

CAUSE - OR COINCIDENCE?

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Tonight I bring you two stories. About two people, a man and a woman, each with a problem - one of guilt, one of loneliness. And the way, through dreams, they resolved their problems. We shall live with the man through his dream; the dream of the woman belongs to her future.

The first is entitled,

Cause - or coincidence?

Strange how suddenly the curtain of tragedy can come crashing down to cut off the comedy. Strange how a scene of joyous festivity, of ebullient gay spirits, can soar on a splendid carefree evening - and suddenly come crashing to earth in grief and despair.

Time moves relentlessly forward - second by second, steadily, eternally. Other people continue doing today what they did yesterday, the traffic flows, the stop signs go green, then amber, then red. The flow of the city goes on. But for one or two, unnoticed by the forward marching world, everything has suddenly changed - what was joyful and full of promise has turned to misery. For that one, or two, the world will never be the same.

Helen Chalmers was gorgeous. No, that's the wrong word. It's true, but it has connotations and they are

too limited. She was better than that - lovely to look upon, delightful to be with, exciting to dream about. She'd always been a favorite of mine.

I was younger then, in my early forties. I was divorced from my wife - a fine woman, but it just hadn't worked out. I was living alone, dating a bit, but not really concerned about changing my status.

Saturday nights tended to be a bit dreary, I guess because one is supposed to be going out Saturday nights. A single man is always in demand, and I was invited to a fair number of parties. But I found myself alone a surprising number of Saturdays. I guess people assumed I'd be busy and didn't call.

So I wandered over to the Country Club, on this particular Saturday evening, planning to have dinner alone. I went in to the bar first, sat on a bar-stool and talked about nothing at all to Lou, the bar-tender.

There was a foursome of my friends at one of the tables, and they waved me over, asked me to join them. There was Art Kimball, bald before his time, a triangular face, glasses, a bit academic in appearance/but vivacious, outgoing, a good friend. And his wife, Clara - blonde, a bit prone to talk too much, but when she broke off with a "don't you think so?" and looked at you intently with those big blue eyes, you felt you were indeed in fine company.

And there was Helen Chalmers. Beautiful Helen, with her wonderful energy, her eager search for life and fun, her warm affectionate nature that seemed to say, "Come on, let's go, let's have a good time." And with her handsome figure and her beautiful, expressive face, the only answer one could think of was, "Great! Let's go!"

She was there, don't ask me why, with Clarence Cunningham. Clarence was dull, and a good bit older than Helen, who was about my age. I don't doubt he was

a success in his field, the law, but a dinner partner he was not. His hair was thin, and plastered close to his scalp. He sported a mustache, I am sure in an attempt to add a dash to his dreary appearance. He spoke slowly, often pausing to look down as though he had notes in his hand, before plodding forward to a tedious ending. Helen was between marriages, and I suppose she couldn't think of a good excuse when he asked her to dinner. In any event there he was, her date.

We had a few drinks, and then went upstairs to the dining room for dinner. Again, they asked me to share their table, and I did, with great delight.

Helen sat next to Clarence and then me. Clara was on my left. I am afraid I monopolized Helen, talking right over Clarence almost as though he weren't there. We chatted, we laughed; I beamed at her and she beamed at me. We couldn't have been more congenial, and I glowed in her laugh and the sparkle of her eyes.

Art excused himself, and I decided to go to the men's room with him.

"Great luck, our running into you. You seem to be hitting it off pretty well with Helen," he said when we were alone.

"Oh, she's terrific," I responded. "Great fun."

"Poor old Clarence," Art said. "He's getting older."

"Older and duller," I responded.

"We're going on to the Blue Cat in Newport, do a little dancing, make a night of it. You'll come along, I hope."

"Oh Art," I said. "That doesn't make much sense. Five is awkward - one always left at the table when the

other two couples dance. . .Anyway, Clarence is her date. No, I'd love it, particularly love to be with Helen, but this isn't my night."

There was a pause, as Art rinsed off his hands. "It's a shame," he said. "I wish we could drop Clarence off and make it our own foursome."

I said nothing, but as he was walking out the door I grabbed his arm, and pulled him back into the rest room.

"You know," I said, choosing my words carefully, "it wouldn't take much to get Clarence to drop out. He's not enjoying himself, and not apt to. Lord knows what he'd do in a night club - fall asleep, probably."

Art said nothing, not sure why I'd called him back just to say this.

"Maybe we could get him to fall asleep before you go to the night club," I said.

Art looked perplexed.

"A little drop of something in his coffee. . ." I'd had three vodka tonics and some wine; sober as a judge, but perhaps the fine edge of judgment had been blunted, or my sense of honor sidetracked a trifle.

"You've got to be joking," Art exclaimed.

I was thinking. "You know," I said, "I have some sleeping powders at home, and I live just two blocks away, and my car is right outside. . ."

"My God, Harry, you wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, these are very mild, wouldn't hurt a flea. And he's almost asleep anyway. . .and golly, I would love to go to Newport with you two - and Helen."

"God, I've never known you like this. It's a crazy idea, probably wouldn't work anyway. It's fiendish!"

I'd worked my way into it, and was determined to go ahead.

"Tell the girls I had a phone call to make, I'll be back in a minute. See ya."

It took maybe five minutes and I was back. Dessert was just being ordered. The moment came when Clarence was turned to hear something Helen was saying, and Art was having an exchange with his wife. Quick as a flash, into his coffee, spilled a fairly generous dose of sleeping powder

Helen saw me. Her eyes widened, her speech faltered, and she finished the sentence in a kind of a daze. Art saw me. He could hardly suppress a chuckle, but he continued talking to Clara who was turned toward him, away from me. By the time Clarence turned back, I was facing away, trying to hear what Art and Clara were saying.

Pretty soon I saw that Helen had recovered from her surprise and was having some difficulty suppressing a laugh. She obviously wanted to ask me what on earth was going on - and did so, with her eyes - was eager to be part of the fun.

And we waited. Dawdling over our coffee, since it was too early to go to a night club, anyway.

Soon Clarence's head started to nod. He'd jerk it up abruptly and look around him. Then slowly it would sag again. We paid no attention, kept him in the conversation as much as we could. He wasn't saying much, but then, he never was.

As we got up to leave the table, Clarence was slow to rise. "I don't know what's wrong," he said, "but I'm terribly sleepy."

"Well, you're just relaxed," I said. "A good congenial evening like this will do that - with the drinks before dinner and the wine and all. . ."

We walked toward the cloak room.

"Golly," said Clarence. "I don't think I can make it. You people go on, I think I'm going to have to drop out."

"Oh," said Clara. "You'll get over it. A little fresh air. . ."

Clarence took a few steps, walked out on to the front porch. He stood there a moment while they were fetching the car, then said, "No. I'm sorry. And embarrassed. But I've got to get home."

There were some more protestations, not very heartfelt, and finally it was decided: Clarence would go home, I'd go in his place to the Newport night spot.

What a night it was. I'm sure the liquor played a part, suppressing any sound critical judgment, but it seemed that everything I said was brilliant, everything Helen said was charming, and there never on this earth were two people as thoroughly delightful as the two of us. We danced - and when I didn't know the step, which was quite often, I would on the spot create movements that, if recorded, I was sure would go down alongside Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. I remember the night as a blur of red lips, flashing eyes, laughter and joy, and when I finally said good night to Helen at her door and beat my way home, I was in a golden glow.

It was close to four o'clock when I got to bed so I slept late. In fact, about ten o'clock I was awakened by the telephone.

It was Art.

"Have you seen the morning paper?" he asked.

"Hell, no. You work me up."

"Clarence was killed last night."

"What?"

"Clarence was killed last night. An automobile accident."

My god. I thought of him on the porch of the Country Club, disorganized, extremely drowsy, waiting for his car. I could see him driving away, nodding, snapping his head up, finally unable to hold it off any longer - and crashing into something. My sleeping powder. And he was dead.

Art ended the long silence.

"It was a head-on collision. The driver of the other car is in the hospital. In intensive care."

I was stunned, couldn't think. Finally said, "I'll go get the paper. Thanks," and hung up.

A few minutes later I called Art back.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "Soon - right away."

We agreed to meet, and an hour later I was in his library.

"I'm going to turn myself in," I said. "I'm responsible."

"What are you talking about?" Art said. "We don't know you had anything to do with it. And nothing

is to be gained. Clarence is dead, the reasons aren't important. No point in you're getting into trouble."

"I'm responsible," I said. "It was a stupid thing to do, a wicked thing. But I did it. That accident was my fault just as much as if I'd wrestled the wheel away from him and sent him crashing into something."

"We don't know that," said Art. "People have accidents. We don't know what caused this one. Let me find out. Let me talk to the police, as a close friend of his, and get the details. Take some time, think it through. Wait till I've talked to the police."

"It won't make any difference. We doped him and he had an accident."

"All right, if you want to tell somebody about it, you can. But later. Nothing will be lost by that. Just wait. Promise me you'll do nothing until I talk to you again, later today."

I nodded. My mind was still cloudy, I couldn't have two connected thoughts. I knew I wanted to tell what I had done; whether it would be helpful or not, I had to tell. But I'd wait.

Art came by shortly after lunch. I was still somewhat dazed.

"Harry, you're out of it," he said. "The sleeping powder had nothing to do with it. Clarence was driving perfectly well down Columbia Parkway and a guy going the other way crossed the lane and hit him."

"He could have dodged," I mumbled. "If he'd been alert, he could have gotten out of the way."

"Going forty miles an hour straight ahead when suddenly another can going fifty miles an hour swerves into you? Not a change."

"He wasn't himself. He. . ."

"Look!" said Art. "The police haven't even examined Clarence. They haven't even looked for liquor. They regard him as totally innocent, a victim of another guy's losing control."

It took a while and a good deal more conversation. I talked to Helen, who was the only other person who knew about the sleeping powder. She said the same things Art did, told me I couldn't blame myself.

Finally I agreed to say nothing. But my thoughts. . .I would lie in bed and stare at the ceiling. The act which had made him sleepy had made me sleepless. I'd see again every moment of that evening. I'd see him, befuddled, drowsy, getting into his car. I'd see the accident on Columbia Parkway, a dozen different ways - but always with the thought, "You made him vulnerable. You made him helpless. How in God's name could you be so stupid, to dope a man and let him go on his way, driving his car?"

The visions haunted me, the thought tormented me. I couldn't sleep. I'd be in the middle of a conversation with someone, when suddenly, out of nowhere, would come the site of a befuddled Clarence seeing a car charging toward him, and too doped to react. I'd killed a man, just on a whim, a passing prank, a desire to have an evening with a girl. . .

Finally, sleep did come - and with it a dream. A very realistic dream - each detail clear - and, something that didn't often happen - on awakening I remembered every bit of it.

I was in front of a heavenly desk. I couldn't tell later what I was standing on, but I had an impression that it was nothing. Just suspended upright, effortlessly in space. Soft fluffy clouds were in the vicinity; all was quiet, peaceful. Behind

the desk was a fatherly figure, large white beard, a smooth, untroubled face, and a beatific expression.

"Well," the bearded figure said, "Your name is. . .let me see, I have it somewhere. . .ah yes, Harry Livingstone. And you're here for your Day of Judgment."

"My Day of Judgment. . .I thought. . .?"

"Yes, I know, you thought there would be one grand day when everybody who had ever lived would be called up and judged. I don't know how that got started. . .someone dropped the plural ending from Days, I guess. No, all at one time wouldn't be feasible. I don't know how many there would be. . .depends on how far back in the hominoids the Big Boss decides to go. But it would be billions and billions of people, all of a sudden, piled up on top of each other, some a bit impatient at having had to wait a few thousand years, all expecting individual attention. Well, God could do it of course, but it would be quite a strain."

"Then are you. . ." I hesitated. "Are you. . .St. Peter?"

The figure laughed. "No, no," he said. "I'm just one of the deputies. You can call me George. You have no idea how many people die each day - literally hundreds of thousands of them. It would be quite a load for one individual. No, St. Peter comes in on the really tough ones - and I'll tell you in confidence he rather fancies the juicy ones, and does not mind an interview now and then with one of our handsomest feminine arrivals. He has some stories that would make your hair curl. No, we take them one at time, as they come. Makes a great deal more sense. He lays down the policies, and has a number of us who do our best to do the right thing."

He shuffled some papers, then looked at me.

"You seem a bit uneasy. Anything on your mind, anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Don't you know all about me, don't you know everything I have done in my entire life?"

"Yes of course, it's all in here and in the back-up files. But that's quite a bit of material to sort through. Not only your day-by-day actions, but every thought that passed through your head, second by second, during your entire life. And anyway, it's helpful to hear your own account. Tells something about you, you know."

I recounted to him the thing uppermost on my mind - that evening at the country club, and the tragic death later that night.

"Ah yes," the figure said, "I remember that now. We had a good laugh over that - the Machiavellian trick of shelving a man so you could take his place in an evening of good-natured revelry. . . There were a few of us, I'll admit, who thought it was reprehensible - not enough to keep you out of here, but something not to be condoned. Verging on the amoral. But I'll admit I was rather tickled by it."

"But - the death. . . I killed him."

"Where did you get that idea? Is there something we've overlooked?"

"I doped him. . . and he died. Was killed. . . on the road. . . It was all my fault."

"Well now, that's a new one on me. Hold it a second, and I'll check." George bowed his head, and seemed to go into a reverie. Only a few seconds went by.

"I get a different story from my colleagues, and from the record," he said finally. "I. . ."

"You've. . .you've just consulted them?"

"Oh. I guess you're a bit mystified by our communications up here. They're rather advanced. You people have gone from pony express rider to telephone to fax and the Internet - speeding up all the time. We work on thought waves up here. Like your electronics but without all that darned equipment. It's a bit hard for you to understand - not only the communication but the time compression, that takes you three minutes to say, we get across in a trillionth of a second. Sort of instantaneous, only more so. But that's neither here nor there.

"Our records show no connection between the death of Clarence and your slipping it to him an hour or so earlier. He was minding his own business, driving as well as he ever does, which is not too proficient but well enough, when this young chap, out of the blue, crossed the lane and smashed into him. There was nothing he could do, he was a goner. Can't see how that involves you; in fact, the incident wasn't even mentioned in your record."

"You mean, the fact that he was dopey had nothing to do with it?"

"Not a thing."

"I am not responsible at all for his death? I really had nothing to do with it?"

"As far as our judgment goes, and you'd have trouble finding any better, there is no connection. Not let's see what else we have on you."

The clouds dissolved, George melted like wax and faded away, my support fell away from me, and as I started my downward crash, I awoke. It took me a moment to shake off the dream, to adjust to the reality that surrounded me. But it all remained clear in my mind. I could see the patriarchal George, his great

white beard moving up and down as he spoke, the twinkle in his eye, the peaceful, benign atmosphere he exuded. I thought of what he had said and a great weight lifted from me. God, I felt, had spoken. I crossed to my built-in bar, poured myself an orange juice and stepped to the window.

I lifted my glass and my eyes toward Heaven. "Thank you, George," I said.

* * *

My second story takes us back a few years, to those days shortly after World War I, when the nation slipped into depression, a period of much unemployment, when large numbers of men found themselves wandering about the country, riding the rails, tucking themselves into empty freightcars. . . Many of them were decent citizens, fine people. They were simply the 20's version of "finding one's self." The story goes like this, and is called:

Hallelujah, I'm a Bum

Esther was lonely.

She had other problems. When Clark died, he left her very little. Theirs was a happy marriage, they loved each other deeply, for twenty five years they were a loving and contented couple. Never had much; Clark's clerking job paid enough to give them a decent life, with bread on the table, and an occasional vacation trip or two. They had agreed: better to use their limited resources to provide them with a moderately good life rather than try to put away for the future. Let the future take care of itself. Save money? With inflation, it would be worth far less, buy far less, in the future than it would now. Invest it? There never was enough to spare for that. Insurance? It would siphon off so much of their small income - and anyway, neither could think of life without the other.

On his death, she soon found she would have to move. There was social security, and she picked up a little as a seamstress. But the house down by the railroad tracks at the edge of town cost far less than their middle class residence in a better part of the city, and it wasn't bad. She was making out.

No, it was the loneliness. They had never had children; perhaps that was one of the things that pulled them together in their marriage: they had each other, and no more.

Now that she was alone she thought, on rare occasions, that perhaps she should marry again. At forty five it wasn't really too late. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she had to admit she was still attractive; she had the kind of dark brunette beauty that lasted; she knew she had gentle, gracious manners, dignity but warmth, was still desirable as a wife. But no one had come along who brought the issue to the foreground. . .and anyway, she couldn't bear the thought of belonging to anyone other than Clark.

Her new house wasn't too bad. It had taken a while to get used to the noise of the trains. They roared by at the very edge of her small yard. There wasn't even a fence. The track was at the top of a gentle slope only sixty feet or so from the rear of her house. Actually the trains had slowed down considerably when they reached her place, because they were entering the yard where they would stop or go through at greatly reduced speed. They didn't sound their whistles for another quarter mile or so, when they reached a crossing. That would have been unbearable, that loud sustained screaming right at her backdoor-step. And in the distance it was rather pleasant - a soft sort of plaintive wail, fading as the train drew farther away.

She planted a bit of a garden. Along the fences - there were fences between her and her neighbors on each side of her small piece of property. Sun flowers, and

blackeyed-Susans, and asters - things with big blooms, that would add brightness to her rather shabby quarters. For the rest, there was the small lawn, level till it neared the tracks, and then sloping up.

It was a time after the first World War when unemployment was at a high level. During the war everybody was busy. For a while, employment was high, everybody either in the armed forces or working in defense plants. But then that ended. Hordes of men were discharged from the service, and came back into the labor market; workers released from defense contractors were looking for new jobs. There was no GI Bill to send men to school and college; it was the period of the hobo. All over the country, men were riding the rails - some changing cities in search of employment - the grass was always greener. . .; some thought they'd take a couple of years, while things were so bad, to see the country, enjoy a life free of the time clock, an responsibility. There was even a popular song, "Halleluia, I'm a bum."

As the freighters approached the switch-yards and slowed down, it was time for those hoboos to leave the train. Earlier, the train was going too fast; later, as they entered the yards, there was a good chance of them being picked up by the yard police. The word had gotten around: the place to drop off was at a spot known as "The Lady's House." There was a slope there, one would land on an incline and roll down, instead of smacking down hard on a flat surface. And there was more.

Esther had seen these bums drop from the train and roll into her back yard. At first she had been alarmed. All of them were unshaved, dirty, in ragged clothing. Lord knows how long they had been riding the rails without bathing or even washing. They came out of Heaven knows where, hungry, with no social restraints and one could never guess what a past; they clearly constituted a threat to a woman living alone.

But after a nervous week or two she began to relax. Some days two or three would drop off, then several days would go by with no one. Those that appeared (she watched nervously through the curtains on a second-floor window), simply rolled down the incline, lay there a moment or two collecting their wits and recovering from the shock of the landing, then got up, brushed themselves off, walked past her house to the street, and disappeared. Six or eight trains pulled by each day; she would retreat into her house, if she were in the yard, when she heard an approaching engine.

But with considerable frequency, she'd look out the window first thing in the morning, and there would be a hobo lying at the bottom of the slope, sound asleep. He'd apparently dropped off during the night, was catching a little rest waiting for the day to arrive. Soon he'd arise, stretch, look at the house for a minute, then go on his way.

As time went by, she lost her fear of these men. When a train approached while she was doing her gardening she would no longer steal swiftly into the house to avoid anyone who might be coming along. If a hobo dropped off, he'd look a little embarrassed when he saw her, perhaps even a bit frightened, and move off as quickly as he could. Once in a while one would speak to her. She'd wish him a cheery good day and go on about her business.

After a while there was a repeater or two, some man she'd recognize. Sometimes they'd have a bit of conversation - nothing personal, she thought it would be imprudent to probe. But they'd talk about the weather, or the state of her garden. And he'd move on.

One day when she saw one of the repeaters sleeping on her back lawn in the early morning, on an impulse she took him a cup of coffee. His gratitude was enormous. This pleased her greatly. Somehow, although no real relationship was established, the hoboes relieved her loneliness. She found herself taking a

cup of coffee to anyone she found there in the morning. She began to look forward to these encounters, without really realizing it.

The weather, even in Ventura, California, was not always fair. It would concern her when it would start to rain on a hobo stretched out on her lawn. They'd soon awaken, and slouch off, shoulders huddled, collar turned up if they had one, the water dripping off their tousled hair and from the end of their noses.

She walked by an Army & Navy store one day and went in on impulse. Sure enough they had a used tent, for sale cheap. She bought it - had to cut down a bit on her grocery purchases - and soon there was a tent in her back yard at the bottom of the slope - and it was gratefully used by her overnight guests.

The word spread. The place to stay in or near Ventura is "The Lady's House." Men who were riding the rails as a way of life, and weren't really trying to get someplace, would come by often, enjoy a morning cup of coffee, and chat with "The Lady" before they wended their way into town and looked for a new ride.

She noted one in particular. A man in his early forties, stocky, well built, strong masculine features and a full crop of auburn hair. He rolled down her little hill close to noon on a clear sparkling Spring day while she was cutting some flowers.

"Hi there," she said as he picked himself up.

"Oh, hello. You're back."

"Yeah," he said. "It's my favorite stopping place."

She smiled and went on with her clipping. He stood, some twenty feet away from her, and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Mighty pretty flowers," he said finally.

"Oh, thank you. It's not much of a garden."

"Anywhere flowers grow, it's a garden. And I can see you're giving them tender loving care. That's what counts."

He doesn't sound like one's typical hobo, she thought. Quite a good looking man. She said nothing.

"You're getting a reputation," he said. "You're the only place I know where a cup of coffee and a comfortable shelter waits for us. The word's gone down the line. I imagine you get a lot of us hoboes."

"Not too many. I was bothered at first, but I've come to like it. I don't have much regular company."

"That so?" he asked. "I should think a pr. . . I should think a gal like you would have lots of company."

"Not here. It's sort of a bad part of town, and. . . Look, would you like some lunch?"

"Oh lady, I wouldn't want to bother you. But golly, it sure would be awful nice." She liked the way his face crinkled when he smiled, the lines that ran out from the corners of his eyes, the breadth and freshness of his smile.

As they got to her back door, she thought, "What on earth am I doing - inviting this stranger into my house?" She hesitated, hand on the door. He senses her concern at once.

"Maybe a sandwich would be just great. Maybe you'd like to bring it out here."

"No, no. Come on in," she said - completely reassured by his words and his manner, and ashamed of her thought.

He sat at the kitchen table while she warmed up some soup and made a sandwich. He started to ask if she lived alone but decided the question might frighten her. He said nothing.

She started to ask him if he was headed anywhere, decided it would be better not to seem to be prying into his private affairs. She said nothing.

"Nice little place you've got here."

"It does fine. I don't need much."

"You work?"

"When I can. I do some sewing for people the other side of town." Suddenly she got a surge of courage.

"Tell me about the life you're leading."

"Not much to tell."

"But how do you live? What do you eat? How do you get along with the others? Do you have any home? Do you see your relatives, your friends? What do you see in the future?"

"That's a lot of questions, lady. It's like any other life. You eat what you can, sometimes a handout like this, sometimes a scrap that's been discarded, sometimes a flop house. You learn to sleep on the hard floor of a freight car. Much worse, you learn to ride under the car, uncomfortably perched on some plumbing with the ground rushing by nine inches under you. You learn to be alert to the fellow alongside you, 'cause you never know what sort he is, and whether he'll cut your throat to give himself a little more room. As for

family and friends, somehow they've been lost along the way. They live their lives, I live mine. And it's times like this that make that life worth living."

Esther looked at him and smiled.

"Do you like it this way, what you're doing?"

"It has its points. Nobody expecting anything of you. No schedule of things to do. No clock to punch, no one to answer to. No obligations, no one to think of but yourself. People in this country take a lot of stock in freedom. They don't know what freedom is until they ride the rails."

"It's a lonely life," she said, almost to herself.

"Yea," he said, "That it is."

"You don't strike me as the hobo type."

"Lady, there ain't no hobo type. You meet Ph D's who could never get started, you meet guys running away from a prison rap; you meet former business men who smashed into a whirlwind, you meet newsmen looking for a story. You meet men so ashamed and unhappy they want to kill themselves but haven't the nerve; you meet men who think there's no better way to live, and are having the time of their lives."

"And which category do you fit in?"

"Treading water. Just waiting. Times 'll pick up. Something will come along. I don't really know what, but I'll know it when I see it."

She had been sitting at the table with him while he ate. She now took his plate and started for the sink.

"That's enough about me. Now how about you?"

"There's not much to say about me," she answered. "Just an aging widow-lady with mighty little to live on, who keeps a garden and entertains hoboes. I guess I am just waiting, too. . .and like you, I don't know for what."

"Just two lonely people," he said.

She turned from the sink and looked at him.

"Yes," she said softly. Their eyes held each others for almost a minute. Then he got up.

"I sure appreciate that," he said. "The best meal I've had in many months. And I do thank you. . .Lady. I don't even know your name. Should I?"

"It's Esther," she said and held out her hand.

"Mine's Jerry," he said, and took her outstretched hand. "Sure glad to meet you."

He started for the door, went out, turned and waved, and walked toward the road.

"Wait," she said - and then wondered what she was going to say.

"Would you like a . . . a . . . bath?"

He stopped, and walked back toward her. "Lady, I've been wanting a bath ever since I took a swim three weeks ago. You offering me one?"

"Well, if you'd like to use my shower, I'll stay out here, and you can, sort of, make yourself at home. You'll find a razor in there, too, but you don't have to use it."

"If. . .she said, and paused. "If you'd like me to wash some of those clothes you're wearing. . ."

"Lordy, Lady - Esther. I can't believe all this. It's wonderful. No, that'd be imposing too much. You wouldn't want to handle these old rags."

"That's the bathroom up there," she said, pointing. "Just throw the clothes out the window. I have a dryer, and I'll have them back to you in about two hours. Wait a minute - come with me."

They reentered the house and she picked up a magazine. "Here. That'll help the time pass."

She took the clothes when they fell from the window, and washed and dried them. While waiting, she sat in the kitchen. Thinking. What was she doing? What had gotten into her? How did she know anything about this man - this strong, handsome, well-mannered man that has suddenly entered her life and set her trembling? He spoke well, was not really a bum. He was gentle, considerate. . .so much like Clark, in so many ways.

No, she mustn't think of Clark. But would he disapprove. . .of what? She wasn't sure. She was all mixed up. She took the clothes to the bathroom, handed them to Jerry through the barely open door. And went back to the kitchen.

She was still all mixed up when he came through the door. The clothes were indeed shabby but they were clean. And he looked great. Clean shaven, the strength of his features stood out more clearly. His hair neatly combed, he looked like a successful businessman in a hobo's costume. He went over to her, and took both her hands in his.

"I don't know how to thank you. I've never met anyone like you. Beautiful, wonderful, and oh, so good. You're a dear, wonderful person."

She looked at him, her eyes intent, her mouth forming the trace of a smile. Something within her wanted to scream, "Don't go!" but she said nothing.

He slowly withdrew his hands from hers, and he took a step backward. Then he turned and walked toward the street in front of the house.

He stopped, waved to her, and shouted, "I'll be back."

"Oh, yes," she said.