

like sugar into their tea. In their little lighted hutches they sat nibbling, nibbling, staring at each other without expression. They came and went: to whom had they been sold? Out of the hutch into the hamper. Over the cup's rim she searched for a glint and spark in the eyes, the hidden independence, for a sign that from under one of those table-cloths might resound a muffled thud. The spark was

there, very dim.

She lingered until the tea-bag squeezed out its last potion of pale alfalfa-water. Was it still snowing out? "And miles to go before I sleep. . ." trickled through her mind as she rose, threw on her coat, obeying an impulse to be gone at once to reunion with the Belgian hare that waited in the car. "And miles to go before I sleep."

## The Locks

ALLYN WOOD

"Little Jason, you run out now. I got house-cleaning to do, and then I got a little boy to clean up, for tomorrow you begin going to school, little Jason!"

He came out into the sun. Spice of wood-dust hung over the line of shanties following the canal; it was the dust of their houses baking on the bare packed bank that scarcely lifted above the water waiting passively behind the bridge. Sometimes little clapping water-hands beat against the iron doors of the locks beneath the bridge, beat against the concrete sides of the bridge, beat, clapped, despaired, and fell. Brown and oily and dusty, the water lay with a strange subservient beauty behind the locks, moving round and round ever so slowly, as if it must remember motion while it waited.

Children were playing not far off, but Jason preferred to lie alone and watch the locks. He looked across to the other bank, which rose steeper to a strip where chicory and smoke-stacks loomed equal against a flat sky without perspective. Somewhere beyond was school: tomorrow he would cross the bridge, crack the sky like an eggshell, and learn everything that people

knew. He wondered if water were not piling up behind the locks as he watched, until one day it would *have* to overflow, and the locks would *have* to open. He thought of a great Being looking down on them, waiting until a momentous instant to open the locks. Perhaps when he crossed the bridge tomorrow, going to school . . . From one of the houses, old, old Mrs. Swink emerged with her basket of washing and began to hang it, jerking up and down on malnourished bones. How many times had they opened in her life? He knew because he had asked her, and she had said "Many, many times." He could hear the iron doors grating open to receive Mrs. Swink gliding through again and again, never different. Mrs. Swink was time, like the sun and the clock and the factory-shrill; she had turned mauve with time, like an ancient bottle.

In the warm afternoon, the locks remained inexorably cold, in shadow. A fishy exhalation spread, chilling Jason and disturbing a memory from his own short life. All the women from the shanties clustered in the wind—strange calyx of patterned aprons—in attitudes of cold and

fear and protection; and as a winter night drew down, the old men and children built a huge bonfire on the barren ground, to warm the others in the boats who were dredging for Mr. Kindred. Mrs. Kindred stood very still in the women's midst; all she said was, "He told me he was going to fish from the bridge. He told me . . ." which she said so often that gradually her voice became filamentous, and a sigh and shiver went through the others like wind through winter weeds. Everyone knew that he had slid deliberately into the water; yet it was scarcely breathed, for had not the tragedy imposed a special silence on them all? His family needed the insurance money, small as it was, more than he had thought it needed him. Little Jason did not quite understand.

That day the Great Being had opened

the locks; the pent water rushed noiselessly on; Mr. Kindred was never found.

Jason rose and began to collect pebbles. He would take them to Uncle Job who called them "min'rils." Uncle Job always said, "Look here now! You been picking up quartz again. Don't you know that's the commonest min'ril in the world? But you're right, too, little Jason, it's not less beautiful for being common." He stuffed his pockets with warm crystals and pieces marbled brown and pink. He did not see his mother come out on the porch behind him. For a moment she seemed to lean against the last sunlight, resting her arms; then she called

"Little Jason, come here! Time to clean you up!"

He broke into a wide smile. Tomorrow he would cross the bridge over the locks alone, going to school.