

A Half-Spread Wing

ALLYN WOOD

Sunday. Breakfast and lunch eaten; a magazine read; the apartment tidied, as a man alone does it, with deliberate delicacy. There is something exotic in his movement, and about the room, which is produced by the placing of ordinary things; and everywhere is evidence of a long and careful striving for homeyness as a spiritual ideal. Where eyes have met the lonely space of walls, pictures hang — but do not look at them: he seldom does. Squares and rectangles become companionable, and being so familiar, are scarcely seen, their purpose forgotten. So that when he desires space, with an intensity too large for the apartment, he never takes them down. The window is another rectangle, a picture of space.

Dust-cloth in hand, he pauses at the window reflectively — tall and thin, a Pierrot in a business suit — watching from that high vantage the lights going on over the city, the arches of foggy globes, banding a hidden river, illumine hesitantly as if regretting to dispel the color of silence. He thinks — does not one always think, then? His face is uninterpretable; in his eyes alone is a constant flickering of shade and sharpness.

Since it is only the beginning of the long purple-wash of evening in spring, he decides to go for a walk by the river. Putting on his coat and scarf before the mirror, he takes the elevator and descends into the evening. For a while the river is out of sight. Breeze and silk ripple about his neck; an exciting passivity entralls him. The earth heaves and breathes beside the pavement — odors climb the air with curling tendrils. He would like a spaniel to accompany him,

but nothing alive is allowed in the apartment; and the honey-colored spaniel that he had kept in the basement a while, disappeared, depriving him — as it caused such need — of a confidant.

His steps lengthen as he approaches the river, appreciatively sniffing. Crowds of shining globules rush over the bridges and fan out into the boulevards; below, the river reflects, but keeps its secrets submerged. He follows a path, studying that strip of bank below the concrete where a primordial domesticity continues unconscious of its restrictions; his eyes invade the burrows like ferrets and linger curiously, softening, until they part with the suggestion of a comradely nod.

A ripple advances downstreamward. "Quack-quack! Quack-quack!" he calls eagerly, and the ripple swerves toward the bank; the ducks approach, dribbling their bills. But night rises from the river. Downstream a single quack summons the flock; effortlessly they swerve outward. He watches their quicksilver wake, a long furrowed V whose edges roll inward to make the river whole, and he thinks,

"There are no foxes here, no predators."

Smiling, his mind tucks in the ducks with grass and reeds; his ears pick up the muted fluster of others gathering to rest; yet his scouting eyes stare sharply below him, toward a half-spread wing and little heap of feathers. In the night breeze the wing rocks and shivers as if a lonely life were in it. Still the ducks downstream are gathering. He remains a moment, his long length rocking gently in unison, only his eyes pained — then turns toward home.