



## UNCLE ISAIAH

RUSSELL KIRK

*Wood engravings by Luther Roberts*

*"And behold at eveningtide trouble; and before the morning he is not. This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us."—ISAIAH xvii. 14.*

**R**EARLY one drab evening, as the news-boys began to cry "racing final!" just before the shop's closing-time, a squat man pushed into Kinnaird's Cleaners and demanded twenty dollars a week. Daniel Kinnaird blinked his mild eyes, and looked at the card the squat man gave him, and shook his mild head. "You'll come across," said the squat man, in a gin voice. "Costa's out. They all come through." He grinned very savagely. "I'll be back tomorrow, collecting." Before Daniel Kinnaird could think of anything suitable to reply, the squat man had sauntered back into the crowd in the street and had been swept away. "North End Cleaners Prudential Association," the card read. It was a neat white card, but Daniel Kinnaird

caught a whiff of the stench-bombs for which it was ambassador: the splintering plate-glass, the explosion, the oily smoke, the intolerable stench.

Kinnaird's Cleaners, Dyers and Tailors, Unusual Service, occupied a square, quoined-stone building which once had been handsome. Like most other business fronts in the North End, it had been a gentleman's house; and, indeed, Daniel Kinnaird could remember when half a dozen of these graceful three-story mansions still had remained the homes of good old families. Only one such place was a home now, and that was the building next door: the Kinnaird house. Everywhere else, Italian and Polish slum children pounded up and down the stairs, or the old parlours were decorated with chromium and converted into hamburger-joints, or the ground-floor façades were

knocked away to make room for car-wash garages. Fashionable suburbs, the automobile and industrialization had turned the North End into a boneyard of defaced and degraded old houses. But the Kinnairds stayed on. They had been among the first to come; they would be the last to go. Indeed, the Kinnairds *could* not go any longer, because their money had trickled away; the North End manacled them. Twenty years before, what remained of the Kinnaird capital had gone into the cleaning business, and at first this had been an enterprise modestly prospering. To-day it was strangling. The pick-up trucks of flashy, shoddy, cut-rate cleaners carried away half their custom; what custom survived came from the Italians and Poles and negroes and nondescripts who packed the houses along this bleary ancient street, people who did their own pressing, brought cleaning only when they must, and required a tailor merely for patches.

After supper, Daniel Kinnaird blinked nightly over his ledgers. Kinnaird's Cleaners no longer could afford a bookkeeper; the help consisted of a girl at the counter, two pressers, a cleaner, and the old Russian Jew who had been their tailor ever since the business had been established. Kinnaird and his wife did all they could, yet every month receipts crept down just a trifle farther. Daniel Kinnaird was poor, but not cheap: his business cleaned clothes carefully, and when—at long intervals—some customer wanted a suit, that suit was decently tailored. Therefore, Kinnaird's Cleaners had become a failing undertaking in a

market where cheapness was the sole factor in competition. Kinnaird could not afford paying twenty dollars a week to the North End Cleaners Prudential Association. In any case, it would have been wrong to pay. The Kinnairds, old-fashioned folk, still judged in terms of right and wrong.

"Costa's out." Kinnaird did not read the newspapers very thoroughly, but he understood that. "Costa's out"—that was *finis* for Kinnaird's Cleaners, he supposed. Last week, the governor had pardoned Bruno Costa. Costa had been serving concurrent sentences for extortion and assault with intent to do great bodily harm, but the governor had pardoned him after less than two years in the penitentiary. An election had been won, a new governor and a new attorney-general and new judges had taken office, certain pre-election agreements had to be fulfilled. To the representatives of the Press, the governor had spoken in very humanitarian fashion about modern concepts of penology, and had released some six eminent thugs. Of these fortunate six, Costa was the least; but he was big enough to run the North End.

Kinnaird went into the tailor's room. Cross-legged on his broad bench sat the old Jew, and Kinnaird handed him the card. "Oi, Mr. Kinnaird," said the Jew, raising his eyebrows in sympathy, "how much?"

"They want twenty dollars a week, Sol."

"Could be worse," said the Jew, spreading his palms in resignation. "Could be worse, Mr. Kinnaird. You pay, yes? Always better to pay."

"No," said Daniel Kinnaird. "They never dared come near me before.

What shall I do, Sol? Why do they come now?"

The Jew protruded his lower lip, a gesture of futility. "Costa already got everybody else, Mr. Kinnaird. Kowalski's Drugs, on the corner, he pays. Jim's Garage, he pays. Every kind business, Costa got some association. I'm telling you, Mr. Kinnaird, better to pay, always. Costa's boys, they throw bombs, stink up the place; they beat maybe you, maybe me. To pay is cheaper."

"I'll call the police," said Daniel Kinnaird, uncertainly.

The Jew cackled joylessly. "Maybe Costa fix the police, maybe not. Maybe not; but anyhow, the police ain't got time for watching your front window day and night, Mr. Kinnaird."

"The Kinnairds don't pay people like Costa," Daniel Kinnaird said, mostly to himself.

"I'm telling you, it's bad times now." The Jew shrugged; and then, rising suddenly, put on his coat. "At supper, you think it over, Mr. Kinnaird. To pay is cheaper. Good night." He went quietly out of the back door, and Kinnaird, watching him through the window, observed that Sol glanced around the corner before he stepped into the darkening alley.

Closing time being past, the rest of the help had gone home; so Kinnaird locked the doors with deliberation, took all the money from the till and tucked it inside his coat, and left the shop by the door in the wall which led into his house. This he locked and bolted, once he was in his hall, and put a chair against the knob. Picking up the telephone, he

dialled the number of Hanchett, the bookseller, a laconic old man of some astuteness.

"Charles?" said Kinnaird. "A man came from Costa to-day. They want twenty dollars a week. What can I do?"

"Pay," said Hanchett's rasping voice.

"It wouldn't be right to pay. What else, Charles?"

"Do you know anybody in the rackets, anybody big?" asked Hanchett.

"No."

"No, you wouldn't." Hanchett coughed. "Well, if you did, you might persuade somebody to make Costa call it off. Do you know anybody in the city hall?"

"No, and I don't want to."

"There fades your second chance, Daniel. I'll make it short and sour: you've got to know somebody *tough*. If you don't, you'll have to pay. If you need cash, I'll lend you some. Stop by to-morrow." Hanchett hung up.

Daniel Kinnaird lingered by the telephone-stand, staring at the cover of the directory. "For an emergency call to the police, dial O," said a big black line of print. He shook his head and went into the kitchen, where his wife was at the stove. "Alma," he sighed, "please sit down a moment."

Having glanced at his face, little Alma obeyed. "What is it?" He told her.

"Do we know anyone *tough*, Alma?" he asked, after they had sat some time in silence, his wife with her hands against her temples.

"We might see Simonds, the alderman," she murmured.

"He knows we voted the wrong

way," was all Kinnaird said. She nodded, and for some minutes they listened to the clock tick.

"We'll have to manage to pay, that's all," Mrs. Kinnaird remarked then, as if she were angry with her husband.

"It's not right to pay a man like Costa." He stared her down. "There's someone we might turn to, you know, Alma——"

Her lips parted, as if to ask "Who?" But she shut them tight before the word came out; her eyes narrowed; and, watching her husband's expression, she shook her head.

"I'm not ashamed of my uncle, Alma," he told her.

"No! Don't you dare bring him into this!" She clasped her plump hands together. "It would be better to pay. Besides, you never could find him in time. We've not seen him for more than nine years."

"In some ways, Uncle Isaiah is a very remarkable man, Alma."

"Oh, whatever possessed Costa's gang to come after us?" She wanted no more talk of Uncle Isaiah, it was obvious. "They used to let decent people alone; or, anyway, they only plagued the foreigners and the coloured folks."

"Costa's rising in society," Kinnaird observed sardonically, "and we're not exempt any longer. Decent people don't count nowadays. Is the chief of police decent? Is the mayor decent? Costa, or Costa's friends, can deliver the vote of this ward. Costa stands for Democracy in action, *à la* North End."

"Then there's nowhere to appeal," she said, rising from her chair. "We'll pay."

Kinnaird motioned her back.

"We'll appeal to Uncle Isaiah."

She gritted her teeth. "Appeal to a lunatic?"

"Isaiah never was in the asylum, Alma—you know that."

"Only because they couldn't catch him," she cried vindictively. "Oh, I know every old family has its nasty uncles, old men that play the fiddle and get drunk and never repay loans; I wouldn't mind a man like that very much. But your famous Uncle Isaiah! Ugh, he's cold, cold, like a toad, and he's always watching! Whenever he came into a room, I shook."

"I thought he was very polite to you, Alma."

"Of course he was. His manners were exquisite to everyone, and he dressed beautifully" — here she glanced critically at her husband — "and he was clean as a scrubbed baby. But you Kinnairds! I could see that Isaiah standing beside the stakes, watching witches burn — only he was born too late for that fun. You Scotch Kinnairds, with your cruel Old Testament names and your brimstone souls! You're scary enough, any of you; but Isaiah scared the wits out of the lot of you people. You were frightened to death of him yourself, Daniel — you know you were."

Daniel Kinnaird winced a bit, and then chuckled. "Remember, Alma, how when he was in a good humour he'd act Giant Despair? You lived just down the block, and you'd be over to play——"

"Do you think I'd forget? I lost five years' growth from that game. We'd be Christian and Faithful; then that dreadful Isaiah would come stealing up, in some sort of enormous black sack, and all of a sud-

den he'd pounce, and have us, and throw us in a closet. Oh, his cold hands, his long nails! I used to cry at night, after a day when we played that game; but I never dared refuse to play, because then perhaps Isaiah might have lost his good humour. How I hated him! I thought he was like a pet snake, that had to be fed on milk, and stroked or he'd choke you."

"You exaggerate, Alma. Uncle Isaiah wasn't very approachable; but sometimes I loved him, and he knew it. He was charitable, too. And he never was in serious trouble with the city police."

"No," said Alma, with a bitter smile, "usually it was the League of Nations that wanted to put him behind bars. I'll admit he had commercial talent. Smuggled guns, illegal immigrants and emigrants, opium——"

"Don't be silly, Alma; so far as I know, Uncle never had anything to do with drugs. He really was a strict moralist after his fashion. Many times I was proud of him. He was eccentric in the grand manner, when all's said. I admit the anarchic streak in him. But you've no reason to despise him so; and if anyone can help now, it's Uncle Isaiah. Whatever he was or wasn't, he took a great pride in family. Alma, he'd send help or bring it, if he knew."

She shrugged. "No danger of that: Isaiah Kinnaird would be a dead pigeon if he set foot in this country, let alone this city. He's in Omsk, Tomsk, or Tobolsk, for all anybody knows. And you'll not find one soul in town who can give you his address, Daniel; so we may as well pay Costa."

Her husband leaned upon the kitchen table, his chin between his

hands. "I don't know that," he said, rather malignantly. "I don't know. How about the Greek?"

\* \* \*

In Water Street, a little way from the ferry docks, was the Ares Café, its back to the sluggish river, its face to that sullen and nocturnally silent road of warehouses, even the red and green neon of its sign suffocated in river-fog. The front window contained a large ham on a platter, flanked by two valetudinarian potted ferns; and upon the plate-glass was lettered boldly, "Woodrow Wilson Argyropolous, Prop. Tables for Ladies." Above the café, two grimy windows looked down from what might be a loft or an office, with a separate entrance leading from the street to this upper floor. Only a man with genius for observing small details would have made out a device just above this entrance: a diminutive mirror fixed upon a steel bracket, tilted at such an angle that anyone looking from the window above could see who was at his door. Mr. Isaiah Kinnaird had fastened that mirror in place, for his office had been over the Ares Café. It had mattered to Uncle Isaiah, Daniel Kinnaird reflected, that he should have a glimpse of his visitors before they got in. Daniel Kinnaird now stood here by the Ares Café, looking through the big window.

It being half-past nine in the evening, the Greek had only one patron, finishing a cup of coffee; and the Greek was engaged in his old pastime of demonstrating his private remedy for the riddle of the business cycle. Pencil in hand, sheets of paper on the counter by the coffee-urn, he drew interminable circles and curves

and triangles, gesticulating with his left arm, and his voice drifted through the open doorway to Kinnaird. "O.K., Mr. Bronkowski? You with me so far? O.K. Now the bank give me seventeen thousand more. . . ." A very small boy emerged from behind the coffee-urn and tugged masterfully at Woodie: "Pencil, Daddy, pencil." "Go 'way, boy," sighed the Greek, benevolently. "Now, Mr. Bronkowski, this O.K.?" The customer agreed. Daniel Kinnaird shifted impatiently outside the window: he must get the Greek alone. "Pencil, Daddy, pencil!" said the small boy. In despair, Woodie surrendered it. At that moment, while still watching the scene inside the café, Daniel Kinnaird came to feel that he himself was being watched.

He turned in alarm. But no one was in the street, not Costa nor the squat man nor anyone else. Then his eyes caught the surface of the mirror above his head: reflected in it was a face, peering downward from the lightless window behind the mirror. This face, though dim in what light came from the café sign, could be made out sufficiently well for recognition. A small, square countenance, with deep lines at either side of the mouth, and topped by thick white hair. A polite expression was on the firm lips; the large eyes were shadowed by tufted eyebrows. It was Mr. Isaiah Kinnaird. Next, the reflection was gone.

Daniel Kinnaird, in astounded urgency, tugged at the door to the office above, but it was locked. To have cried out Uncle Isaiah's name would not have been prudent, he reminded himself even in this frantic moment. Regardless of the solitary

customer, Kinnaird burst into the café and said to the Greek, panting, "Woodie, I want to talk with you."

"Play with the pencil, boy," said the Greek, patting his son on the head as his black eyes ran over Kinnaird's pale face. "You come in the kitchen, Mr. Kinnaird?" They went behind the swinging door, back by the sink. "You got trouble, Mr. Kinnaird?"

"My Uncle Isaiah's upstairs," said Daniel Kinnaird. "Take me up, Woodie."

The Greek scowled, shifted uneasily, and then laughed. "Ho! You joke, Mr. Kinnaird! Ho! You know I ain't seen your uncle for nine, ten years. Nobody seen him. Cuba, Mexico—who know? Not here, never Ho, ho! Not healthy in Water Street, not now."

"I saw him in the mirror, Woodie. He'll want to see me. Take me up."

The Greek's grin faded. "Christ A'mighty, Mr. Kinnaird, you don't joke? You feel good? No, Mr. Kinnaird, by Christ A'mighty your uncle not up there, nobody up there. Listen." He raised his hand. A screen slammed—it was the customer going out—and then they heard only the sound of the little boy scribbling and stirring about in the café. From the office above, not the faintest rustle. Lowering his hand, "Nobody up there, not for nine, ten years."

"Take me up, Woodie," said Daniel Kinnaird. "I've got to see my uncle. Costa's on my track."

"God damn to hell!" The Greek shrugged in vexation. "The truth, that's what I tell. O.K., come up, Mr. Kinnaird, if you got to." He took two keys from the knife-drawer and led the way through the café to the outer door. "Costa," he

added, very low. "Oh, bad. You pay, Mr. Kinnaird. *I* pay." They went outside, and the Greek unlocked the separate door opening upon the stairs, and they ascended some very black steps. Then another door stopped them; the Greek had some trouble with the key of this one. After fumbling, he got it open, and they were in a great dark loft of a place. "No electricity, Mr. Kinnaird," said the Greek, rather softly. Dim shapes of furniture loomed up: a desk, some sort of long counter, a safe, a table, three or four miscellaneous chairs, a filing-cabinet. But no one was in the room. The shadows at the far end were very thick.

"How about a flashlight, Woodie?" The Greek shook his head, but felt along the counter, and presently had a candle in his hand; he lit it. No, the shadows were only shadows. Beyond the place where they had been, two more windows looked upon the river, a door between them. "Show me what's on the other side of that door, Woodie." The Greek fitted a key to it, and when it creaked open they looked upon the oily river. They stood high above the water, indeed; a rickety flight of steps, supported by piers, twisted down to the quay and the mouth of an alley. With now and then a gurgle or hiss, the tide was slipping languidly out. "All right, Woodie," said Daniel Kinnaird, "I apologize to you. Fancies, fancies."

They closed the river door and stood in the middle of the disused office. "What the hell," the Greek said, "I know. Me, I want him back, too, Mr. Kinnaird. You think about him coming, maybe, and think, and

after while you hear steps outside, and you say, 'Christ A'mighty, that's Isaiah Kinnaird!' Ho! Nothing there. Your uncle, he's too smart to come back ever. Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, who know? But not here. If he was, no Costa, hey? No Costa? Your uncle, he don't spit on Costa, hey?"

"Why didn't you rent this place afterwards, Woodie?"

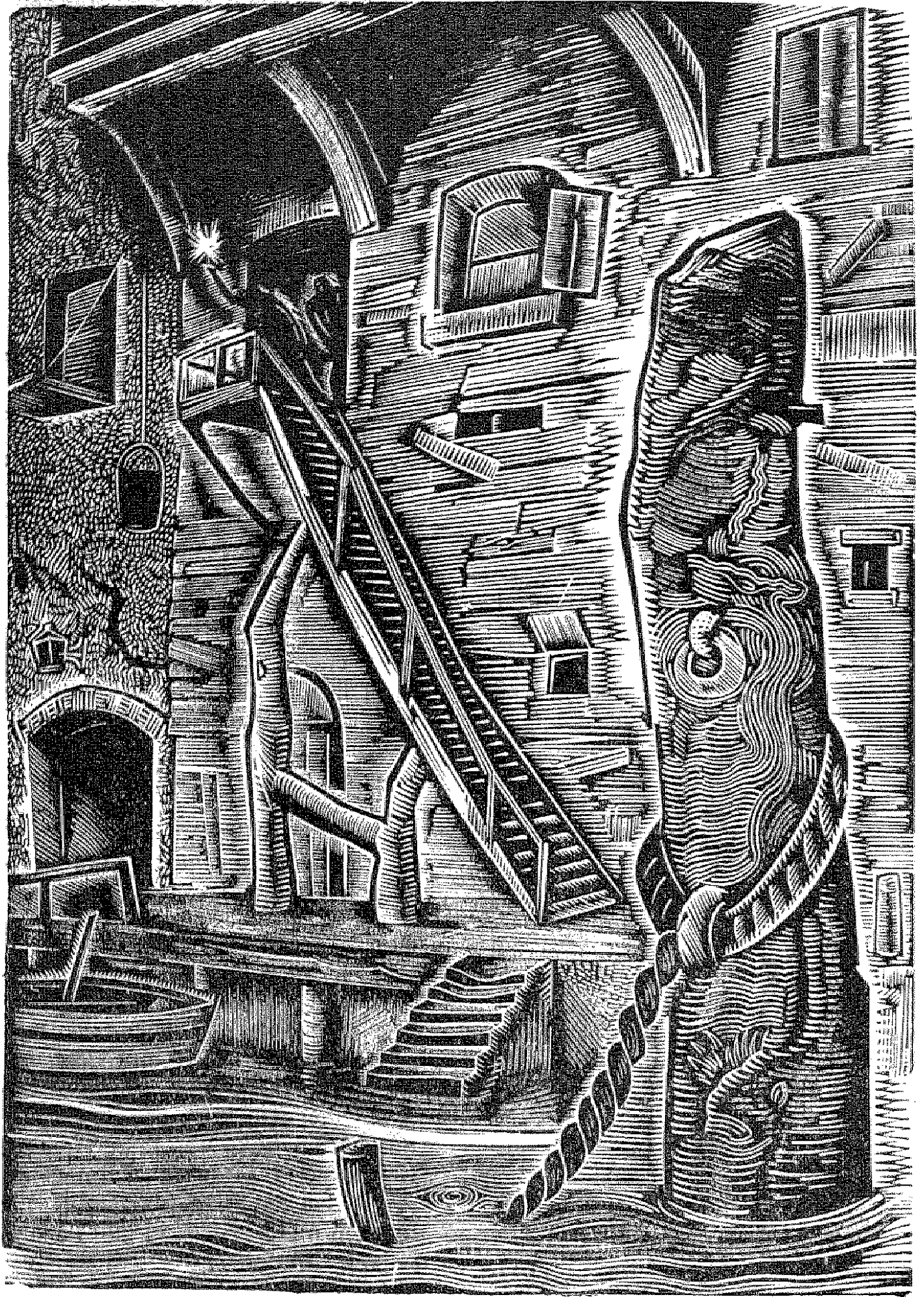
The Greek ran his hand across his forehead. "I get no money for this dump, Mr. Kinnaird. And your uncle, he take me up here some time, me and my first boy, and he give my boy candy and we talk. Oh, how your uncle talk, Mr. Kinnaird! What a friend, so good! What he don't know, Christ A'mighty, it don't matter a damn. I leave things like he had 'em. If your uncle crazy, Mr. Kinnaird, I like every guy in Water Street crazy. Smart! No, I leave things like he had 'em. 'Woodrow,' your uncle say, 'Woodrow, I put my trust in you.' Good! Oh, Christ A'mighty, a good man. I leave things like he had 'em."

"Woodie," said Kinnaird, "isn't there a chance *someone* knows how to reach my uncle?"

"All right," said the Greek. "All right. One guy you try. The lawyer, Simmich. What the hell, you try him. Your uncle, Simmich did stuff for him." He led the way back down the stairs and into the café, and there scribbled an address on the back of an old menu. "He don't know; but you try him." Opening the door, the Greek started to speak again, hesitated as if doubting his discretion, and then muttered, "You know your uncle, he usta pray?"

"I never thought of him as pious."

"Oh, Mr. Kinnaird, sure. Pray!



*... they looked upon the oily river. ...*



Christ A'mighty, he talk low when he talk with you; but when he pray—maybe I wash dishes down here, and I hear him pray loud, loud, hear him through the ceiling. Your uncle, he pray to God to choke his enemies. And it come true, Mr. Kinnaird, come true every time. Oh, a good man. But me and you. . . . Oh, that Costa! Best to pay. Sorry, Mr. Kinnaird. So long."

As he left, Kinnaird took a surreptitious glance at the mirror overhead, but of course it was blank. Simmich lived within walking distance; and though the hour was past eleven, Kinnaird couldn't wait until morning. He came to an old brick flat-building on the edge of a slum-clearance project, walked up four flights, found a door with a plate that said "D. L. Simmich, Attorney," and knocked. After he had knocked twice more, a thin fellow with nasty little eyes, in slippers and shirt-sleeves, opened the door. "Well?"

"My name is Kinnaird."

Simmich's manner altered; he glanced down the hall, either way. "Come in, please, Mr. Kinnaird." They sat in a living-room with dreary walls of a dirty cream, and Simmich said, "Related to him?"

"I need to get in touch with my uncle immediately. What can you do about it?"

The nasty eyes roved calculatingly over Kinnaird's mild face and shabby suit. "I play my hand straight, Mr. Kinnaird. I haven't had word of Isaiah Kinnaird for three years. But it might be possible to make enquiry among certain—among certain foreign associates of Mr. Kinnaird's. Just possible, understand. Of course,

there'd be cablegrams, and registry-fees, and my regular charge. . . ." The nasty eyes calculated.

"Go ahead," Kinnaird told him. "I presume my uncle's transactions with you always turned out satisfactorily, Mr. Simmich."

"Oh yes; prompt and agreeable, your uncle, even though he was firm." The nasty eyes seemed to recalculate possible extortion against possible retribution. Simmich sighed slightly. "The costs will not be prohibitive, Mr. Kinnaird. I'll commence first thing to-morrow morning."

"Begin by cable, please, to-night," said Daniel Kinnaird. He shook hands with some inner reluctance, went down to the foggy road, and turned into Water Street, as good a way home as any. Even cables could hardly be expeditious enough. Uncle Isaiah left his brand on people, left it deep.

\* \* \*

Well past midnight. Kinnaird, alone in Water Street with his troubles, approached the Ares Café again. The café was unlighted now, the Greek having closed before eleven and gone down the block to his four rooms and his seven dependants. Daniel Kinnaird could recall, rather vaguely, hours spent, when he was too young for school, in that dusty office above the café, hours of a fearful joy spent on a stool beside his impenetrable Uncle Isaiah, playing with rubber stamps and shuffling little bundles of old invoices, and now and then daring to tease Uncle Isaiah into a guessing-game. His uncle, small and straight and impeccably neat, never had been out of temper, never had seemed in

the least busy; and his skin had been tight and smooth as a very young man's. But you did not climb on his knee. His mother, Daniel Kinnaird realized now, had not much liked his playing in that dusty office; but she never had dared put her objection into words. If you knew Uncle Isaiah, you hardly risked talking about him, however many walls separated you from him; for he knew, he *knew*.

In the midst of such recollections, Daniel Kinnaird walked slowly past the Ares Café and some paces beyond, when a sensation made him stop abruptly. For the past two or three seconds, an odour had drifted very faintly about his nose; and now that odour found its cubby in his memory. It was the odour of a soap; it was the scent of the delicate and costly soap that Uncle Isaiah had used, the scent which always emanated from Uncle Isaiah's stiff white collars and square small self, the odour of a good old-fashioned man's soap. And an odour it was, no mere memory. Daniel Kinnaird swung about and leaped towards the doorway of the café. No one was in that doorway nor the adjacent recess of the door to the office; but someone must have been there not more than half a minute since. For the second time that night, Kinnaird tugged at the door which led upstairs, and on this occasion it yielded. In he went, up the stairs, treading on his toes so as to hear any sound above him.

And before he had gone up six treads, a sound did come from somewhere at the stair-head: a whistle, infinitely low, but a whistled tune, "Dixie." After a few more seconds, during which Daniel Kinnaird stood immobile and felt the hair rising

along the back of his neck, the whistle gave way to a soft, soft humming, and then distinct words, sung in a very melodious, deep voice, though muffled:

*"There'll be buckwheat cakes and  
Injun batter,  
Make you fat or a little fatter,  
.Look away, look away, look away,  
Dixie land."*

"Uncle Isaiah!" called Kinnaird. How well he knew that voice and that old tune. "Isaiah Kinnaird!" In three bounds, Daniel Kinnaird was at the top of the staircase and pushing against the door. But it would not give.

Now the chant had ceased. Kinnaird rattled the knob, tried to force the bolt. "Uncle Isaiah!" For he felt something stirring on the other side of the door. "It's been nine years, Uncle Isaiah!" To his mind's eye came a vision of the man behind that thin door: Mr. Isaiah Kinnaird, quite ageless, with his peculiar jaunty dignity, his aloof whistling, his stiff old-fashioned collars, his faint scent of soap and his good dark clothes, his stout thorn walking-stick, his square, genteel, old-young face with the tufted eyebrows and the restless eyes of a light blue. "Uncle Isaiah!"

After this last cry, silence fell for a whole minute; then a quiet, quiet voice said, somewhere inside the loft, "Good evening, Daniel, from your mad old uncle."

"Let me in, Uncle Isaiah." No reply, but some noise like the scratching of a stick on the floor. "Uncle, are you ill?"

Now Isaiah Kinnaird's voice rang

much clearer and stronger, rich with his old whimsical deliberation. "In me, Daniel, the reward of many decades of celibacy and sobriety is displayed. I'm quite as hearty as I was when last we met. But if you will pardon my recurrent eccentricity, we shall keep this door shut."

"I've got urgent business to discuss with you, Uncle, and it's been nine years since we were together, you know."

"I am aware of both facts, Daniel, my nephew; yet you will understand that I am here on a kind of sufferance; my tenure is precarious; and my present arrangements require that for the moment our intercourse take place wholly *per vox*, however undignified this may seem to you." There was a deep chuckle.

"Uncle," said Daniel Kinnaird, his heart warming, "come home with me. It's dark: you won't be seen. I need your help. Incidentally, your landlord, Mr. Argyropolous, is a consummate liar."

"A Kinnaird shouldn't sit in judgment so summarily, Daniel. Although Woodrow bears a measurable affection for me, I rather think my presence here would embarrass him just now.

*Thus sang the jolly miller, upon the banks of Dee:*

*"I care for nobody, no not I, and nobody cares for me."*

Whenever I have deviated from this profound maxim, Daniel, I have suffered. You will recall, too, the injunction of our Stoic preceptor, 'Live as if upon a mountain.' This affair of yours which I'm to settle requires particular privacy. Woodrow knows nothing of me."

"Precisely what am I to do, Uncle?" Daniel Kinnaird was resigned to conducting this extraordinary conversation through a closed door: it never had been of any avail to oppose the impregnable whims of Uncle Isaiah.

"As for coming home with you," continued Uncle Isaiah, as if he had not been interrupted, "candidly—why, I hardly think Alma would endure the shock without some preparation, eh? Besides, my arrangements require you to keep all this from Alma—which, our family having a congenital proclivity to secrecy, you shouldn't find difficult. Now to business. I understand you are in difficulties with a certain Bruno Costa."

"People like that never dared approach us before, Uncle Isaiah."

"Right; and therefore our dismissal of him should be rather curt, eh? Mr. Costa hardly understands our family, Daniel. But in any case, I suspect Costa's necessities force him to seek revenue from sources normally left prudently unmolested. Formally, I understand, Costa confined his exactions to persons who could not speak three consecutive sentences of proper English, and accordingly were, so to speak, bubbles in this great melting-pot of ours. But certainly he must have spent a great deal to obtain his release from prison in company so august, and he is endeavouring to recoup his losses—doubtless to fulfil certain pledges, indeed. Well, we must give him a rebuff, Daniel, my nephew."

"And how?"

"Offer his representative a lump-sum settlement, rather than weekly payments; and insist upon a personal interview with Mr. Costa."

"But could we trust Costa to keep off, after he'd got his lump sum?"

"Of course not. Our offer is bait, you understand, Daniel, to bring him to the interview. That meeting shall be conducted precisely here, to-morrow night, at eleven; and I'm the one who'll clean Mr. Costa's clock for him. Tell his man that Mr. Kinnaird wants to talk with Costa. You needn't mention which Kinnaird."

"What will you arrange, Uncle Isaiah?" Mr Isaiah Kinnaird, his nephew reflected, was a gentleman remarkably competent; but he was Lord knows how old, and Daniel Kinnaird did not quite relish the idea of leaving him alone with a creature like Costa.

"Daniel, I should hardly have to tell you that I cannot tolerate enquiry into the procedures of my business. I'll solve your problem for you: that's enough. And since I am anxious not to attract attention from Woodrow or anyone else, will you leave me to my lucubrations? Costa's to come here at eleven to-morrow night, remember." The voice hinted at a good deal of relish.

"When shall we meet, Uncle?" Daniel Kinnaird felt a thorough fool, separated from his nearest kinsman by an inch of pine, after nine years.

"That, Daniel boy, is in the dispensation of a merciful Providence, and hangs, perhaps, upon the issue of our business to-morrow. Good night, Daniel." Perfect silence ensued upon the other side of the panel; and Kinnaird, knowing the futility of crossing his uncle, went reluctantly down the stairs and across the street. No light showed at the upper windows: elusive as a bat or a night-bird, Isaiah Kinnaird. His nephew

shivered a trifle—some truth resided in Alma's horror of the old man, after all, for he was in his way truly mad—and then hurried home, a good deal dazed, but much reassured.

\* \* \*

To his wife, next day, Kinnaird said nothing but that he had no intention of paying Costa, and would therefore "make other arrangements." He ignored her frightened exasperation. All day, he was quite cheerful; and at closing time, again, the squat man entered Kinnaird's Cleaners.

"Cough up the dues, brother," said the squat man, leaning against the clothes-counter.

"I'd rather make a final settlement with Mr. Costa," said Kinnaird, calmly.

Very speculatively the squat man chewed a cigar. "That's up to the boss."

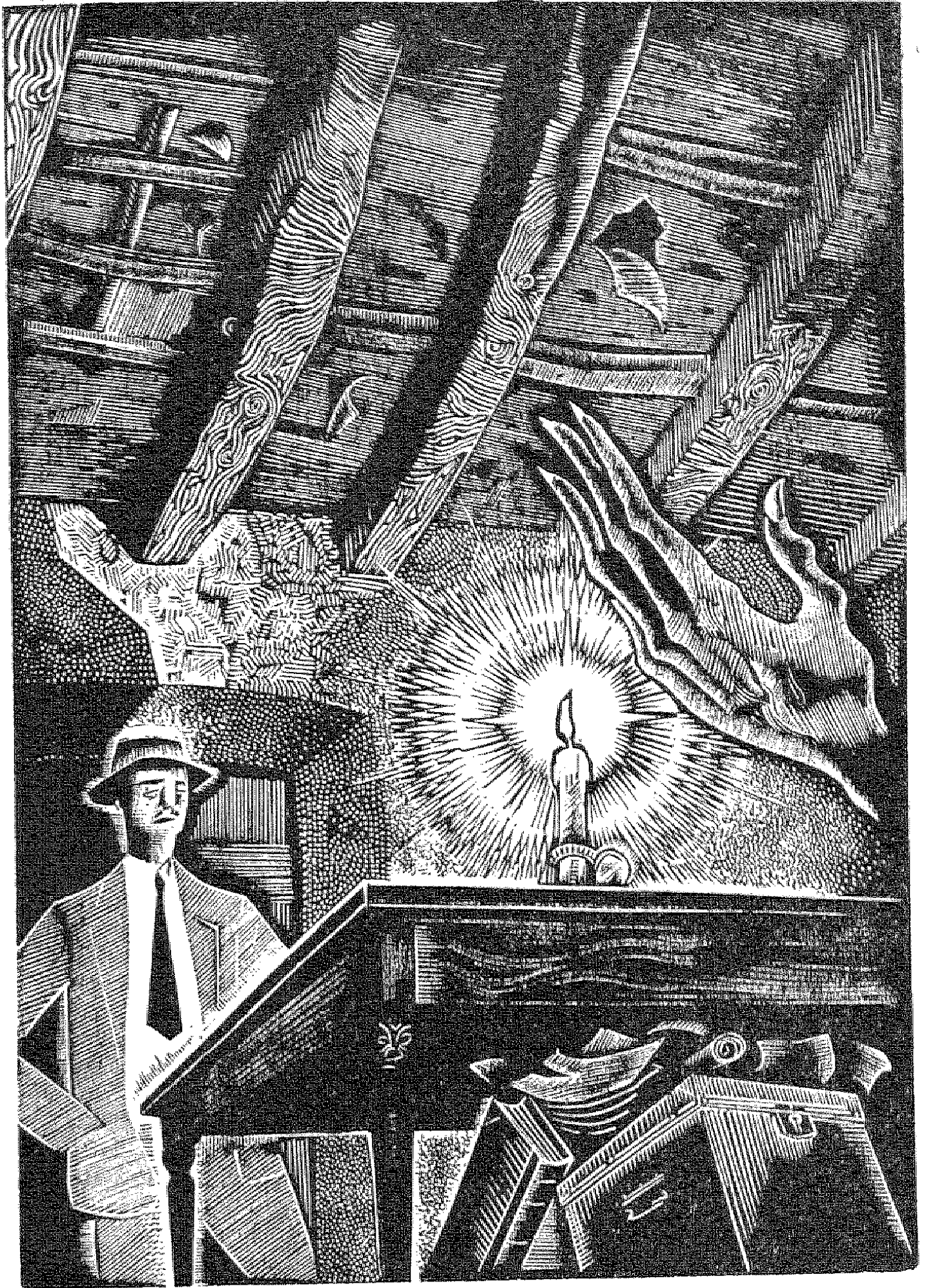
"Then I'll meet him at eleven to-night, over the Ares Café, in Water Street." Kinnaird was firm about it; the squat man looked taken aback.

"The boss makes the dates, see," he said, resentfully.

"If he wants a cash settlement, he'll be there, my friend."

"O.K., O.K.," the squat man answered, almost as if he wanted to placate; "but if you get the boss riled, it's your funeral. Say, you ain't planning any cute stuff?" He looked again at Kinnaird's mild face. "No, I guess you wouldn't." And he went away.

Kinnaird locked the shop and ate a hearty supper. "Oh, you Kinnairds!" said Alma. "What have you done? Sometimes you're as clammy as your uncle."



*... someone came from the shadows ...*

Selecting a book, he settled himself in a corner by the grandfather clock.

\* \* \*

Shortly after eleven that night, a tall and swarthy man emerged from an alley on the north side of Water Street and crossed towards the Ares Café. He wore an expensive suit of a very loud check, and he walked with a heavy swagger, throwing his shoulders back, glancing challengingly from under the brim of his low-crowned hat. There was no one to challenge. He tried the door to the office above the café, found it unlocked, and felt for a light-switch: none could be discovered. So he mounted the stairs in darkness, and knocked at the upper door. No one answered. With a curse, he pushed it open and slipped inside.

Upon a naked table in the middle of the long, dusty room, a single candle was burning. Shadows half hid the farther end of the loft, but he could make out a door there, and he could see no one waiting for him. "Kinnaird?" he grunted. He closed the door behind him. When it went shut, there occurred a distinct click; he started. Keeping his face to the room, he felt at the back of him with his left hand, seeking the knob, while he slid his right hand cautiously in a coat pocket. There was no knob; there was no external lock; the door, he could tell, was secured by some hidden spring. "Kinnaird!" he called, a bit alarmed, in a fury.

Did something shift, over there by the other door. Now a voice said, in a bare murmur, "Mr. Bruno Costa, I see." Costa crouched instinctively.

"You playing games, Kinnaird? Come out!" Costa's voice had an uneasy shrillness.

And someone came from the shadows, came into the dim aura of light on the far side of the candle. It was a self-possessed old man, small but squarely built, dressed with fastidious care; he played with a good walking-stick; his head was bare, and in the flicker of the candle Costa could see that he had thick white hair, a fresh, pink skin, and great eyebrows that made his eyes circles of shadow. "What the hell," cried Costa. "Who're you?"

"I represent Mr. Daniel Kinnaird," said the old gentleman, composedly. "My name is Isaiah Kinnaird. We haven't met previously, Mr. Costa. I'm here to arrange a final settlement with you." He smiled politely.

"Yeah?" Costa hesitated, and knew that the old man perceived his hesitation; so he strode defiantly to the middle of the room until he reached the side of the table opposite Kinnaird. Costa kept his hand in his pocket. "Yeah? No, we ain't met, but I heard about you, you crazy old bastard. What's up?"

"I look upon you, sir," said Isaiah Kinnaird, "as a most interesting phenomenon of social disintegration, the incarnation of these depraved days. Your reference to my origin is amusing; for only one instance of illegitimacy has been recorded among the Kinnairds in the past two centuries; while you, Mr. Costa, manifestly are the end-product of many generations of unbridled lubricity."

"Cut the comedy," Costa said, grimacing in a way that should have been alarming to anyone less placid than this old man. "Are you and that pants-presser going to ante?"

Now old Kinnaird came still closer to the table, so that he leaned almost

over the candle, and Costa could see his eyes. They were blue, and would have been innocent, had they not slid and rolled about so wildly. "Jesus!" gasped Costa, a lump in his throat, "I don't do business with nobody that's bughouse."

"Costa," replied Mr. Kinnaird, politely smiling, "I believe we shall make our final settlement now. You were highly imprudent, sir, this night. Surely you noticed how the door locked behind you?"

"Keep away," Costa muttered, shifting his hand in his pocket. "You going to ante?"

"Are you in good health, Mr. Costa?" Having said this, the old man rapidly slipped one of his slender hands (in this instant, Costa saw how terribly long the nails were) across the dusty table and touched Costa upon the wrist. Costa screamed, and sprang to one side.

"O God! Keep them hands off me!" Isaiah Kinnaird was sidling round the table. "Keep off, you old toad!" And now Costa pulled his automatic; but Kinnaird's white hand was quicker still, and as its fingers touched Costa's, the tall man screamed again, and the gun fell under the table.

What followed would have been ludicrous, in some sense, to anyone that witnessed it. A powerful man, in the prime of life, dodged and ducked about the room, vaulting the table, scampering past the desk, for an instant seeking sanctuary behind the safe, always trying to gain the back door. Now and again, he screamed dreadfully, as his pursuer very nearly grasped him. Always in his way, intercepting, snatching,

chuckling peculiarly, darted a small old man, his white hair disordered, his eyes alight, his veined hands extended, one gripping a stick. Then Costa saw an opening: he doubled back, rolled under the table, and ran straight for the door to the river. But just before he reached it, his foot touched the rung of a chair, and he went to his knees. He rose almost in the same moment; yet as he caught his balance, Isaiah Kinnaird protruded his stick, tripped Costa, and was upon him.

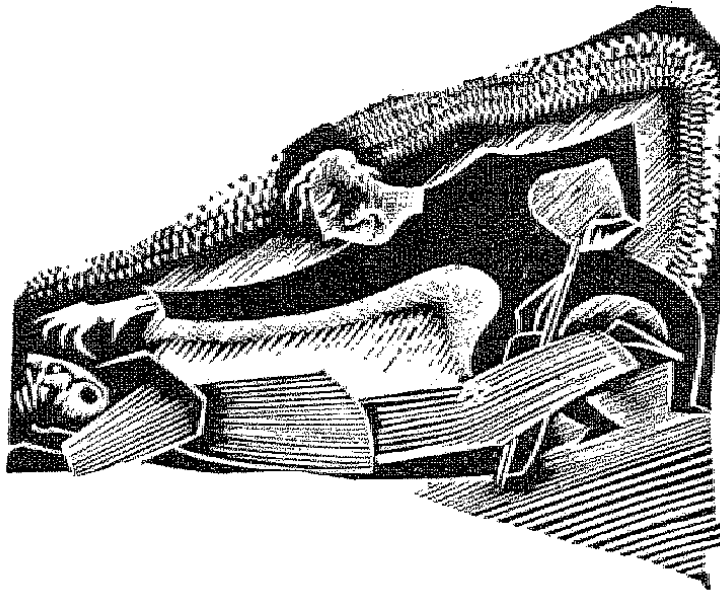
\* \* \*

When the clock struck midnight, Daniel Kinnaird put down his book. The conference in Water Street should be terminated by now; and his uncle, who was cool as the centre seed of a cucumber, would have warned Costa off. At the last stroke of the clock, however, an engulfing conviction burst upon Daniel Kinnaird, something that devastated the marches of ordinary perception. He thought he heard a man's shriek, and a chuckle dreadfully familiar, associated in his memory with a great black sack. All this invaded his consciousness as if someone had tumbled him into a freezing pool. Who knows the whole power of passionate desire, or what a desperate longing may conjure from the depths? Into Kinnaird's confused mind flashed a dozen curious sensations of the past evening: the scent of soap, the tune of "Dixie"; and without snatching up hat or coat, he ran out of the door into the road, and through the paper-littered ways of the North End towards Water Street. Some things even a Costa ought not to face.

From the pavement, now, he could

see an insufficient light flickering behind the drawn shades of the office over the Ares Café. His flesh creeping, he climbed the stairs and pushed open the door at the top. A candle, almost wholly guttered, allowed him to inspect an empty loft. One chair had been knocked over; something had brushed dust from the table. That back door to the river-stairs

stood ajar, a slight breeze causing it to creak intermittently. Daniel Kinnaird went upon the crazy platform, and heard the night tide sucking at ooze, and saw some bird flap over the water towards the soiled and decrepit streets of the North End. But of Isaiah Kinnaird, or of Bruno Costa, no trace—not that night, nor the next day, nor ever.



O my prophetic soul!  
My uncle! . . .

W. SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet I, 5. c. 1601.*



Why are you weeping? What grieves you? Tell me that we may know it together.

*Iliad, i, 362-3.*