

NINTH AVENUE

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Table of Contents

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

PART TWO

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CHAPTER I

WHEN the light of morning touches the buildings and pavements of a city, it always seems to borrow their hardness and to lose in some degree its quality of flowing detachment. The Sunday morning that fell upon Ninth Avenue, New York City, gave you a sense of invisible stiffness in its very air. The buildings, with their smudged, flat fronts and tops, presented the impression of huge warehouses stretching down both sides of the street—the appearance of holding commodities rather than human beings. Most of them were five or six stories in height, and their curtained, oblong windows and the bright, tawdry shops at their base had an oddly lifeless aspect, in spite of the sounds and animations which occurred within and around them. The iron elevated-railroad structure that extended down the street, with all of its roar and rush of trains, could not destroy the spirit of silent inertia that lurked within the scene.

Blanche Palmer stood in front of a bureau, in one of the apartments that lined the street, and combed her dark red, bobbed hair, as though it were a sacred and perilous performance. She was only partially dressed, and the mild light that came in through a rear window from the courtyard brought an extra vividness to her semiplump arms, abruptly rounded shoulders and moderately swelling bosom. Their freshness stood out, a little forlorn and challenging, in the disordered room with its half drab and half gaudy arrangements. The brass bed, the magazine-posters of pretty

women against the pink-flowered wallpaper, the red plush chair with the most infinitely smug of shapes, the white chintz, half-dirty curtain and dark green shade at the window—all of them seemed to be meanly contending against the youth and life of her body.

She was fairly tall, with most of the weight of her body centered below her waist and with an incongruously small torso, but this effect was not as clumsy as it might have been, since it was relieved by a bold approach to symmetry. Something of a child and an amazon met in her body. Her face was not pretty if you examined each of its features separately—the overwide lips, the nose tilting out too suddenly at the tip, and the overstraight, shaved eyebrows—but the whole of it had a piquant and enticing irregularity, and it was redeemed by her large, deeply set, bluish-gray eyes and the fine smoothness of her cream-white skin.

Her twenty years of life had given her a self-consciousness, and a hasty worldly wisdom, and a slightly complacent sexual alertness, and these three qualities blended into the customary expressions on her face. Yet at odd moments it showed questioning and dissatisfied shades. She was just a little more frank and wondering than the other girls in her environment—just a little distressed and seeking beneath all of the affected wriggings, and ignorances, and small, cruel impulses that ruled her heart and mind. As she stood before the bureau, the treble of a child's voice emerged from the babble of sounds in the surrounding apartments, lifting the words: "Well, it ain't gonna rain no mo-ore, it ain't gonna rain no mo-ore; how in the heck can I wash my neck when it ain't gonna rain no mo-ore."

Blanche took up the song, half humming it as she slipped on an old, black, sleeveless evening gown which she still kept to wear about the apartment when visitors were not present or expected. It had a big, scarlet satine flower sewed at the side of the waist and was extremely low-necked and gave her a near-courtesan touch, increased by the over-thick rouge and lipstick on her face. She could not dispense with cosmetics, even before her family, because they were too inherently a part of the shaky sexual pride within her, which always needed to be glossed and protected because it had been frequently hurt and discountenanced in competitions and comparisons with the other girls in her life.

She stepped down the dark hallway and entered the living-room, where her family sat and pored over the Sunday papers. The hour was verging on noon, and the debris and confusion of a past breakfast stood on the square, uncovered table in the middle of the room. Blanche eyed it peevishly.

“Oh, for Gawd’s sake, what a dump,” she said. “How’m I going to sit down with gue and coffee all over the chairs?”

“Too bad about you,” her brother, Harry, answered, with an amiable jeer in his voice. “Too bad. We’ll move up on the Drive an’ get a lotta servunts for you, huh?”

“Sure, go ahead, but as long’s we’re not there yet you c’n move your big legs and help clean off the table,” she replied.

“Whatsamatter, you parulyzed?” he asked, still genial as he rose and picked up some of the dishes.

Her sister Mabel and her oldest brother, Philip, joined in the slangy, waggish repartee as Blanche went to the kitchen and came back with a cup of coffee and a fried egg. The father chortled behind the comic-section of one of the papers, oblivious to this usual Sunday morning "kidding-match," and the mother was busy in the kitchen. Harry Palmer, known to the bantam-class of the prize-fighting ring as Battling Murphy, was a youth of twenty-two, with a short body whose shoulders and chest were full, hard lumps, and whose legs were thinly crooked but steel-like. His small, black eyes had a dully fixed, suspicious, partly dumb and partly cunning look that never left them, even in the midst of his greatest smiles and laughers, and his nose was shaped like the beginning of a corkscrew, and his thick lips just touched each other, with the lower one slightly protruding. His moist black hair was brushed backward; his skin was a dark brown with a dab of red running through it. The start of a primitive man, forced to become tricky and indirect as it escaped from the traps and ways of city streets, but still longing for direct blows and curses, showed on every inch of him. He was cruel without wit enough to know that he was cruel, and in his most lenient and joking moments the little imagination and sentiment that he had grew large in its own estimation and made him feel that he was as decent and kind as he could be in a life where you had to "put it over" the other fellow, or go under.

He prided himself especially on his generous and affectionate attitude toward his family. They were the only people who had any actual claims on him—his own flesh and blood, yep—but he felt that it was necessary to hurt them whenever they objected to his actions, or tried to hold him down, or did

anything that they should not have done. His idea of superiority was not to allow any one to boss him unless it contributed to his material gain, and to order people around whenever he could. Part of his family-pride was a real emotion and part of it was a dogged peace-offering to his more openly selfish and cruel words and actions to other people. He looked upon women as creatures made for his particular enjoyment, but they alone were able to revive the streak of surlily shamefaced tenderness within him, and if they were exceptionally good-looking, and besieged by troubles, he wanted to pet them and give them money. He intended to avoid marriage until he met a pretty girl of his own age, who would refuse to give herself to him, and who could hold her own in the rough parryings of conversation, and show a practical disposition and a sense of the value of money.

He had fought in preliminary six-round bouts—with erratic success—since he was twenty, and he was known to the ring as a courageous but unscientific fighter, whose main fault was that he would not train rigorously for his encounters. On the side he was associated with a gang of bootleggers, in the position of a guard who often went with them to protect their deliveries, receiving a small share of the profits. The Palmer family was mainly dependent on his support, since his other brothers and sisters did little more than pay their own expenses, and his earnings for the past two years had really lifted them to a point where they could have deserted their upper-proletarian life. His parents preferred the Ninth Avenue apartment and its surroundings, because it had been stamped into their spirits for years, and because they liked the boisterous freedoms, the lack of etiquette, and the

semiunderworld plainness of their environment. He and his brothers and sisters would not have been averse to moving to “a sweller joint,” but the desire was not yet sufficiently deep to stir them to any action.

His older brother, Philip, who was twenty-five, was looked upon as the most “high-toned” member of the family. Philip worked in a neighboring drug store and studied at night to become a pharmacist, and had had two years of a high-school education. He was a tall man of much less sturdy physique than his brother, and he dressed in the manner of a lower dandy, with much fussing over cravats, shirts and suits of clothes. He had a weak face beneath his curly brown hair—the face of a sneaking philanderer, invaded a bit by kindly impulses which he tried to suppress but which often led to his undoing. His brown, bulging eyes, soft mouth that tried to be hard, and tilting out nose inherited from his mother—these features disputed the sneering nonchalance with which he strove to become one with the life around him. He was not naturally studious, but his brain was cautious enough to realize that he was not adapted for the more arduously physical tasks in life, and that he would have to learn—at any cost—some sheltering and fairly profitable profession. For this reason he applied himself to absorbing the details of pharmacy, with much laboring and many secret groans.

His sister Mabel was the adored young coquette of the family. They regarded Blanche as a silly, fluctuating, and slightly queer person in comparison to her sister, for Blanche made no serious effort “to play” men for their money and favors, and often went out with the poorer and more ordinary youths of

the neighborhood, and revealed, in the opinion of her family, a spirit that was too jauntily reckless—too “easy.” Mabel, on the other hand, was reckless enough, with her cabaret, private club and automobile parties, but the recklessness was more a patent exuberance used to cover up an excellent canniness. Her people had the feeling that she could not be taken advantage of, and that she would play the game carefully until she landed a wealthy man willing to marry her. Physically, she was a girl of eighteen years, with her body in that fetching state of transition between budding and maturity; mentally, she was twelve years old; and emotionally, she was a woman of fifty. Girls of her kind, whose environment has been split between their homes in an almost slummy district and the falsetto battle of Broadway, become sensually wise overnight. At eighteen, Mabel was literally stuffed with tricks, and informations, and cool wiles picked up on streets and in cabarets, and her mind merely functioned as an assistant in this process. At the very bottom she was sentimental and fearful, but only an actually dire predicament could have extracted these qualities—an unexpected danger or calamity. She was close to medium height, with a slenderness made charming by an unusually full bosom, and a pale brown skin that had a sheen upon it like that on the surface of a pond, and black, bobbed hair that was curled for three or four days after each visit to the beauty parlor. Her little nose was almost straight, with hardly a trace of the Palmer curve, and her lips were loosely parted and petite, and her big, black eyes assumed the most vacantly innocent of stares, unless she was angry, when the lids half closed between dancing sparks.

Her father, William Palmer, had worked as a bartender, during the days when his country had not yet established a new and widespread class of criminals, and he had once owned a small saloon, afterwards lost through his dice and poker-playing lusts. After the advent of prohibition, he had branched out as a bootlegger, in a very modest way, but he lacked the vigor and acumen necessary to such an occupation—he was now a man of fifty-five—and the arrest of some of his cronies had frightened him into giving up his illegal trade. Then he became the ostensible manager of his prize-fighting son, and now he did little more than hang around the gymnasiums where his son trained, dicker for a few minutes with the owners of boxing clubs, loaf around his home, and sit in all-night drinking and poker parties. He still had the remains of a once powerful body, in spite of his lowered shoulders and grayish-black hair slowly turning to baldness, and he was one of those men who hold out against dissipation with an inhuman tenacity, until near seventy, when their hearts or stomachs abruptly collapse, and they die. He was of average height and always tried to carry himself with a great, chipper bluff at youthful spryness. Upon his brown face the twisted nose which he had given to his son, Harry, stood above broad and heavy lips, and there was a piggish fixity to his often bloodshot eyes that were too little for the ample size of his head.

He was a man who lived in two worlds at the same time—that of verbal bluffing, uttered to soothe and shun the sore spots and cruel resolves in his nature, and that one in which he endlessly schemed for money and ease, and was willing to commit any legal or well-hidden crime to procure them. He would have grown wrathful if you had accused him of being

dishonest, and his rage would have been quite sincere. He had practiced self-deception for such a long time that each part of him was genuinely blind to the tactics and purposes of the other part. His children were, to him, the great, living boast with which he could dismiss the world's and his own allegations of failure. "I never got what I wanted but I'll be damned if they don't," he sometimes muttered to himself, and the excuse that he gave himself was that their better advantages, and his own guidance, would enable them to win out in the virtues which he had transplanted within them. He had lost his own parents at an early age and had been raised in a public institution, and had been forced to work hard when he was not yet fifteen, and he doted on citing these beginnings as an explanation for all of his material failures. He had punished and commanded his children when they were still in knee trousers and short skirts—often shouting at them and beating them about the legs—and he had struggled outrageously against their gradual assumption of authority and independence, but his delight in remaining their master had finally subsided to an even stronger pleasure—that of a man who was watching the masterful qualities which his children had derived from him.

"They get it honest, all right," he had once said to himself, after a squabble in which his son Harry, then seventeen, had threatened to knock him out. "I never took any sass from anybody myself, you bet I didn't. They'll never learn to fight for themselves 'f I take all the spunk and pep outa them."

Now he clung to the gruff pose of ordering them about, but never really cared when they disregarded most of his words, or talked back to him, as long as the boys kept out of arrest and

the girls did not seem to be openly or particularly unvirtuous. He suspected that his daughters had probably “gone the limit” with one or two men whom they knew, but the absence of feminine virtue to him was not a matter for agitation unless it was persistent, complete and loudly flaunted. He wanted his daughters to be “wise” and to end up in decent marriages, but he was not averse to their “cutting up” a bit, as long as they kept it well hidden. His favorite children were Harry and Mabel and he never overlooked any chance to flatter and serve them in some manner.

His wife, Kate, was the least aggressive member of the family, and her children, Philip and Blanche, held in a much-qualified way many of her characteristics. Two years younger than her husband, she was a lean and not oversturdy woman whose head rose only an inch above his shoulders. She had been a servant girl just migrated from Ireland when he—a bartender in the block in which she lived—had married her because of his inability to seduce her in spite of her meek worship of him, and because her turn of figure and her tart, fresh face had appealed to him. She had toiled most of her life, with only a short period of intermission before the birth of her first child, and she had frequently taken his drunken blows and his palpable faithlessness after the first two years of their marriage, and they had often lived in the dirtiest and most hellish of poverties when his gambling losses had reduced them to pennilessness, but something like a mangled dream had never left her spirit—not plaintive, and not precisely wistful, but more the quietness of a peasant girl never quite living in her surroundings and always longing for the strong peace of village and hill. The dream was stupid, maligned, numb—but still it persisted. She

had little courage, and yet a stubborn flare of it often shot out when she was driven into a corner, and her main reliances were obstinacy and endurance. Unlike her husband, she did not share the bragging illusions which he had concerning their children, and she felt that her sons and daughters were imperfect, overwild and far too selfish, and she cared for them more because life had deprived her of all other opportunities for compensation. She favored Blanche most because Blanche seemed to her to be more of a reproduction of what she, the mother, had been in her own girlhood. It was not that she had any keen insight into her daughter's character and needs—it was only the very cloudy but warm feeling that Blanche was more honest and "fine" than the rest of her children. Mrs. Palmer had long since ceased to love her husband, or to respect anything about him except his physical strength and his masculine braveries, but she had fallen into a rut of obedience to him, from which she lacked even the desire to extricate herself, and she preserved an attitude of bare affection, to impress her children and to keep him in good humor whenever she could. She had rigid notions concerning honesty and morality not held by the rest of her family, and she often weakly complained against their "looseness" and accepted it only because she could not change it. Below her still abundant, grayish-red hair, her face was like the seamed and puffed and violated copy of Blanche's countenance, with much the same eyes, lips and nose, but without the hopeful smiles and uncertain questions on the other's face.

As the family gathered in the living-room on this Sunday noon, chaffing and listening to the latest fox-trot and waltz records from the slightly nasal phonograph that stood on a shaky table

in a corner of the room, and reading the papers with the jealous, spellbound attention with which obscure people greet the notorieties and “stunts” of other men and women, the mother still worked in the kitchen, cleaning the breakfast dishes and preparing the five o’clock Sunday dinner. Kate Palmer usually refused to allow her girls to help her with the housework, for more or less selfish reasons, because of her pitiful pride in the fact that she could manage things herself—the elderly housewife, to whom work had become an only distraction and importance—and because she really dreaded the possibility of their attractive, feminine hands becoming “chapped and ugly-like.” On Sundays the Palmers, in varying degrees, were always in their best mood. They had all slept later than on other days, and the Sabbath-day was associated in their spirits with “sorta making up for what you pulled off during the week”—the faint, uncomprehended return of conscience and forgotten religious precepts—and with more peaceful forms of enjoyment. Early every Sunday morning the mother went to a Presbyterian church on the outskirts of their neighborhood, and sometimes her husband or one of her daughters would accompany her, both of them stiffly empty and ill-at-ease. If you had asked all of the Palmers whether they believed in God and in Christianity, they would instantly have replied in the affirmative, after giving you a wondering, suspicious look, and yet their belief was merely the snubbed but never-quite-relinquished shield which their fears became conscious of at rare and odd moments. In case you died, you wanted to know that you were on the right side of things and in line for some possible reward—this was the only shape that religion had to them. Its exhortations and restrictions were

jokes that could not possibly survive in the sordidness, and strain, and sensual longing of your life—you knew that at the bottom but you never admitted it to yourself on the top. Again, there was a consolation, dim and yet imperative, in feeling that a vast, hazy, grand Father was controlling their days, and in moments of sore need, or danger, or pain, they would have instinctively and even beseechingly called out His name.

When the papers were exhausted, the conversation of the Palmers became more steady and personal.

“Guess you’re goin’ out to-night with that Jew-kike uh yours,” said Harry, trying to get a rise out of Blanche. “Can’t you pick out somethin’ better than a Christ-killer, huh?”

“What’s it to you?” she asked, coolly. “Show you a good-looking Jewish girl and you’ll fall all over yourself trying to date her up. I know you.”

“Sure, but I’d just play her for what I could get,” answered Harry. “I’ve got a notion you’re kinda sweet on that Loo-ee Rosenberg, ’r whatever his name is.”

“Well, she’d better not be,” said the father, with a scowl. “I don’t mind when some kike takes her out for a good time—their jack’s as good as any other guy’s—but I’m not lettin’ any Jews get into this family.”

Blanche gave them a scornful smile. She was far from being in love with Rosenberg, and the matter was neither pressing nor irritating, but she felt a general defiance against their masculine habit of laying down the law to women.

"I guess I'm old enough to tend my own business, pa," she said.

"Oh, you are, huh," answered her father. "Well, maybe we'll see about that."

"Aw, I know what's eating both of you," said Mabel, in her expressionless, thinly liquid voice. "You're sore 'cause Harry lost to a Jew in that fight he had up in Harlem. Kid Goldman, that's the one. When you going to beat him up, Harry?"

"I'll get him, I'll get him, don't worry," her brother answered, frowning as he remembered the affront to his vanity. "I was outa condition that night, and my left wasn't workin' good, that's all. Wait'll I get him in the ring again."

"You know what I've always told you—you got the makin's of a champion 'f you'll only get down to business," said his father. "You're trailin' around too much with that bootleggin' gang uh yours. No fighter ever got to the top with a bottle in his hand, I'm tellin' you."

"G'wan, you know damn well I'm down to the gym five days a week," answered Harry, who realized the truth of his father's words, but wanted to minimize it with his own reply. "An' what's more, I don't see any of you turnin' down that fifty they slip me ev'ry Monday. Money don't lay around on the street—you got to get it any place you can."

"Well, I ain't any too anxious 'bout hearin' the cops knockin' on this door some day," his father responded, peevishly.

"Go ahead, drink your fool self to death—who cares," said Mabel, who had become petulant at the thought of the grand

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