's gonna get hospitable with us!"

The foetal form budged not, merely hugged the pillow more closely to its hidden head.
"Boss, you hear me? " The shout was earsplitting. No response. "Ya hear me, yuh stupid bastid!" A sly smile glistened on the flexing lips. "You crazy, lousy, stupid bastid!"

The foetal figure budged not.

Pond was growing impatient. "Get him in here quick," he snapped, "or I'll not be responsible."

Jackhammer's face contorted in fright. "Come, boss," he whined cajolingly, "make haste." He paused. "Make haste while the sun shines," he pleaded. "Make haste while the sunshine's bright on my old Kentucky Home." The last was improvised with an accompanying snigger which in turn reverted to the open grin.

Pond was not amused.

"I am no longer liable," he announced: "You residents of this apartment are free to..."

Jackhammer gazed in terror at the towering tenants, clawed blindly, insanely at the goosedown pillow: "Can't you hear me at all, you lousy bastid! We gotta get inside quick!"

The tactile stimulus galvanized Quillercouch into action, which took the form of his fiercely hugging the pillow the more closely to him the more vehemently Jackhammer sought to wrench it loose. The pair rolled about on the corridor floor for some minutes, grunting and panting. Pond was amazed that Quillercouch, whose breathing was so obviously obstructed, could match strength with the Aztec; this was partly to be explained by the fact, probably, that Jackhammer
used only one hand in the struggle, the other tensely engaged in clutching the mushball bat at its cracked handle.

The contest might have continued indefinitely except that Jackhammer got an especially good hold on the pillow, Quillercouch made an exceptionally vigorous wrench to effect its freedom: the result was that the ticking ripped asunder and the air was filled with flying feathers, leaving Quillercouch clutching shredded twill to his unmoving head. But now was the veil ripped asunder. Now could he hear. Now, opening his eyes, could he see. He closed his eyes but could not close his ears.

"We got to get out of this hall!" Jackhammer shouted, his cupped hands funneling the bedlam directly into the nuncio's ear. He doubled in agony, in terror; his eyes shot open; the twill veil fell away. "My ear," he gasped. "Bells -- jangling, crashing -- like Beethoven -- deaf in one ear!"

"What the hell -- you don't play piano." Jackhammer grabbed hold of Quillercouch's arm and dragged him into the room.

"You could have done that five minutes ago," Pond observed dryly.

"Jangling -- and crashing -- smashing and lashing and thrashing and gnashing and splashing and mashing -- Like trains in a tunnel -- bells! Bells, bells, bells!"

The last feathers settled about the prostrate form. "Jangle all the way!" Jackhammer shouted with a coarse guffaw. The remark -- especially as Jackhammer delivered it -- was devoid of humor. And there was a cruelty to it.

But Fluffy laughed. And her laughter was tailor-made to gratify the naked vanity of the Americano, who, in turn, smiled half-diffidently, half contemptuously. "You ain't heard nothing yet. Stick around and keep your ears open."

Fluffy wet her lips. They glistened. She flexed her shoulders artfully. Her spirit, her soul, seemed to lean forth from her urgent flesh in a mystic yearning toward the smirking clown.

He ogled her, at his ease. "Later, sister," he said. "See me later."
Pond crossed and closed the door. He rooted through his belongings till he located a clean shirt. He could not help but reflect that the comportment of the nuncio was vastly different from that of the preceding afternoon: the loss of the figurine and the despair for its recovery had substantially unmanned him.

Certainly it was not a pretty sight.

Quillercouch was now absorbed in gazing at his bleeding ankle, probing the leg wound with one hand, while the other energetically slapped at his left ear. Pond watched grimly as the emissary crossed to the armchair, sat down, doggedly tore his oversize handkerchief into two ragged pieces, one of which he tied in bulky bandage about the encardine ankle, the other he wrapped about is head so as to enclose the jangling ear from the outer world. "Bells," he muttered incessantly, "jangling and crashing..."

Pond was paralyzed by embarrassment.

At length, the bandaging completed, the Civil Servant arose, pulled the marbletop table from the wall, straightened its checkered cloth, assumed his statesman's pose, gently lowered his knuckles to the pattern of red and white -- and spoke:

"You understand, Pond, that I accuse you of nothing. You understand also that I am here completely in my capacity of private citizen -- all the way."

Pond nodded, almost abashed.

Quillercouch very ably summed up Pond's visit of the preceding afternoon, established the fact that there had been some confusion, that the figurine definitely had been in place on his desk -- that thereafter the figurine was not to be found...

During which summation Jackhammer was making up to Fluffy -- who needed little or no making up to.

"How'ja lik'ta see a snake dancer?" he rasped -- "Shabriba, the snake dancer."

"Sure," she said.
Whereupon he pulled an olive jar from his hip-pocket: inside was a garter snake. "Shabriba," he guffawed, "the home-trained snake dancer! You like?"

Fluffy's smile glistened. "I like."

The Latin snorted enjoyably. "You haven't begun to like!" Then, addressing himself to the snake in the jar: "Dance, Shabriba, dance!" The snake budged not. "C'mon, baby, dance for daddy..." The snake definitely did not move, certainly did not dance. "Dance!" Jackhammer shrieked suddenly, his eyes bulging, red-veined. Shabriba did not budge. "Dance, damn you!" the pre-Colombian hollered -- "dance you son of a bitch!"

Quillercouch, who, during his harangue to Pond, had been alternately cupping and uncupping the bandaged ear, glanced sharply to Jackhammer, but did not correct that worthy: it was apparent he could not hear the obscene shouts. He paused for some time now, permanently clapping his fluttering hand over the open ear, then finally resumed his narration, which now had progressed to the conjectural revenge Standcastle would take when apprised of the disappearance of the figurine. His eyes wandered the while uneasily about the room, coming back again and again to Jackhammer, then finally coming to rest permanently on that spectacle.

"Is that a bell you're shaking there, Sidney!" he shouted peevishly.

"Hell no, boss -- no bell; I'm shakin' a snake in a jar."

"I say is that a bell, Sidney!" Quillercouch shrieked.

"No, boss -- a snake!" Jackhammer retorted, insane with rage, hardly ceasing to shake the olive bottle in which the garter snake smashed and crashed and almost splashed about, so hysterical was Jackhammer's energy.

"What'd he say?" Quillercouch snapped at Pond.

"He said it's a snake in a jar he's shaking -- not a bell."

"Answer me this instant!" Quillercouch was angry.

Pond repeated his reply, shoutingly.

"You insist on remaining silent and mocking me with those grimaces!" The knuckles whitened. "This is rank insubordination, fellow!"
Pond lost patience. He turned to go, then reflected that this was, after all, his own room. He completed dressing, then sat wearily on the bed and gazed at the tableau before him: Fluffy, her eyes riveted on the white-hornrim-clad character, was making rhythmic movements on the chair, her state obviously that of oblivious ecstasy. Jackhammer was shouting ever more loudly, "Dance, damn you, dance!" at the gartersnake, was smashing the tubular jar into the palm of his hand, to the perhaps fatal discomfort of Shabriba, the putative snake dancer. Quillercouch had retired to a corner where he stood crouched, the bandage raised from the formerly closed ear; he was nervously snapping his fingers at the portals of each ausculatory aperture in the throes of some diagnostic dilemma.

Pond wearily started to rise when suddenly the door opened and Maria appeared. She gazed at the room, its occupants, the silver tray, Pond.

"The coffee grows cold; you have drunk but little."

"I was waiting for you." Strangely, Pond felt that he actually had been waiting for her. "I -- I was waiting, and..."

She smiled sadly. "You lie, but I do not reproach you." She sat quietly beside him on the bed. "Why do you draw Evil toward you?" she asked, indicating the rhythmic trio.

Pond considered. "Are they evil?" he asked.

Her reply was oblique. "It is the wet wash," she said.

"And the figurine -- now too that."

"Figurine?"

He squared his shoulders. "I will tell you later. Now I must go to Paris, there to rendezvous with the man of the false beard and twisted eye, he of the call from Switzerland. He is ready for the laundry now; soon the business will be ended."

She did not reply. Pond accepted her proffered coffee and together they drank, finishing off the last of the dolce in the process. Maria replaced her cup and saucer to the silver tray. She arose. "Go then," she said softly: "your mission is urgent."

She paused at the doorway. "But -- the figurine?"

"Go now," he said. "No more of that."

She went then.
Arthur North

Pond made an adjustment to the handle of the left door and crossed to the closet. Within three minutes he had gathered up his laundry bundle and packed a small overnight bag. He returned to the door and viewed the scene a final time.

Quillercouch abruptly ceased his finger-snapping, gazed about the room as if sensing something. His eye caught on Jackhammer. "Sidney, what are you doing!" he snapped peevishly.

Jackhammer crossed to Quillercouch, cupped his hands, bellowed into the vicar's ear:
"SHAKIN' A SNAKE IN A JAR!"
"Well, the idea! You put that snake away this very instant."

Quillercouch was vexed. "Grab hold of your bat -- don't you see what this fellow is doing there!" He indicated Pond. "Overnight bag and all!" he exclaimed. "Well, we're on to your tricks, Mr. Figurine-stealer! Sidney, grab a hold of your bat!"

The Americano sulkily replaced the jarred snake to his hip-pocket and grabbed a hold of the bat.

Pond had paused by the door, had placed the overnight-bag to the floor, was checking the knots on the laundry-bundle. He thought perhaps he might reason with them, appeal to logic -- but he could find no reason, no logic in what was happening, in what had happened. But the urge to speak was strong. He held forth the bundle in offhand epiphany, raised his eyes ceilingward in thought.
"Gentlemen, I -- I..."
"Sidney! He's escaping! Hit him, Sidney. Hit Pond with the bat! Hit him with the bat!"
"Gentlemen -- believe me, I..."
"Allan! Watch Out!"
It was Maria who had screamed.

Pond's eyes focused awkwardly on the Aztec's onrushing form, perceived the bat arcing backwards over the white-brocade shoulder-pad -- and registered almost simultaneously the climactic glistening of Fluffy's eyes and lips, even in the very moment Jackhammer began his forward swing -- but did
not see the snap of string, the growth of crack, the severance of the heavy end of the mushball bat as it broke loose from the fissure and flew awkwardly up toward the ceiling, its wielder lurching awkwardly, crashing twistedly at Pond's feet, crashing right hip first, slightly backward, onto the tile floor. There was a muted splintering of glass. Somewhere a snake cried out in agony. Sidney contorted at Pond's feet, his eyes bulging agape, his hands slipping wanly from the bat-stub. "Oh my god!" he hissed, his hand wavering backward to his gluteus maximus, "I'm wounded, stabbed, crippled -- crippled forever," he groaned.

Pond gripped the laundry tightly. His concern was for Fluff. He glanced at her to perceive a face cloyed with a surfeit of sensuality, masked with remorse for an indulgence which had gone beyond the pale.

"Allie..." she whispered, almost brokenly.

"Fluff, I..." He was about to cross to her -- when he saw it: Quillercouch flying at him with extended nails, hurtling through the air, face furiously expelling the shriek:

"Beellllssssss!

Not a moment too soon Pond stepped through the door to the hall, closed it behind him. He heard the private citizen smash splashingly against the paneling. Quickly Pond pulled the doorhandle from its socket and heard the inner handle clink to the floor. He pocketed the shaft and strode quickly down the hall.

Maria, unnoticed, stared after him.

Inside the room Quillercouch shrieked, trampled upon Sydney's prostrate form, scratched and clawed at the unyielding door.

In the armchair by the celesta Fluffy shrank from the scene.

But was of it.
Chapter XII

The following noon Pond was in Paris. There had been absolutely no trouble getting the laundry through customs, despite Pond's compulsive fidgeting. He checked into a small yet inexpensive hotel nearby the Care de Lyons. Since none of Smith's directions had stipulated hour, Pond went at once to Le Cafe Pigalle de l'Etoile, third table from right. It was, happily, unoccupied.

He ordered a hamburger and a chocolate shake and sat back to survey the situation. It wasn't much of a situation. Except for a handful of tourists eating hamburgers and chocolate shakes, the sidewalk cafe was deserted, even of pedestrians.

Despite the light drizzle, the Americans -- all the tourists were Americans -- doggedly sat at the al fresco tables and talked poignantly of their native Midwest cities.

Almost immediately Pond saw approaching a Smith-shaped figure, navigating by means of a crooked cane the cobbled sidewalk, blinded by bandages which completely covered the leonine head, to say nothing of the paw-shaped hands. A moment later the figure sat triumphantly beside him.

"Smith?" Pond inquired discreetly.

The figure made no reply.

"Smith??" Pond repeated uneasily -- and the whisper etched like acid across the unblemished silence of the situation: all touristic eyes were upon the bandaged figure; all laments for far cities had ceased. All American ears awaited the bandaged reply to Pond's hissed question.

None came.

Instead, the figure busied itself with extricating from its apparel a tangle of electrical apparatus. Pond was amazed as the bandaged hands began connecting wires and plugs and batteries; he watched intently as the other connected to batteries the four leads of two small transistor-type hearing-aid sets. Meanwhile the waiter had taken up his post at Smith's elbow and all the American tourists had moved to
closer tables. A dozen-odd Parisians had crossed through the rain from neighboring shops and cafes, compelled by the bandaged apparition.

At length the electrical set-up was completed. It consisted of the aforesaid two hearing aids, the speaker for one Pond now divined to be bandaged up in Smith's head, which would account for the rectilinear protuberance below the nose; the receiver for this speaker Smith now instructed Pond, by means of gestures, was to be affixed to his, Pond's, right ear.

"Can you hear me, Pond?"
"Yes, perfectly."
"I said can you hear me?"
"Yes."
"Say yes or no!"
"Yes!"
"Pond, answer me."

At this point Pond bethought himself of the second speaker lying forgotten on the table. He picked it up and replied in some annoyance, "Yes, I can hear you perfectly!"

"No need to shout," Smith growled peevishly. "Remember this here stuff's electronic. You can talk in a whisper. That's the whole point. Avoid being eavesdropped. Get the idea?"
"Yes."
"Well okay then."
"Would M'sieu care to order?" the waiter demanded of Pond.
"You want to order anything -- hamburger or milkshake?"
Pond whispered to Smith over the electronic device.
"Wadda you -- a waiter or somethin'?" Smith asked irkedly.
"The waiter here just wants to know, that's all."
"They got milkshakes here?"
"Yes."
"Chocolate?"
"Yes -- I've got a chocolate myself."
"You gotta do what?"
"I don't have to do anything. Do you want a chocolate milkshake or what?"
"Chocolate or what?"
"Chocolate."
"Or what -- you said chocolate or something -- chocolate or what?"
"Yes."
"Oh, horseshit, 'yes'! Tell him to bring me a chocolate shake and make it cold. I'm sweatin' like a pig in here."

Pond was miffed at the other's tone. He checked his annoyance, however, and turned to address the waiter and found himself staring myopically into the latter's black and burning eyes.

"I could not quite make out what he say," the majordomo mumbled, withdrawing his head from Pond's ear.
"Chocolate shake," Pond murmured stiffly -- "Cold."
"Waddaya gettin' me?" Smith asked anxiously.
"Chocolate shake -- cold."
"Good. I'm sweatiin' like a pig. Is it rainin' out there or somethin'?"
"Can't you see at all?"
"Just shapes and forms, like -- all grey, kind of. Is it rainin'?"
"Yes. Just a drizzle though."
"What?"
"I say it's drizzling out here!"

Pond's twenty-odd auditors nodded their twenty-odd heads in assent.

"What?" Smith repeated.

Pond boiled in exasperation. He took the control panel in his hand, and, progressively turning up the volume, hissed: "It's raining, raining, raining, raining, rainin'!"

"I guess you wonder how I worked out this here plan for meetin' you secretly like this, well..."

The electronically amplified Smith whisper boomed forth from the receiver in Pond's ear. In agony he ripped it away, realizing he had turned up the wrong volume switch. The still loudly articulate receiver slipped from his grasp and pitched with a clatter to the sidewalk.
"I rented a room in the hotel across the street, see?..." Pond's deafened hearing only faintly registered the gargantuan secret. "...and I just sat there waitin', see, till you showed up with the bundle, see? I dreamed up this pitch with the two hearin' aids so's we could talk secret without shoutin' because my head's bandaged up for secrecy, see? At first I was just gonna hide my head, see, but then I figure fingerprints don't lie either, see..."

Pond snatched at the fallen receiver, stifled it with sweating palm. It continued to crackle.

"Smith!" he hissed. "Smith!"

"... so when I see you show with the laundry I slap the bandages on and..." With eventual presence of mind Pond reached to both control panels, turned each to zero. Then calmly he replaced the receiver to his ear and carefully, deliberately, he shot the dial of one panel to "Full". No sound. Then the second dial. "...you was loyal..."

That dial he shot back to zero. The other he grasped firmly between right thumb and forefinger.

"One vanilla shake." It was the waiter who spoke. "Does you' frien' want to take it out or use it here?"

"But -- he wanted chocolate!" Pond exclaimed in irritation. "And of course he wanted to use it here!"

"So? Then this one he can take with him!" At this the waiter chortled as at some vast joke.

Pond turned up the volume of Smith's receiver. "Your milkshake's here -- do you read me? Over."

Then he turned up the volume on his own receiver carefully. "Smith, do you read me?"

"What the hell is all this read business? You say somethin' about a chocolate milkshake?"

"I said your milkshake is here."

"Fine. There a straw?"

There was none. Pond apprised the waiter of the need. The waiter apprised Pond of the fact that they had run out of straws a week ago.

"You'll have to drink it without," Pond informed Smith. "They don't have any straws at all. In fact, they ran out..."
"How the hell am I gonna drink a milkshake without a straw with my head all wrapped up like this!"

"I don't know how the hell you're going to drink a milkshake without a straw with your head all wrapped up like that!" Immediately Pond regretted his astringent tone.

Smith snorted electronically. "Shows all you know," he sneered. "Get a load of this for ingenuity."

After which announcement he whipped a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket, quickly bored a hole to the side of his bandaged speaker, then disassembling the pen and removing the ink cartridge, he introduced the tip of the plastic penshaft into the milkshake, the opposite end into the bored bandage hole. Gurgling sounds ensued, and the milkshake level lowered rapidly.

By now, despite the growing rain, the crowd had almost doubled.

The gurgling sounds paused halfway down the milkshake, the twisted head raised, straightened. "Best choc' shake I ever et! Can't beat these French for cookin'. Got a helluva lotta je ne sais quoi to it -- head and shoulders above the stuff you get on Broadway."

"About the laundry," Pond interjected.

"Yeah. One thing about that laundry: don't ever let it get wet. It..."

"Wet?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you in a minute. Wait."

Whereupon the gurgling sounds resumed, the milkshake level subsided -- too rapidly. There was a muffled cough, a sound as of milkshake-fluid sloshing around in an electronic device. When Pond read Smith again the latter was almost illegible.

"Wanted to tell you about that -- that's why I sent for you."

"About getting it wet, you mean?"

"Yeah, I..."

"You sent for me just to tell me that?"

"Uh-huh. I..."

"Smith, you -- you can't do this to me! I'm leaving the laundry here -- now -- with you. I wash my hands of it. I..."
"You got to wait till..." But then there was a final gurgle, followed by the audible deadness of electronic devices gone dead. Pond watched in horror as the Smith-jaws continued to move in an intent delusion of communication.

"Smith -- Smith! Do you read me! Do you realize a man is dead because of this bundle! -- that my life has gotten hopelessly complic..."

Then suddenly the sky opened and deluge fell. The switch panel for the speaker leading to Smith's ear was inundated. Pond's own voice died in electronic echo and he knew he was no longer being read. Smith abruptly bolted to his feet. "I'm sweatin' like a pig in here!" he roared, his muffled voice barely audible without its artificial aid.

Pond cupped his hands to the bandaged ear. "It's not you!" he shouted; "It's raining out here!"

"Rain?"

Tourists scurried to shelter. Natives were all but trampled. "Yes!"

"Well for Chrissakes keep that laundry dry! Take it back to Rome right away -- I'll contact you real soon at your room there -- go 'head back -- AND DON'T TRY TO FOLLY ME!"

With this stern injunction the bandaged figure whitlerd about and thrashed madly forward through the rain, beating wildly about with its twisted stick. Pond stood agape, dripping, pelted by the liquid heavens, then started after the wheeling figure, but, blinded by rain, lost his way. He smashed into a tree just as he heard the screech of brakes and the muffled roar of pain.

A moment later he barely escaped being run down by the hulking, speeding ambulance which -- as Pond's subsequent, fruitless quest would indicate -- must have been, could only have been, the cause of Smith's pain and disappearance.
Chapter XIII

It was just past noon the following day when Pond disembarked at Rome Termini. It was the depth of siesta-hour when he reached his lodgings. He tried to tell himself, mounting the steep and twisting marble stairs, that Smith's parting injunction had not been his main motivation in this immediate return from Paris, a city he had never before seen, and which just now he had seen so briefly and wretchedly. And yet he knew, deep within him, that he had become the puppet of the laundry, dominated by its vague import.

He had barely entered his room when a knock sounded at the door. It was Maria. Pond bade her enter.

She glanced in dismay at the laundry. "You have not freed yourself," she said softly. "You are encumbered by it yet."

He did not tell her of Smith's accident with the ambulance, of his own fear that perhaps he was alone with the laundry now, solely responsible. He sighed. "With all my heart I tried -- and failed."

"Your eyes tell the story; they are hollow with worry, and the flesh of your face is tight with fatigue. Do you hunger?"

"My stomach does, though I do not."

In a thrice Maria was out of and back into the room. "I must soon depart for work, but I have phoned to the bar below that coffee be sent at once. Then you must go forth and eat heartily." She turned to go, yet hesitated at the door, fingering the knob which Fragopane, again, had fixed.

"I trust for your peace of mind that your journey to the land of the Franks, your Gaulish mission, was one to comfort your flesh and your curiosity, if otherwise deficient in spiritual rewards."

Pond looked at her blankly: she didn't fill in the blanks, merely continued:

"Permit me to advise you that the pair have returned yesterday and then again this morning -- the Spaniard and the Diplomat."

"Oh?"
"And the golden girl of the great blond hair -- she too, with love in her eyes."

Pond began to feel uncomfortable -- but it could not be denied that Fluff's eyes were veritable billboards of emotion.

"Truly she feels what must be a Grand Passion for the Spaniard -- the Golden One."

Pond was surprised. "Hmmm." "A cow could not be more amorous than she."

"Yuh."

"In the eyes, that is to say. Of the other -- the physical -- I cannot, of course, speak." She gazed at Pond levelly. "Your skin is hot and red and dusty. You wish, of course, to lave. I shall leave. Perhaps this evening we will speak again. Now I must prepare to leave for work. You will forgive my intrusion; curiosity consumed me to learn of the laundry. Truly it is a pity a man so young and personable as yourself should be thus burdened. Arrivederci, Signore."

"Call me Al." "Gooda bye, Al." "Bye, Maria."

The door closed behind her. Pond went forth and laved, strangely a'tingle. When he returned to his room he was not at once aware that it was occupied by a pair of thoughtful, bovine, blue eyes. It was, in short, occupied by Fluff. He stared at her, startled, his head halfway through a clean shirt. Her eyes did not seem especially amorous now -- but then Jackhammer was nowhere in sight.


"Fluff, for goodness sakes, please remember you're married."

She pouted. "You didn't stop being a doll just because I went legitimate with Spillway. You are a doll, you know -- and I always called you one."

"One what?"

"Doll."
Pond buttoned his collar nervously. "That was ten years ago, Fluff, and we were two completely different persons. Please forget it -- believe me, I have."
"You don't know how I've ached, not seeing you, doll -- and you in Paris, living it up."
Pond stared at her fixedly. "Fluffy, have you been drinking?"
"You know I never could act sober around you, doll."
"Have you been drinking?"
"Only with thine eyes, Allie." One broad and blue and bovine eye flicked shut; the other proposed a toast. Pond teetotaled.
"Fluffy," he admonished sternly, "you shouldn't even be here, you a married woman lying there on my bed, unmade at that, your shoes off, no stockings. We'd never be able to explain this to anyone, should we inadvertan..."
"You phoned for a mess of caffee latte, Pond?" It was Firestone.
"...tly get caught."
"Don't mind us; we went to two different colleges together." This was Fluff, excusing the situation to the gaping waiter.
Who chortled, gazing, appraising. "Young America, you should live so long!" He chortled again. "Where'll I put this coffee?"
Pond cleared the table nervously.
Firestone cluttered it up with the coffee and left.
"Do you think I stopped loving you just because I got hot for Spillway and married him? You don't know with what repugnance I fulfilled my..."
"Fluffy, I -- the -- this coffee'll get cold. And -- and I'm very hungry -- and, well, would you care to join me?"
"Join you in your hunger, you mean?"
"Join me in satisfying it, I mean."
"What, your hunger?"
"Yuh."
"For coffee, you mean."
"Sure. You want to?"
"With just one cup??"
"I won't mind."

She gave a snort, then dragged herself to a sitting position on the bed, her flexed toes feeling for her shoes.

"Always the animal, huh, always a heaping handout direct from the inner man to the outer woman..."

Pond bustled about busily. Fluff was off on a stream of sarcasm. He reflected that she was not, actually, unintelligent. Sometimes she was so intelligent he couldn't understand what she was saying. Though perhaps in a woman that quality is not always synonymous with intelligence...

He completed his toilette and, almost as afterthought, hid the laundry again in the armoire. He laughed wryly to himself as he felt its moist exterior: "Don't get it wet," Smith had outrageously admonished, in the very teeth of the storm...

He straightened up, crossed to the coffee. "Sure you don't care to join me?"

"In one cup?"

He could think of no reply. "Well..."

"Well?"

"We could go outside for -- for a snack."

The Golden Girl's toe slipped into the second shoe. "Feeling the old herbivorous urge, huh?"

Again he could think of no reply. He watched as she arose from the bed, moved back as she passed in front of him to the door.

"The, uh -- the weather's been rather muggy, hasn't it?" he groped conversationally.

Her high heels rang in the marble corridor. "Haven't we all?" she shot back drily...
Chapter XIV

Stepping from the building to the sun-slugged sidewalk Fluffy perversely insisted on sitting directly down at a table on the street-platform of the Bar Italia.

Firestone bounded forward. "Help you, folks?"
"Buncha dolce and three caffe latte," Pond replied.
Firestone returned almost at once with the provender.
"Couldn't stay and talk up there in the room," he said, pulling up a chair: "had some customers to check out." He smiled recklessly. "Saw you go in before with a big wet bundle. How was Paris?"
"Rainy."
"Has it occurred to you that I'm no longer a virgin?" Fluffy inter-posed somewhat acidly.
"I guess that's right," Pond mumbled vaguely.
Firestone stared briefly, then continued. "What was with the Gaucho and Friend who came limping out of here right after you lammed to France the other day? Something to do with the bundle?"
"Nothing whatsoever," Pond stated flatly.
Firestone considered. "The Friend is the very simulacrum of the, well, the comic consul type character -- ambassadorial antics. Those folks get as off-beat as schoolteachers, dealing as they do with one lost lamb of a tourist after another. Bloats their amour-propre. Unhinges their sense of proportion."
"Do you mind that I'm not a virgin anymore?? I should think you'd sort of like the idea," Fluff said, almost puzzled.
"We'll talk about it later, Fluff, if you don't mind -- okay?"
"The guy in the white riding britches and the white brocade sport coat with the white boots and white horn-rim glasses seemed to be pretty well covered with blood -- or pasta sauce or something; came out clutching his aitchbone rather remorsefully. Brilliant effect though -- all that red against all that white."
"Mmmm. I can imagine."
"Deflowered," Fluff mused. "But why should they call it that? For only then does a woman truly blossom..."
"Paris was rainy, you say?"
"Drizzling all day -- then a cloudburst."
"That guy in the top hat and cutaway -- he seemed in pretty bad shape, too. Actually off his nut, I'd say."
"Very strange pair, yes."
"I don't much like Paris, myself. Can I get you more coffee? I seem to have drunk the third cup. Just occurred to me that you must've wanted it as a second cup for yourself. Be right back."

Moodily Pond watched the retreating figure of the majordomo disappear into the dim recesses of the bar.
"Allie," Fluff said softly, "how much you making now a year?"
Pond told her. Her face sobered.
Pond stiffened. "I'm sure that's considerably less than Spillway draws just in dividends."
"Hmmmm."
"Yuh."
"Allie, it's you I love -- I've got to say it."
"And -- Jackhammer??"
"I can generally keep that sort of libido in check."
"Hmmmm."
"It is you I love."
"Yuh."
She considered. "But it's Clydie who has the million dollars."
"That's right."
"You making a choice or something?? -- between love and a million dollars?" It was Firestone who spoke.
Fluffy hesitated momentarily. "I guess so," she answered. "I was..."
"No, no, no!" Pond interrupted. "The choice is over! Irrevocable. And it wasn't you who chose the million dollars: it was the million dollars that chose you -- Natural Selection, practically. Oh, I could have -- could have forgiven you if Spillway had made the million dollars -- but the fact is that the million dollars made him, money and owner being vastly different in which case. I mean, Spillway was shaped, formed,
moulded by the possession of a million dollars -- passive -- what I mean, a prince is the creation, the creature, of a kingdom: only kings create their empires..."

"Allow me to tell you something of princes, sir," the waiter interrupted.

"What I mean," Pond blurted on, "you deserved a king, not a princeling..."

"Sir, I will explain princedom to you," Firestone insisted stolidly.

"... the puppet creature of paper wealth. What I mean, he did not create the million dollars; he..."

"Sir! I would speak of princes!"

"...happened merely to be born into a state of uncommon grace..."

"Precisely, sir! uncommon grace -- that is, royal grace! You have said: 'If there had been no upper class the lower class would have had to invent one. The French Revolution and the resultant emergence of Napoleon and the Empire may be cited as...'''

"What I mean..."

"support for this hypothesis. The point is..."

"Really!" Pond exclaimed, "I'm trying to talk to this woman about..."

"Princes. Precisely, sir!"

"Yes, but I -- I'm not discussing them academically. I'm talking about a certain guy who had a lot of money, and -- and..." Pond broke off uncertainly.

"Yes -- 'a lot of money'?" Firestone prompted.

Pond stared dumbfounded at the waiter, almost prompted, almost impelled to continue. But he did not want to talk to Firestone about anything, especially he did not want to discuss Fluffy's marriage with him.

"Steinhauser has equated money with generative, not to say phallic, power," Fluffy volunteered brightly. "At Brauron-Meyer's All Girl School we learned that the..."

"Steinhauser is a quack -- strictly a quack!" Firestone spat contemptuously.
Pond stared in dismay as, almost casually, the holocaust of unreason was thus ignited, Steinhauser himself its hecatomb. He would have liked a second cup of coffee -- Firestone had upset the most recently brought cup by banging a point home here on the rusty green iron table -- but could not penetrate the curtain of forensic flame to place an order. So, having finished, drymouth, the final dolce, he sat nervously minding a length of twine about his fingers, gaping from one side to the other, as at a tennis game, as Steinhauser's mangled body flew back and forth through the conversational air.

Thus it was that he was caught unawares by the froglike voice which croaked suddenly at his elbow. Thus it was that he turned, startled utterly, to behold the frogshape crouching sadly in the fourth chair at the urgent table.

"You better come with me, young feller," the frogvoice croaked quietly, sadly, almost inaudibly, as if from some gloomy recess of tragedy.

Pond gazed uncertainly at his interlocutor, and, one by one, his eyes popped. The figure was frogshaped, flannel-clad with widespread shoulders and collarcuffs; a naked houri writhed upon his cravat, imprisoned by a chain of pine-cones wrought in platinum,. Be was sixty and worldweary, and cluttered with jewels.

Pond's blinded glance recoiled in something exactly like horror.

The bulk sat wearily, did not move, did not even focus its clouded eyes upon Pond. An eternity shuffled past under the guise of a fleeting second, then the frogvoice fogged again:

"Come."

Pond struggled for some poised reply, but his senses were riot. The best he could manage was: "What do you mean, 'come'??"

"Let's go, young feller."

"What is this 'let's go' business?" Pond snapped angrily -- but the anger was directed principally at himself for he realized his voice had faltered, that, in fact, it had not even been heard above the coarse hallooings of Firestone and Fluffy

Arthur North
as those two, all absorbed, hacked ever more feverishly at the corpus of Steinhauser.

"Ready?" the frogvoice queried.
"No. Certainly not!" There! That was better.
"...is insane! Steinhauser's main thesis is the...
"...imagery of money..."
"What's this 'no' shit, young feller?"
"Look here," Pond growled, "who are you anyway? Who..."
The frogface smiled unbecomingly. "Who am I?" The smile faded, also unbecomingly. "What the hell is this 'who am I' shit?"
Pond laughed brittly. "You've hardly answered my question, have you?"

Till now the frog-eyes had not met his own, for which Pond was grateful. But now those clouded orbs, cradled in their nets of scarlet, swung round. Pond winced. And the frogvoice frogged again.
"Pen," it commanded.
Pond passed him pen.
"Paper," it persisted.
Pond complied.
The frogfingers moved the pen across the watermark. Marks, ciphers, letters appeared. They spelled, "STANDCASTLE".
Pond gaped from the mene-mene-tarkel-upharsin to the greenish wrinkled face. Those heavylidded eyes glowed, the face-flesh relaxed, the figure slumped slightly forward, as if now relieved of some awful burden. And in the slight relaxation of the grimness of the frogfeatures a new smile seemed to form floridly: but it was no smile: it was merely the phenomenon of extreme ugliness growing suddenly less extreme.

More as pretext for averting his pained glance than for desire to study the notation Pond stared long at the paper on the table: the sky had grown suddenly dark, as if with coming storm, and he peered myopically at the watermark four inches from his irises. He remained thus engaged for some thirty seconds. At length his neck grew stiff and his skull
pounded. He realized the farcical tableau could be continued no longer. Further, Fluffy's knee was now pressing his own and the table had moved some eight inches, completely removing the paper from his focus so that now he was, to all appearances, perusing a narrow, bare stretch of tabletop.

With an audible snap his neck straightened, and his eyes once more popped. The frogfellow had departed -- as, obscurely, Pond had known for some seconds now.

He felt Angst.

On all the siesta-emptied Corso no soul was to be seen.

And still the rounded knee of Fluff pressed tensely against his own square one under the rusty green iron table with neither break nor abatement though still she screamed of Steinhauser.

"Fluff," Pond murmured, gasping for reason as a fish gasps for water, "which way did he go?"

'What, doll?' she asked, making a deft and sudden switch from stridency to tenderness.

"That guy just now -- which way'd he go?"

"What guy, doll?"

"That froggy looking guy that was sitting here -- in this chair here."

"What froggy looking guy, doll?" Her knee pressed more fiercely.

In despair Pond shouted at Firestone. "Who was that guy here -which way'd he go!"

"You mean Steinhauser??"

"STANDCASTLE!"

"Standcastle?"

"That guy just now -- he wrote his name here -- see?"

Firestone took the paper. "That could be construed as 'Standcastle',' he mused.

"It is Standcastle!"

"He -- some guy wrote this -- just now?" Fluffy asked quizzically. Her knee was in danger of upsetting the rusty green iron table.

"There wasn't anybody here just now," Firestone said in annoyance. "If there was I'd've waited on him."
Pond's lip curled inadvertently.
"If this 'guy' wrote that," Fluff added, "the ink would still be wet, wouldn't it?" Her tapering fingers touched the calligraphy.
"That's ballpoint ink. It writes dry."
Fluff gave a little start. "That's your handwriting, doll!"
"Mine?"
You're the only one I've ever seen make d's like that -- and cross your t's like that -- and that script-type little s -- and the way you loop-the-loop on the loop in your little letter a -- and that e like an & sign..."

Pond stared in amazement. There was, indeed, a strong resemblance between his own and Standcastle's handwriting. Either the situation was coarsely cluttered up with coincidence, or...
"Let's go, doll."
"But..." His mind refused to function.
"Let's go right away, doll."
"But, Fluff..."
"Doll..."
"Fluffy!"

Too late. Beyond recall, the rusty green iron table teetered, swayed, crashed sidewalkward, crockery smashing, silver clattering...
Gingerly Firestone bounded from the sinking table.
Pond toppled backwards, Fluff following forward, fullface in Pond's focus.
And as his head cracked against the pavement he saw, or fancied he saw, Maria's frowning features withdraw seven stories up, withdraw into the deep-recessed window in which fearsome omen -- the jalousie, like love's portcullis, crashed down.
And in all this time Fluff's knee had never left his own. Pond groaned.
Chapter XV

The lobby of L'Albergo di Romagnnioa could, except for decor, easily be confused with the Roman office of American Express. To heighten the three-dimensional trompe d'oeil, Fluffy's greeting to the desk clerk was: "I'm Mrs. Spillway. Is there any mail?"

"Ma, si, Signora. Ci sono molte..."
"Did he say yes, doll?"
"Yuh." Pond's skull was an orb of agony.
"...molte, molte, moltissime..." the clerk chanted.
"Key please -- forget the mail." Pond's voice showed his impatience; he badly needed aspirin.
"...moltissimomassime..."
"The key alone," Pond sang out; "forget the post at present."
"Such forgetting will push beyond the narrow line of 'now', will protrude into the future time..."
"The key alone! The post, forget!"
"Alone the key, Signore. Behold it here."

Pond beheld the key but did not grasp it. He felt Fluff's knee move against his own. "For the Signora," he said tersely, his head an abomination to itself.
"No, doll" Fluff protested, "you take it --- it's for us."
"No, Fluff, I..."
"Take it!" she murmured, her throat tremulous, her lips moist, her eyes glistening.
"Fluff, I got to get back and..."
"Doll!" Her knee thrust against his own, her hand sought his.

"Behold the key! See it here!" the clerk sang out ecstatically.
"Take it, doll. Don't humiliate me -- not publicly." Her knee lashed sidewise into his. He stumbled uncertainly. Several lobbylizards gaped. Quickly Fluff's knee closed up the gap. Again Pond stumbled, this time against a fern-laden urn. He clutched among the fronds for support.
Portrait in a Gesso Frame
"Behold the key for Signora," the clerk called across the distance. "See it over here."

Pond tried to tell himself that all this was not a dream -- Fluffy revitalized, her husband god-knows-where, Rome about them both like a snare, the clerk chanting his monotonous litany of the key, the gaping lobbythrong, his chaotic headache, these insubstantial ferns.

He was, at length, seized with a desperation so hopeless as to smack of the debonair. The clerk's cries were becoming louder, Fluffy's knees more insistent, the lobbystare more fixed. Forward lay only the fronds and the urn. Behind lay Fluff.

He turned.
To the desk, to the key, to the challenge.
The massed stare squinted.
The clerk smirked.
"You will use Elevator F-2, kindly," he commanded. "It is the only one."

Pond took the key. And led Fluffy to F-2.
And entered it, as through a proscenium.
Once inside, he spoke firmly. "Fluff, this is not right."
"What's that, doll?"
"It isn't right that you and I should -- should..."
"Say it, doll."
"Well, that you and I should, uh, should..."
"Horse around like this?"
"Fluffy -- please." Pond was pained over and above the murderous migraine. "What I mean to say is you are married. You mustn't compromise yourself in this fashion."
"In what fashion? Be specific. In this fashion, you mean? -- or this one here -- or this one -- or this, or this, or this...?"
"Fluff -- please -- please, Fluff."
"All you got to do is say 'please', doll, and it's yours - anything. What I mean..."
"Fluff, don't you understand -- I'm sure this elevator operator here understands English, and..."
"What floor you want, Sire?"
"See?" Pond was miffed.
"What flower, Sore, Madonna?"
"Third," Pond muttered sullenly.
"Gentleman and Ladies will kindly remove to the rear of the machine. Gentlemen will kindly move his hat. Ladies will rear the machine as well," the turban-clad operator announced pointlessly. Then, closing the door, closing off the lobby thereby, the lobby with its orchestra and its gallery and its gaping horde, he set the rococo machine that was F-2 into its slow and clanking ascent.
Arthur North