SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE

STYRON

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BY

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HAMISH HAMILTON
LONDON

First published in Great Britain, 1961
by Hamish Hamilton Ltd
90 Great Russell Street London WC1

Reprinted by Photolitho by Ellerman Harms, Amsterdam - Holland

L'ambizione del mio compito non mi impedì di fare molti sbagli

With love and gratitude to
MY WIFE ROSE
MY FATHER
and
WILLIAM BLACKBURN
this book is dedicated

That of that providence of God, that studies the life of every weed, and worme, and ant, and spider, and toad, and viper, there should never, never any beame flow out upon me; that that God, who looked upon me, when I was nothing, and called me when I was not, as though I had been, out of the womb and depth of darknesse, will not looke upon me now, when, though a miserable, and a banished, and a damned creature, yet I am his creature still, and contribute something to his glory, even in my damnation; that that God, who hath often looked upon me in my foulest uncleannesse, and when I had shut out the eye of the day, the Sunne, and the eye of the night, the Taper, and the eyes of all the world, with curtaines and windowes and doores, did yet see me, and see me in mercy, by making me see that he saw me, and sometimes brought me to a present remorse, and (for that time) to a forbearing of that sinne, should so turne himselfe from me, to his glorious Saints and Angels, as that no Saint nor Angel, nor Christ Jesus himselfe, should ever pray him to looke towards me, never remember him, that such a soule there is; that that God, who hath so often said to my soule, *Quare morieris?* Why wilt thou die? and so often sworne to my

soule, *Vivit Dominus,* As the Lord liveth, I would not have thee dye, but live, will nether let me dye, nor let me live, but dye an everlasting life, and live an everlasting death; that that God, who, when he could not get into me, by standing, and knocking, by his ordinary meanes of entring, by his Word, his mercies, hath applied his judgements, and shaked the house, this body, with agues and palsies, and set this house on fire, with fevers and calentures, and frighted the Master of the house, my soule, with horrors, and heavy apprehensions, and so made an entrance into me; That that God should frustrate all his owne purposes and practises upon me, and leave me, and cast me away, as though I had cost him nothing, that this God at last, should let this soule goe away, as a smoake, as a vapour, as a bubble, and that then this soule cannot be a smoake, a vapour, nor a bubble, but must lie in darknesse, as long as the Lord of light is light it selfe, and never sparke of that light reach to my soul; What Tophet is not Paradise, what Brimstone is not Amber, what gnashing is not a comfort, what gnawing of the worme is not a tickling, what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally from the sight of God?

JOHN DONNE, Dean of St. Paul's,

"To the Earle of Carlile, and his Company, at Sion"

PART ONE

I

Sambuco.

Of the drive from Salerno to Sambuco, Nagel's *Italy* has this to say: "The road is hewn nearly the whole way in the cliffs of the coast. An evervaried panorama unfolds before our eyes, with continual views of an azure sea, imposing cliffs, and deep gorges. We leave Salerno by Via Independenza. The road turns toward the sea, looking down on *Marina di Vietri.* On regaining the coast we enjoy a glorious view of Salerno, Marina di Vietri, the two rocks (*Due Fratelli*) and Raito. Beyond a side turning we enjoy a sudden view of the colourful village of *Cetara* (4½ m.). We return to the sea and then make a retour round the grim ravine of Erchie, approaching the sea again at Cape Tomolo. Passing through a defile with high rocky walls, we come in sight of

Minori and Atrani with *Sambuco* high above them. The road diverges beyond Atrani and ascends the Dragone Valley."

About Sambuco itself Nagel's is characteristically lyric: "(1033 ft.) a little town of unusual appearance in an extremely beautiful landscape; the contrast between its lonely situation and its seductive setting, between the ruin of its ancient palaces and the gaiety of its gardens, is very impressive. Built in the 9th cent. under the rule of Amalfi, Sambuco enjoyed great prosperity in the 13th cent."

Sambuco, indeed, is no longer prosperous, although because of its geographical position it is undoubtedly better off than most Italian villages. Aloof upon its precipice, remote and beautifully difficult of access, it is a model of invulnerability and it is certainly one of the few towns in Italy which remain untouched by recent bombs and invasions. Had Sambuco ever lain upon a strategic route to anywhere it might not have been so lucky and at one time or another might have found itself, like Monte Cassino, crushed in ugly devastation. But the affairs of war have left the place intact, almost unnoticed, so that its homes and churches and courtyards, corroded as they may be by poverty, seem when compared to other towns of the region to be proudly, even unfairly, preserved, like someone fit and sturdy among a group of maimed, wasted veterans. Possibly it was just this remoteness, this unacquaintance with war and with the miserable acts of violence which are its natural aftermath, that made the events of that recent summer seem to everyone so awesome and shocking.

Lest from the above I be accused at the outset of sounding too portentous, I will say that these events were a murder and a rape which ended, too, in death, along with a series of other incidents not so violent yet grim and distressing. They took place, or at least had their origins, at the Palazzo d'Affitto (". . . a curious group of Arab-Norman structures rendered specially picturesque and evocative by the luxurious vegetation by which they are framed. The garden-terrace commands a wonderful panorama.") and they involved more than a few of the townspeople and at least three Americans. One of these Americans, Mason Flagg, is now dead. Another, Cass Kinsolving, is alive and flourishing, and if this story has a hero it is he, I suppose, who fits the part. It is certainly not myself.

My name is Peter Leverett. I am white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, Virginia-bred, just past thirty, in good health, tolerable enough looking though possessing no romantic glint or cast, given

to orderly habits, more than commonly inquisitive, and strongly sexed—though this is a conceit peculiar to all normal young men. I have lived and worked for the past few years in New York. It is with neither pride nor distress that I confess that—in the idiom of our time—I am something of a square. By profession I am a lawyer. I am ambitious enough to wish to succeed at my trade, but I am no go-getter and, being constitutionally unable to scrabble and connive, I suspect that I shall remain at that decent, mediocre level of attainment common to all my ancestors, on both branches of the tree. This is not, on the one hand, cynicism, nor is it, on the other, self-abasement. I am a realist, and I wish to tell you on good authority that the law—even in my drab province, where only torts, wills, and contracts are at stake—demands as much simple deviousness, as much shouldering-aside of good friends, as any other business. No, I am not up to it. I am stuck, so to speak, with my destiny and I am making the pleasant best of it. While maybe not as satisfying as the role of the composer I once had an idea I might try to play, it is more than several times as lucrative; besides, in America no one listens to composers, while the law, in a way that is at once subtle and majestic and fascinating, still works its own music upon the minds of men. Or at least I hope to think so.

A few years ago, when I came back from Italy and Sambuco and took a job in a New York firm (somewhat second-rate, I must admit, and not on Wall Street yet laggardly nearby, which caused our office wits to suggest the slogan "Walk a block and save")—several years ago I found myself in a really rather bad state. The death of a friend—especially under the circumstances that befell Mason Flagg, even more especially when one has been on the scene, witnessed the blood and the tumult and the shambles—is not something that can be shaken off easily at all. And this applies even when, as in my case, I had thought myself alienated from Mason and all that he stood for. I will come to Mason's ending presently, and it will be described, I hope, in all its necessary truth; for the moment let me say only that it left me quite desperately stunned.

During that time I had incessant dreams of treachery and betrayal—dreams that lingered all day long. One of them especially I remember; like most fierce nightmares it had the habit of coming back again and again. In this one I was in a house somewhere, trying to sleep; it was dead of night, wintry and storming. Suddenly I heard a noise at the window, a sinister sound, distinct from the tumult of the rain and the wind. I looked outside and saw a shadow

—the figure of someone who moved, an indefinite shape, a prowler whose dark form slunk toward me menacingly. Panicky, I reached for the telephone, to call the friend who lived nearby (my best, last, dearest friend; nightmares deal in superlatives and magnitudes); *he,* somehow, I knew, was the only one dear enough, close enough, to help me. But there was no answer to all my frantic ringing. Then, putting the phone down, I heard a *tap-tap-tap*ping at the window and turned to see—bared with the malignity of a fiend behind the streaming glass—the baleful, murderous face of that selfsame friend. . . .

Who had betrayed me? Whom had I betrayed? I did not know, but I was sure that it all had something to do with Sambuco. And although I felt little grief over Mason's end—I want to make that clear right now—I still felt low, miserably low over what had happened in that Italian town. Now, looking back on it, I can see that maybe it was only because my most unhappy suspicion was this: that though I was in no way the cause of Mason's death, I might have been in a position to prevent it.

Nature of course has a way of dealing with even our most heartless despondencies. Gradually, so imperceptibly that I was hardly aware that it was happening, my memories began to blur and dim, and it was not too long before I was feeling almost normal. After a few months I even became engaged. Her name was Annette, and she was beautiful and rich, besides.

Yet if my gloom had pretty much disappeared, my wonder and curiosity had not. I knew that what was left of Mason, many months before, had been sent back from the Italy he loathed, and now rested—if even a dead Mason could be said to be at rest—somewhere in American soil. Rye, New York, I believe, but it doesn't matter. I knew that the Italian girl he had been accused of raping and beating had also died (I had seen her for several seconds that night, and she had been beautiful in a complete and stunning way, which I think accounted for much of my later distress). And I knew that the case—the *tragedia,* the Naples papers had called it—was closed, there being little aftermath for snoops and gossips and the simply curious to feed upon when the two principals were so firmly and decisively dead. Even the New York papers had given the story small play, I discovered—and this in spite of the Flagg name with its more or less glamorous attachments—possibly because Sambuco was, after all, a faraway place, but more likely because no one remained to expose his shame and guilt to the vulturous limelight. So, save for the excep-

tional fact that I had been in Sambuco at the time, in many ways I knew no more about the horrifying mess than the lowliest strap-hanger.

Except that I *did* know something, and this was what continued to bother me, and long after the time of those funereal blues I have just described. I did know something, and if that something was not much, if it was more in the nature of a strong suspicion than anything else, then it only served to keep my puzzlement and curiosity alive for a year or more. Even this curiosity would doubtless have passed from my mind had it not been for a cartoon I saw one Sunday in the New York *Times*. . . .

Anyone who has ever lived alone in a New York apartment knows or remembers the special quality of a Sunday. The slow, late awakening in the midst of a city suddenly and preposterously still, the coffee cups and the mountainous tons of newspapers, the sense of indolence and boredom, and the back yards, sunlit, where slit-eyed cats undulate along fences and pigeons wheel about, and a church bell lets fall its chimes upon the quiet, hopelessly and sadly. It is a time of real torpor, but a time too of a vague yet unfaltering itch and uneasiness—over what I have never been able to figure out, unless because in this most public of cities one's privacy is momentarily enforced and those old questions *What am I doing? Where am I going?* are insistent in a way they could never be on a Monday. The particular Sunday of which I am speaking was in the late spring of the year, a bad time for introspection. My girl was visiting her parents up in Pound Ridge, my friends were either away or indisposed, and I had buttoned up my collar in preparation for a lonely walk in Washington Square, when in the most idle fashion possible I picked up the editorial section of the *Times*. Perhaps again that early afternoon I had been thinking of Sambuco, stirring up old sorrows and regrets, and several futile recriminations. I am not sure, but I do know that when I saw the cartoon, and the signature, unmistakable, beneath it—*C. Kinsolving* —my heart leaped and I was wrenched backward in time toward Sambuco—hurried through memory, weightless, like a leaf. The whole thing poured over me again, but without the horror this time, without the sweats. I did not go out that afternoon. I studied the cartoon—it had been reprinted from a newspaper in Charleston, South Carolina. I studied the cartoon and the signature, and I paced up and down, making my gums sore with cigarette after cigarette, gazing out into the quiet Sabbath gardens (pretty soon there will be no more gardens in the Village) at the pigeons and

the beer drinkers in sport shirts and the prowling cats. At last when dusk began to fall and the chink of supper dishes sounded across the way, I sat down and wrote Cass a letter. It was midnight when I was finished. I had not eaten and I was utterly worn out. Shortly after one o'clock I went out to the White Tower on Greenwich Avenue and had a couple of hamburgers. On the way back I mailed the letter, which was less a letter than a document and which I addressed to Cass in care of the paper in Charleston.

The reply was a long time in coming. A month went by, then several weeks more, and I was on the verge of screwing up the nerve to write another letter when, sometime in July, I received an answer:

Dear Peter,

Naturally I remember you & was delighted to hear from you again. You were right, I dont guess there are many C. Kinsolvings. Glad you liked my cartoon & consider it fortunate that you ran across it in the Times if for no other reason than it prompted you to get in touch with me & write such a good letter. Im right proud of that cartoon which I think, despite my contempt for politics in general, took a good swat at D.C. hypocrisy. In regard to your question, these cartoons are gravy and not my actual metier, since I work half days at a cigar factory here in C'ton, & also teach a painting class though things go a bit slack both ways toward the end of Summer. However I dont look down on cartooning, who knows but whether its the American Art Form (not kidding), anyway consider myself in a direct line of descent from Daumier and Rowlandson & besides I get 35 bucks a piece & sometimes more, which as they say is not sparrow food. Also Poppy has a job sort of book keeping at the Navy yard & we have a very good coloured woman for the kids when theyre not at school so though maybe we are not eating as high off the hog as that other eminent Carolinian, B. Baruch, we are doing alright. Also, am painting in all my spare time & all that paralyzing death of the soul you must have seen is pretty much gone.

Peter, always wanted to thank you for what you did in Sambuco for Poppy & all. She told me everything you did & now I should apologize, using the weak excuse that I didnt know how to contact you in N.Y.C. But this would be a lie, so will only say now thanks again & trust you to understand.

Also, I can understand very well your interest in M. & your desire to know more of the situation down there in Sambuco. Myself I find it most difficult to talk or even think about M. & what went on, much less write about it. Yet its funny you know, just as you say youre in the dark about what happened in Sambuco, so from time to time I keep wondering who M. was, I mean really WAS & what was

eating him & how he ended up the way he did. I dont guess anybody will figure that out & suspect that its all for the best any way you look at it. You are right in "surmising" that I had a rough time down there. I guess I drew pretty close to what is commonly described as the brink, but I seem to be O.K. now. Have not incidentally had a drop of beer, even, in going on to 2 years. It makes Sophocles much easier to read, and am now beginning to work my way straight through Shakespeare, making up at this advanced age for the deprivations of the U.S. public school system.

Anytime youre down this way, Peter, let me know. We live near the Battery in a 200-year-old house which doesnt rent for much & theres plenty room for a guest. Poppy remembers you with affection, also the kids.

Molti auguri
Cass

I have never had much faith in that "Any time you're down this way"—having used it several times myself in sticky situations when the true sentiment behind the phrase was all too apparent. It is polite and it is friendly, but it certainly does not plead or exhort. It is not the same as "It would be nice to see you again," and it is as far removed from "Please come see me, I miss you" as simple civility is from love. There was some quality in this letter of Cass', though, that made me believe that he would not take unkindly to a visit from me—actually, as regarding Mason, that he might even be as eager to see me as I was him. I had three weeks' vacation due me in September. The first of these weeks I had planned to spend with my girl Annette (there is something foregone and conclusive about that word fiancée) in the White Mountains. The other two I had left aside for a visit with my parents down in Virginia: they were both old and ailing and, while we have never really been as close as some families, something weary and sorrowful in their letters made me long to see them again. What I proposed to do, then—and this I wrote Cass right away—was to discommode him to the extent of spending a week end with him in Charleston, flying down from Norfolk sometime during the visit with my parents. I would not expect to stay at his house, despite the implied invitation. Would such and such a week end be all right? Would he get me a room in a hotel? It should in no way have surprised me, I suppose, but it did: I got no answer from Cass at all.

The time spent in New Hampshire with my dazzling Annette was a total and sweeping catastrophe. I will deal with it only to the extent of saying that it rained, that we lasted two days, and that

when we left our mountain cabin in a downpour we were unbetrothed. There were no sexual difficulties. We were just not meant for each other, we decided. Both of us put up a brave front about it all, but a love affair, like some prodigy of plastic surgery, is flesh laid on to living flesh and to break it up is to tear off great hunks and parts of yourself. I went down to Virginia feeling mournful, grim, indescribably bereft.

Of my sojourn in Virginia, however, there is a little bit more to say. Nothing in America remains fixed for long, but my old home town, Port Warwick, had grown vaster and more streamlined and clownish-looking than I thought a decent southern town could ever become. To be sure, it had always been a shipbuilding city and a seaport (visualize Tampa, Pensacola, or the rusty waterfront of Galveston; if you've never seen these, Perth Amboy will do), and in official propaganda it had never been listed as one of the ornaments of the commonwealth, but as a boy I had known its gentle seaside charm, and had smelled the ocean wind, and had lolled underneath giant magnolias and had watched streaked and dingy freighters putting out to sea and, in short, had shaken loose for myself the town's own peculiar romance. Now the magnolias had been hacked down to make room for a highway along the shore; there were noisy shopping plazas everywhere, blue with exhaust and rimmed with supermarkets; television roosted upon acre after acre of split-level rooftops and, almost worst of all, the ferryboats to Norfolk, those low-slung smoke-belching tubs which had always possessed their own incomparable dumpy glamour, were gone, replaced by a Yankee-built vehicular tunnel which poked its foul white snout two miles beneath the mud of Hampton Roads. Hectic and hustling, throbbing with prosperity, filled with nomads and the rootless and the uprooted (*"Upstarts,"* my father said. "Son, you're watching the decline of the West."), the town seemed at once as strange to me yet as sharply familiar as some place on the order of Bridgeport or Yonkers. And, unhelmed, touched with anxiety, smitten with a sense of dislocation I have rarely felt so achingly before or since, I knew I could not stay there long; the fact is, I almost left on the same day I arrived, when, that evening, hunting in vague panic for a familiar scene, I wandered down to the river in the soft September dusk and instead of the broad, grassy field I had known so well (the "Casino" it had been called, shadowy at twilight with rustling sycamores, where there was a bandstand and a river view of the wide warm old James, mirroring stars: here we played baseball in the fading light and here, too,

shirt-sleeved Negroes hawked peanuts and deviled crabs, until at last the tootling of clarinets faded and died, and all shut down, and lovers walked beneath the trees to the sound of sycamore balls plopping earthward in the stillness and the whistle of a freighter seaward-borne in the dark) I found a snarling Greyhound bus station and a curious squat lozenge-shaped building, greenly tiled, whose occupants numbered among them a chiropodist, a lay analyst and—of all things to tell about the fading South—an office full of public-relations counselors, or consultants.

But this is too familiar to go on about at length. In America our landmarks and our boundaries merge, shift, and change quicker than we can tell: one day we feel rooted, and the carpet of our experience is a familiar thing upon which we securely stand. Then, as if by some conjuring trick, it is all yanked out from beneath us, and when we come down we alight upon—what? The same old street, to be sure. But where it once had the solid resounding sound of Bankhead Magruder Avenue—dear to all those who remember that soldier who stalemated McClellan—now it is called Buena Vista Terrace ("It's the California influence," my father complained, "it's going to get us all in the end."); an all-engulfing billboard across the way (the zoning laws have collapsed; we used to swing on grapevines there, in the ferny mornings) tells us to "Listen to Jack Avery, the Tidewater's Favorite Disk Jockey," and though we are obscurely moved by intimations of growth, of advancement, we feel hollow and downcast. Nor is our nostalgia misplaced. Only fools lament change in itself, but in this "pillaged town," as my father called it, there was many a fool who on his deathbed would protest his innocence of total rape. " 'Bring back the greenery, bring back the leaves!' That's what they're going to holler," my father said. "That's what they're going to holler when the light dims. And all they're going to get is this here Avery."

It must have been on the afternoon of my fourth or fifth day in Port Warwick that my father, retired now from the shipyard, took me for a long ride around town in his car. We traveled all the old avenues, many of them strange to me now (the largest and most venerable trees seem to be the first victims of a municipal renascence: not only the magnolias but the oaks and elms had fallen, in a process of rebuilding that made way for, among other things, the first Bauhaus-inspired Pentecostal Holiness church in Dixie), and we had beer and pigs' knuckles behind the flyspecked glass of Jake Eisenman's grill, which alone amid the Laundromats and Serv-ur-Selfs and Howard Johnsons resisted change, resisted neon