

# STARTLING STORIES

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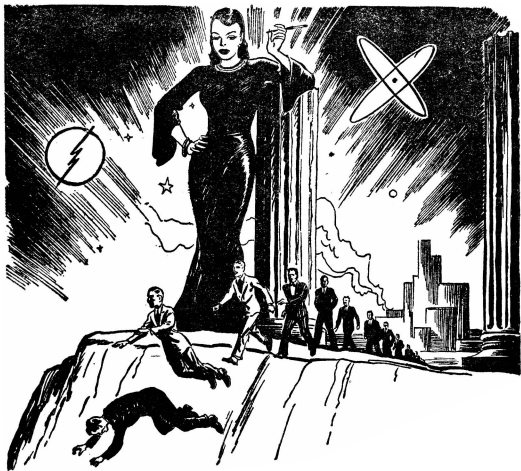
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# The Black Ewe

By FRITZ LEIBER, Jr.

**V**ERY well, I'll tell you why I broke off my engagement to Lavinia Simes —though I'm not the sort of person who likes to go around broadcasting the facts of his private life. There's altogether too much broadcasting going on these days, by wave, newsprint and heaven knows

what subtler avenues of approach to the human mind.

I could sum it all up in the one word *horror*. But that doesn't mean much by itself. Besides, it would let you explain it away as a neurotic delusion, aftermath of the near nervous breakdown I

*She Brought Death to All Who Walked Behind Her!*

had in 1946, when I quit my desk job with OSS. Though why anyone shouldn't have a nervous breakdown these days, with the whole world rushing hypnotized into the mouth of doom, is more than I can see.

At any rate "ridiculous neurotic delusion" is the explanation favored by most of the friends of the Simes—one syllable, you know, rhymes with limes. They delight in telling each other how without any word of warning I walked away from Lavinia in the midst of a sight-seeing tour of Chicago and refused ever to see her again. Which is completely accurate incidentally.

They all think I behaved outrageously.

All of them, that is, except Mrs. Grotius. When I met her afterwards she said, "Well, Ken, at least you won't go the way of Conners Maytal and Fritz Nordenfelt and Clive Maybrick and René Coulet and the other nice young men Lavinia was engaged to."

I DIDN'T want to go into it with Mrs. Grotius, so I merely said, "Oh those were all accidents. And even the coincidence of so many fatal accidents isn't particularly striking when you remember that Lavinia and her father have always managed to be in the danger spots of the world."

"Yes, accidents do seem to cluster around Lavinia," Mrs. Grotius agreed in that dry voice of hers. "I wonder if that's why she always wears black, Ken?"

She always does, you know. It's a regular fetish with her. Lavinia once explained it, with a stab at psychoanalysis, as being an unconscious guilt-reaction to the fact that her mother had died bringing her into the world.

The mothers of monsters generally die giving them birth, so perhaps it's fair enough that the monsters should wear mourning.

Then another time Lavinia suggested, with hush-voiced Midwestern idealism, that perhaps she wore black because she was so conscious of the miserable state of the world. Which may be a lot more to the point.

NOW I have a third explanation that's much more convincing to me. I'll tell it when I get around to explaining why I left Lavinia on that sightseeing tour.

I think Mrs. Grotius saw pretty deeply into Lavinia. Underneath her faddish interest in the occult Mrs. Grotius is quite an acute old lady. Come to think of it, it was she who first pointed out to me, in an earlier and idler conversation, another oddity in Lavinia's dress.

"Ever notice anything else queer about the way Lavinia dresses?" she asked me a little teasingly because I had just fallen in love with Lavinia.

"I don't think so," I replied, "except maybe that her clothes are a bit out of fashion."

"Behind the fashions, you mean?"

"I suppose so."

Mrs. Grotius shook her head. "That's what any man would say and most women. And they'd be wrong. Actually Lavinia is always about a year ahead of the fashions. But since next year's clothes always look more like last year's than like this year's clothes, most people would explain it the other way. But I notice details and Lavinia is always ahead, not behind."

"Really?" I said, hardly listening.

"Oh yes. Understand, there's nothing particularly clever or striking about her dresses—ugh, that awful black! In fact, they're what you'd call conservative models. Still, they're six months to a year ahead."

"How do you explain it?" I asked, still not much interested.

Mrs. Grotius shrugged lightly. "Perhaps she picks it up when she's off with her father in foreign parts. Though I never knew that Casablanca and Teheran were nerve-centers for the world of *haut couture*. Or perhaps," she added, with a whimsical smile, "Lavinia peeks into the future."

That remark of Mrs. Grotius may not have been pure whimsy. She may have been remembering the thing that happened at a still earlier date. And that takes me back to 1937 and the real beginning of the story of Lavinia and my-

self. She was about seventeen then and engaged to my friend Conners Maytal.

I didn't have a flicker of conscious interest in Lavinia at the time. I just thought of her as another of those precocious but proper Midwestern girls, brought up in a world of politically-active, internationally-minded adults but never losing that trace of Bible-Belt coldness and gaucherie, that "fresh from the prairie" look. Slim, tall, dark-haired, dreamy-eyed, not at all sexy, at least not in any exciting way. I wasn't aware of the excitement of coldness in those days.

We were all gathered in Mrs. Grotius' apartment with its restful pearlgray furnishings and mildly arty feel. Conners Maytal, a curly-haired, dashing young man with some hush-hush, vaguely dangerous government job. The nubile Lavinia. Theodore her father, a thin-cheeked beaming man with manners that a lifetime in the Foreign Service had made the easiest and jolliest, most unimpeachable you could imagine.

He'd just got back from a legation job in Spain and would soon be off to some other corner of the world. Lavinia, of course, always went with him. He'd raised her from a baby, despite his world-wide jaunts. I imagine it was on her account that he always tried to get back to Chicago between assignments, though Mrs. Grotius claimed it was to "stock up on some sensible Midwestern isolationism, after those foreigners drain it out of him."

Besides those three there was myself, Mrs. Grotius, of course, and four or five others. Mrs. Grotius had just heard about Professor Rhine's telepathy experiments at Duke and insisted that we try our luck at them.

She had the stuff you need—a deck of cards with the different symbols—square, circle, star and so on. The way we did it was that one person went slowly through the deck, concentrating on each symbol as it came up, while the other person, who of course couldn't look at the cards, drew a picture of whatever symbol he thought was up at the time.

It turned out to be pretty boring. None of us had anything unusual in the

way of scores until it came to Lavinia's turn. She was a whiz at it. Her score was well beyond anything you could reasonably expect—and that in spite of the fact that she drew two or three symbols that weren't on the original cards.

One was just a circle with a jagged line through it—a little like a cartoonist's diagram of the world cracking in two. The other was a bit more complicated. It consisted of two ellipses overlapping each other crosswise with a dot in the very center.

We puzzled over that latter diagram a good while without recognizing it. The fact is that no one would have recognized it then except a chemist or physicist. Now everyone knows what it means. It's been blazoned all over magazine covers and advertisements—the simplest symbol for the atom.

**M**AYBE that's not beyond the bounds of chance—a girl back in 1937 straining her mind to make it telepathic and repeatedly drawing the symbol of the thing that eight years later was to disrupt the whole course of history. Still, especially with the world of today striding blindly toward some atomic doom like a somnambulist under the control of an evil magician, I don't know.

I like even less to think about that other symbol—the circle split by a jagged line. You see, we don't know yet what that symbol is going to mean. That is, if it's going to mean anything. Still, I don't like to think about it.

As soon as Lavinia found out that she had drawn some symbols that weren't on the original cards she became very upset and insisted on tearing up all her drawings. I think most of us put it down to some sophomoric passion for conformity on her part. As I said, she seemed a most proper girl, very easily embarrassed.

The next day I received a puzzling visit from Conners Maytal. He wouldn't tell me exactly what was on his mind but he kept pacing up and down and peering out of the window, every now and then letting drop something about a "great danger" overshadowing him.

"I've got on to something, Ken," he

said, impressively. "A piece of information has dropped into my hands. It's big, Ken. So big I'm frightened—so big I don't know where to take it or what to do with it. And the worst thing is that I think certain people know I have this information."

Of course I was curious and very much concerned. Conners was a hero of mine and I tried my best to get him to tell me about it. But the most he would say was, "It's something that would never occur to you in your wildest fancies, Ken. Something utterly strange."

It never entered my mind that there might be any connection between the Conner's "something" and his engagement to Lavinia. Though I did get the impression that someone at Mrs. Grotius' party might be concerned. But the world situation being what it was at the time, my guesses ran almost entirely in the direction of foreign agents and American fascists. Perhaps, I thought, Conners had uncovered evidence of serious disloyalty in high government circles.

He left me without telling me any more.

The next day Conners was knocked down by a hit-and-run driver and his brains bashed out on the curb.

Naturally I didn't rest until I was able to secure a private interview with Conners' superior. He listened rather skeptically to my story, and as I told it I became painfully aware that it didn't contain an ounce of concrete fact. Then too, I found that Conners' job hadn't been nearly as undercover or dangerous as some people—not Conners—had made it out to be.

When I finished my story Conners' superior promised me there'd be a thorough investigation. However, he strongly implied that he didn't think anything would be turned up. He was inclined to write the whole business off as nerves on poor Conners' part.

As time passed I was inclined to agree with him. The more so, since I have myself at times experienced some of those same nerves. Often, when you wake up with a start to the terrifying predica-

ment of the world, you wonder for a moment if there isn't something you can do about it.

Something that will avert the horrible dangers mankind is brewing for itself with all the compulsiveness of a drugged savage responding to the tom-tom beat. And you find you can't or that no one will listen. It is enough to drive a man into neurosis.

Back in the years just before the war such feelings were pretty common. We have become a little less sensitive since then, a little tougher-skinned—though that isn't going to help us when the atom bombs start to fall.

Meanwhile the Simes were off to Austria. There was talk of Theodore having hurried their departure on Lavinia's account. She was pictured as a tragic figure—young love cut short and all that.

However, as it happened the Simes were in for an unguessably exciting junket. It was more than five years before they got back to the States. In rapid succession came assignments in Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, London, Leningrad and London again, where they spent a good deal of the war.

From what I've heard of Theodore, it was as much his social as his diplomatic abilities that made him valuable to our government and there must have been endless parties and functions, even in war's shadow, that both he and Lavinia attended.

I get frightened now, when I think of the number of people, the world's most prominent folk among them, who must have met that colorless-seeming Midwestern girl and listened idly to her chatter and then, later on— But I mustn't get ahead of my story.

**D**OUTBLESS you noticed something striking about that list of assignments, coming in the order they did—it was like a road map of catastrophe for World War II. Oddly enough, that sort of thing had already given Theodore a peculiar reputation in the Service.

He'd been in Barcelona in '35, just before the Spanish Civil War, and again in '36. In Naples in '33 and '34, the year

before the invasion of Ethiopia. As you'll remember, Hitler came to power in Germany early in '32.

Well, a year or so previously Theodore had a post in Nuremberg. He always seemed to keep ahead of the big events, as Lavinia did with her fashions. In some cases, as with Casablanca and Teheran and Shanghai, several years intervened.

Among his colleagues Theodore was jokingly referred to as a black bird of disaster. As soon as he arrived at a legation or consulate, superstitious tongues would start to wag—something would happen there in a year or two. Of course such talk was trifling stuff. Still, there was that feeling. Where Theodore Simes went, there went destiny.

Of course they might just as well have said—where Lavinia Simes went, there went destiny. But people didn't think of Lavinia that way. They just accepted her as "that delightful man's daughter."

However, with their arrival in Vienna late in '37, Lavinia ceased to play quite such a passive part. She began to get her share of the spotlight in a most unhappy way—her singular series of ill-starred courtships, tragically reproducing the pattern of the Conners Maytal episode.

First, it seems, there was Fritz Nordenfelt, a young Austrian official. They had not announced a formal engagement but there was no doubt of the degree to which he was enchanted by his Corn Belt siren. He disappeared shortly after the Anschluss.

Then there was Elliot Davies, an American attache at Prague. He died unromantically of a blood infection.

Next came a young Englishman named Clive Maybrick, a Londoner. He fell into an unguarded bomb crater during the blackout, cut his throat on some torn ironwork and bled to death.

Then there was René Coulet, Vichy, killed in a train wreck. And then—oh, there were a couple of others, both of them Americans. One of them, serving in the army in Italy, was run over by a truck miles behind the lines.

Accidents, all. No hints of a "mysterious danger" as with Conners Maytal—at least none that I heard about.

Except perhaps in the case of Davies. I spoke with someone who visited him before he died. Tossing on his Prague hospital bed, he kept talking about something "weird and horrible" that had come into his life, something that made the world seem like a "madhouse at the mercy of an insane doctor." But with Hitler striding up and down the boundaries of the Sudetenland, snarling and lashing his arms, that wasn't an unreasonable remark.

So much I got from Mrs. Grotius and my other gossips. The Simes eventually came home and I bumped into Lavinia in the Loop in October, '47, and five days later we were engaged to be married.

Sudden? Of course. But there were reasons for that. I'd just quit my government job. I was sick to death for a breath of old times, when we had been dreamy and fresh-spirited and at least thought ourselves honorable.

I felt that there wasn't a solitary person whose feelings hadn't been shriveled and coarsened by the enlightening horrors of war. I agree, we're probably more honest today and maybe even a bit more considerate in a rough and ready way—but we have lost something.

**W**ELL, Lavinia was a breath of the old times and a lot more besides. It sounds silly when you say a person hasn't changed a bit, because of course they always have. But applied to Lavinia it really meant something.

In the hustling, stop-light-ignoring Boul Mich crowd, a black sleeve brushed my elbow and a clear voice said, "Why, hello, Ken!" and I turned and got that fresh-from-the-prairie smile and was looking into those misty eyes.

A moment later we were talking about the last thing we'd discussed at the Grotius party in '37, which was Elizabethan music, and moments after that were walking arm in arm, with Lavinia taking those long strides that are faintly ungainly but graceful—you see what I mean?

Not that ten years of globe-circling hadn't left their mark on Lavinia. You felt that she had become a very wise person with all sorts of unknown mystical depths. You felt, possibly because you'd heard of those ill-starred courtships, an aura of romantic melancholy around her. You felt, almost, a touch of something dark and frightening.

But the important thing was that her inmost self seemed unchanged. Her experiences were like some gorgeous garment she wore, enhancing her glamour, some beautifully embroidered and bediamonded black cloak that she could wrap around her or throw off at will. Inside she would still be fresh, innocent, untouched.

I believe that's true in a very literal sense. I mean, I think that Lavinia was and still is a virgin, though it hasn't made her sharp or antagonistic or given her a peaked look and a host of vague ailments or had any of the other common side effects.

I don't say that solely because of the touch of Midwestern puritanism clinging to her or because she always put a stop to our petting before it had advanced beyond a mild stage. No, there was more to it than that. I think she stayed a virgin, not only because it was the safe and proper thing but because she *needed* to be a virgin.

You know, there were pagan priestesses who stayed virgins, not because of any notion that sex is sinful but solely because they believed that sex weakens the special spiritual powers needed by anyone in communication with those awful influences beyond the world.

To be frank I think a lot more than that. I think that underneath Lavinia liked to tease men. I think she fed on their unsatisfied desire. I think she *got something* out of Connors Maytal and Fritz Nordenfelt and then after she had fed— But I mustn't let my emotions get out of hand.

Well, as I said, after five days we became engaged. And right away the incidents began—the slips—leading up to the frightening affair of the spiked punch at the Grotius party and its horri-

fyng aftermath the next day.

The early slips didn't amount to much. I think the first occurred about two days after we became engaged.

We were alone in the living room of the Simes apartment. We'd been talking about our own future but the conversation had drifted around to politics—Lavinia is a liberal and she was going on at a great rate. I was a darn sight more interested in Lavinia than in any political theory ever conceived and there came a point where I stopped listening very hard to what those desirable lips were saying.

Suddenly the words, "March 1952," hit my ear.

I must have reacted visibly for she broke off at once. She looked at me frightenedly. Then, "Oh Ken, I shouldn't have said that."

"Said what?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear?"

"I heard you say, 'March 1952.' What did you mean?"

"Yes but what I said right before that—you heard, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I didn't," I admitted a little embarrassedly. "I was looking at you and thinking how nice it would be to kiss you and— What was it anyhow?"

"Oh, I'm so glad," she said, putting her hands on my shoulders and granting my desire.

I forgot all about March 1952.

**B**UT now I remember it. When that month rolls around I'll be watching the headlines and the undercurrents. Though I don't know how I'll be able to be certain it was her doing. Still, there may be a sign.

The other slips were mostly like that one. None of them made much conscious impression on me. Not even enough to make me think back to the telepathy test and the atom symbol and the other one. But just the same the slips were getting in their subconscious work. Deep in my mind an uneasiness was building, building—toward the night of the Grotius party.

How Lavinia and I were spending our time those days has an important bear-

ing on what happened. I was carrying out a long-postponed project of mine—to really see Chicago. Not the nightclubs and theatres, not even especially the parks and museums, but the solidier stuff.

I have a positive passion for the inner workings of cities. I like to see with my own eyes how the vast supplies of food and fuel come in, where the work comes from, where the brain is, how things are moved around—the railroad yards, the warehouses, the wholesale markets, the grubby side-tentacles of the transportation systems, the courts and jails, things like that.

I like to be able to picture a city as a huge steel and stone creature, with people for blood, a creature that breathes and feeds, digests the useful, rejects the useless, builds up protections against foreign bodies.

**L**AVINIA took to my project enthusiastically and of course having her alone made it a delightful adventure.

This particular afternoon we'd spent doing Maxwell Street, where the hawkers' stands fill the space normally reserved for parked automobiles. For the next morning we had a somewhat different expedition planned, a little farther south. In between them came the Grotius party.

Let me say at the beginning that it was never discovered who spiked the punch and I don't think it matters. Except that they did an expert job, probably with vodka and orange curacao and extra fruit juice. What matters is that it was the first time in her life Lavinia got drunk.

It was a big party.

Everyone of consequence in Mrs. Grotius' circle was there except Lavinia's father. The arts, journalism and bureaucracy were particularly well represented. You could find all shades and degrees of political opinion, for Mrs. Grotius' contacts cut across ordinary lines of demarcation.

For instance, there were the prominent fellow-traveler Harry Parks and also Howard Fitch, editorial writer for

our well-known isolationist paper. There were Bella McCluskey, the sculptress with the "live by the instincts" theories and also Leslie Vail Packard, whose novels are among the more artistic bulwarks of capitalism and propriety.

At first it was a very good party. The unchanging but ever-renewed pearlgray of the furnishings brought me memories of less nervous years. The inevitable political discussions got underway but due to the unsuspected effects of the punch, they were more exciting than usual and, at first, very good-tempered. For instance Fitch and Parks staged a genial and heart-to-heart talk which everyone appreciated hugely.

Lavinia was her usual well-poised unobtrusive self—I suppose a diplomat's daughter learns early to act that way. She wore a black satin evening gown that was attractive but, as always, subtly "wrong." And that rarity—black silk stockings.

But gradually I became aware of a change in her behavior. She was talking a lot more, to a lot more people than usual, and in an oddly confidential way. She'd link onto someone and draw him aside.

You'd see her eager, intent face and the bobbing head of her companion as they nodded agreement.

I'd give a good deal to know what she said at those times. I asked Leslie Packard about it afterwards. I can't ask most of the others because I don't know them well enough or else they've cut me on account of my behavior toward Lavinia.

Leslie was puzzled at first but then he said, "By George, I believe you're right. I seem to remember that she did say something to me, something that exploded in my brain and left me with the nasty feeling of having been cut loose from my moorings. But I can't remember what it was. I just can't recall." And for a moment he looked at me with an expression of genuine fear.

I wish he *could* recall because it might give me the clue to things Lavinia said to me that night, things that I too have forgotten. But it's probably safer as it is.



WHATEVER the things were they had their effect. For the party suddenly turned nasty. Of course it was the political arguments, become personal and carried to unwise lengths, that were responsible. But it was more than that, for they weren't the political arguments of 1949.

You've read stories of time-travel? Well, this was as if our minds and emotions were time-traveling into the future, living over in one night all the strife and turmoil and suffering of the next ten years. We were adjusting ourselves in instants to new ideas and loyalties that ordinarily we'd have spent months assimilating.

It was as if there were a "wine of life" that is doled out to mankind drop by drop and we had somehow broken open the barrels and were swilling down great bumpers of it.

We acted as if we were choosing sides for some bitter social conflict that is to come. I'll have to call the two sides "reactionary" and "radical" but they weren't reactionary or radical in exactly the sense of those terms today. Because, you see, we were reacting to events that haven't happened yet, to ideas unborn.

This was frighteningly apparent in the way we lined up, for few of us picked the side you'd have expected. I, for instance, found myself among the "reactionaries." Bella McCluskey, looking blank and frightened, joined us.

Leslie Packard, his face suddenly losing its bland expression and setting in sardonic lines, was against us. So, amazingly, was Mrs. Grotius. Red-faced and shouting, her gray silk dress flapping, she looked like an enraged lovebird.

We were only vaguely aware of where we were heading. Actually, and incredible as it may seem, we were preparing, then and there in that pearl-cool apartment, to fight the great war or revolution or counter-revolution or whatever it is that is to come in—Lord, if I could name the year!

I hate to think of that conflict because it isn't going to be nice. Yet I can't tell you a solitary thing about the grounds on which it's going to be fought except

—yes—I think it will have something to do with that split-earth symbol.

Of course we were all of us getting drunk without knowing it, but that isn't enough to explain what was happening, not nearly enough.

We were no longer arguing, we were spitting personalities and accusations and threats. Harry Park's face was grim, his eyes were glassy. Howard Fitch's underlip jutted out with sulky viciousness. Along with the incessant shouldering and back-turning and snatching of drinks, there was an ominous feeling of gathering forces.

It seems to me that the lights grew dim and there was a reddish glow from somewhere but that must have been an illusion. And everywhere went Lavinia, slipping from one person to another, whispering, hinting, inciting—I think.

At last the fighting started—yes, actual fighting, though it was hushed up afterwards. The punchbowl was upset and smashed, the strangely dimmed chandelier was swinging—something must have hit it—and Parks had his fingers around Fitch's throat and Fitch was beating at Park's face with ineffectual fists. A minute more—

But then, in an instant, the atmosphere broke. Rage fled. The cloud of the future vanished as if it had never been. We were left staring at each other, dumbfounded.

And then, before Fitch's giggle broke the silence, I became aware of another noise, a muffled gasping that came in gargling rushes of sound. I ran down the hall. Lavinia was on her knees in the bathroom, being sick. Mrs. Grotius had her by the shoulders and was shaking her and saying in a low, intense voice, "You little—*witch!* You little—*witch!*"

I think that Mrs. Grotius, who could never possibly lose the last shreds of her propriety, was using the word as a substitute for another stronger word. Involuntarily she probably used the right one.

I pulled Mrs. Grotius away and held Lavinia's head. As soon as she realized who it was she began to gasp, "Oh Ken, take me home, take me home!"

Before the others had begun to recover from their stupefaction we were outside. I still have a vivid picture of those little broken groups, eyeing each other incredulously, trying to talk.

**D**RIVING home, Lavinia leaned on my shoulder and kept babbling, "Oh Ken, what happened? Oh Ken, I was drunk. What did I say, Ken? What did I do? Oh, I'm frightened. I mustn't ever let that happen again, Ken, I mustn't."

"I let myself go and I'm frightened. I said things I shouldn't have said. What did I say, Ken, what did I say? Whom did I talk to? What did I tell them? What did they say I'd said? What did I say, Ken, what did I say?"

About that time it occurred to me what must have been done to the punch. When I got Lavinia home and Theodore answered the door I explained to him what had happened and how he could check my story. He seemed startled but his usual poise asserted itself as he took charge of the business of getting Lavinia to bed.

Next morning I drove around reluctantly to their apartment, very doubtful as to whether Lavinia and I would go on any expedition at all, certainly not the inappropriate one we had scheduled. But to my surprise Lavinia was dressed and waiting when I came. She looked hardly the worse for the night before and wouldn't hear of any change in our plans. I yielded to her, though I didn't have much stomach for the business myself.

Of course, as you'll understand, it was a great deal more than a hangover I was feeling. A lot of things had been fitting themselves together in my subconscious mind and last night had provided the keystone. I was aware of a mounting feeling of distaste and fear, was almost aware that the distaste and fear were directed at Lavinia.

My war nerves had come back and with them my gloomiest ideas about mankind's mindless stampede toward doom. Last night's scene had been such a terrifying hope-shattering allegory. And below the surface of my conscious mind

was a black theory or rather a dark philosophy of life that deals an almost permanently crushing blow to any notion of freedom or joy or good in the universe.

As if to provide the sharpest possible contrast to my mood the weather was wonderful. It was one of those matchless balmy days that come once or twice a year in Chicago. Despite her black linen dress Lavinia managed to look very cool and airy. Her skin was creamy, her hair was sleek, her eyes were bright.

We arrived at our destination. I parked the car and soon we had joined a small group making the tour. With my queasy stomach I found it rough going, particularly the omnipresent sweetish odor. I would have liked very much to turn back.

But not Lavinia. She looked in the best sort of humor, fairly blooming, as if what we were seeing were giving her the finest sort of appetite for lunch. I'd never seen her drink in everything with such eager schoolgirlish eyes. Her fresh-from-the-prairie look was particularly noticeable this morning, which in a way was highly appropriate.

We finally halted on a raised platform and the guide started an explanation. I felt a wave of nausea and gripped the rail, looking down.

Some distance below and beyond us a narrow, wooden-walled runway led up toward a dark door. The guide's voice droned in my ear. Then a low thundering sound began, like a lot of people crossing a wooden bridge.

The guide was saying, ". . . and then they're struck on the head. It's painless. They drop through a trap door onto a moving belt. Before they regain consciousness, the spinal cord has been pierced. Then the belt takes them . . ."

I swayed dizzily, gripping the railing. But now, instead of physical sickness it was a spiritual nausea that gripped me. It seemed to me, as I stared down unwillingly, that the wooden-walled runway was life and that the creatures pressing up it were mankind, that the dark door was war, destruction and death. They were all white, those crea-

tures, but my swimming eyes seemed to make out a black shadow ahead of them.

I couldn't get things straight. I kept looking beside me at Lavinia as she peered down with interest, so fresh in her black linen dress, her skin so creamy-cool, just the tiniest beads of perspiration dewing the powder on her upper lip.

And as I looked at her an unbearable horror would seize me and I would look down at the runway again and another kind of horror would catch hold of me. In my confused mental state it seemed to me unendurable that such a thing as I was witnessing should be—that mankind should go crowding up to the dark door and no man sane enough to call a halt, but everyone mindlessly following, following.

And because of this feeling I asked the guide a question. And because of his answer I turned and walked away from Lavinia Simes without any explanation and have refused to see her ever again.

They say she's gone away with her father once more. The Simes are always on the move, you know. Maybe to Buenos Aires, maybe to Moscow, to Calcutta, Tel Aviv or some less likely place. I don't know nor do I want to know. It would just give me one more thing to worry about.

I don't really think I'm safe, you see. I broke off the engagement but still I

know too much. No one is safe, who suspects as much as I do.

I wonder how it will come to me when it comes. Will it be the earth rushing up through the fog to crush me—I travel quite a bit by plane—or will it just be a slip on the stairs—and will I see it before I see what's waiting in the dark for all mankind?

As I said, I'd just mumbled a question to the guide and his reply came to my buzzing ears indistinctly, as if from a great distance.

"Oh no, sir, they wouldn't go so easily if we just herded 'em along. In fact, there'd be quite a to-do. Sheep have more brains than most people think and I bet some of them would guess pretty well what was coming.

"But we have a little trick that makes 'em trot along as nice as pie. We have one animal that we've trained to walk up that runway. It's taken out of line at the last second and given a reward, so there's never any doubt of it going up the runway. And then, of course, all the rest follow.

"There, you can see it there, sir, just going through the door.

"We have it a different color so there won't be any chance of it getting destroyed by mistake. Most other slaughter houses do the same. They use a black ewe."