It's Snowing

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An icy wind lashed down from the north, snarling at the city. During most of the night it continued, and people winced under the frosty whip, while they offered platitudes concerning winter and its early arrival. Shortly after midnight however, the gale subsided. Huge clouds rolled in over the fields and streets and houses, obscuring the stars and bringing the first snow of the season. Silently and steadily it fell, as window-panes and street lamps became fuzzy with the clinging white flakes. Trees and buildings exchanged sharp outlines for blurred shadows, and the snow-covered bushes faded into the snow-covered ground, neither discernible from the other.

Then there were those who watched the first snow fall . . . .

"You certainly deserve a lot of credit," Nancy's face was flushed with anger, and her voice was indignant. "I work — I earn the money, and that, I presume, is the manner in which most families are conducted, while you spend the day and the money with that woman." At the words "that woman" Nancy turned and faced her husband. "And today I find her here," she continued. "Well, I'm through. I'm leaving." Of course, now he would protest and beg forgiveness. But he did not speak. Even his eyes were cool and still. Then this was it. Very well, she would go through with it. Walking over to her dresser, she jerked open the drawer and scratched among its contents before she removed a few things which she put in a small valise. As she reached the door on her way out, she heard a slight laugh. "What's that?" she flung the question at him. There was no answer, but as she closed the door, she heard it again — a soft insolent laugh.

"Here is just the room for Madame," said the waiter crisply, as he prodded the keyhole with a bunch of keys, found the correct one, opened the darkly-painted door, and stood aside to let Nancy pass. They entered, and he stepped to the window, flinging it wide. The night air rushed in, tumbling over the sill, down the window-ledge, and across the floor.

It was a small room. A greyish rug covered the wooden floor, and on it stood a battered table, the top of which was bare. Next to the mirror over the washstand was pinned a list of Air Raid Regulations, and on the west wall hung a picture of a sailing vessel tossing in a turbulent sea.

Nancy crossed to the window and looked out over the alley, and her eyes came against the back of another building, and through its windows she saw other rooms which were also alien to her.

"This is just the room for Madame," the waiter repeated as though the architect had designed it knowing that Nancy would seek it out and rent it.

"All right," she consented. Then with a tightening sensation in her throat, "I may be here for some time."

"Excellent," the waiter beamed. "I shall have Madame's bag sent up instantly," and he glided toward the door, pausing on the threshold to exclaim, "I know Madame will find her new home irresistible." Then he was gone.

In the mirror Nancy caught the reflection of a frightened face. It too seemed unfamiliar and unfriendly. Her thoughts dropped into a cold darkness which left her mind numb and her hands icy. She moved to the window and noticed absentlv
that it was snowing. The flakes were fall- ing crazily. No pattern, no purpose, she thought. Then she looked down at the alley. The snow was beginning to melt, and the traffic which passed there was crumbling the fresh whiteness into dirty slush.

There came a bang at the door, followed by the waiter with her valise. “It’s snowing,” he announced in the voice of one who foretells great events.

For a long time she did not answer, then, as if she were seeing it for the first time, Nancy said, “Yes, it’s snowing.”

From the dimly lighted room smoke rose in blue spirals. Cheap liquor was abundantly enjoyed, and the tune of “Moonlight Cocktail” could scarcely be heard above the noisy crowd which squeezed back and forth between the red and white topped tables of Van and Eddy’s.

At one of these tables sat Tony. People who passed him noticed merely that he was alone and that he was a tall young man with a dark face and darker hair. They did not see his eyes which were slightly slanted and narrowed as though there were something which he could not quite distinguish. They did not see his hands which gripped the edge of the table until the knuckles were white, nor his feet which restlessly kicked the legs of his chair. Tony was waiting, and this was unusual. As a rule those who knew him did not care to excite his impatience.

A boy entered Van and Eddy’s. He wasn’t more than eighteen, and obviously he was nervous and ill at ease. Seeing Tony, he made his way through the crowd, stopped at Tony’s table.

“Why are you late?” It was a simple question calmly asked. The boy relaxed. Then Tony wasn’t angry. He had expected almost anything from the things he had heard.

“I ran into a little trouble.”

“But you have the money,” again the voice was quiet and controlled.

“Well,” the boy began.

“Well, you see, when I got there the old boy was in his store. I told him we’d have to have the money tonight, but he said his business had been bad and asked me if I couldn’t wait just a week. I explained about the protection we were giving him and what might happen to his shop if he didn’t pay. But he said he didn’t have it. He was pretty old too, and I — I didn’t want to hurt him.”

“That’s all right, Kid.” Tony smiled. “I guess we can do without his “contribution” for awhile.”

“Then you aren’t angry?” the boy looked at Tony with infinite relief.

“Of course not.” Tony’s voice was like satin. “Won’t you join me in a drink?”

“No, thanks. I better be on my way. My old man starts askin’ questions if I’m too late.”

“That would be swell.”

Tony got up, found his coat, and they started out.

“Sure you won’t change your mind and have a drink?” Tony asked, as they passed the bar.

“I have to get home.”

The night air was cold, and it had begun to snow. Great flakes sifted down softly and stuck to their faces.

“Gee, I like snow!” the boy exclaimed happily.

Tony did not answer, but he smiled. His finger curled around the trigger of his automatic, and the explosion was like a snap in the crisp wind.

The boy turned as he was hit and look-
ed at Tony. With a surprised expression and as though he were about to say something, he fell into the soft snow.

Tony took the empty shell from his gun, tossed it aside and returned the pistol to the inside pocket of his coat. Then he walked swiftly back to Van and Eddy's. He stopped at the bar and ordered a bourbon and soda.

“What’s the weather doing?” asked the bartender.

“It’s snowing,” replied Tony, and his voice was calm and controlled.

As the ivory door-knob was turned, the white panelled door swung open, and a thin beam of light from the hall slipped into the long dark room. Softly it played upon the crystal chandelier. It glided along the silver candelabra which stood tall and fragile at either end of the walnut console table, and came to rest on the long narrow mirrors which hung on one side of pink panelled walls.

Paula Lord entered her apartment, and snapped on the light switch. Her long blonde hair was disarranged, and the bottom to her white chiffon evening gown was stained with mud.

“Lucile,” she called impatiently.

No response. “Damn,” she said in an anguished tone. You pay twenty-five a week for a French maid, and she disappears at a crucial moment. I suppose that’s life, she thought, and she kicked one white satin slipper across the thickly carpeted floor.

There was a knock at her door. “Yes,” she called.

“Did you want me, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, Lucile, see what you can do about this gown. Some fool splashed me with mud as I was on the way in.”

“Very well. Did Mademoiselle enjoy herself at the ball?”

“Oh, it was rather dull, but the President’s Ball always is,” and Paula turned to arrange her hair in the mirror over her dressing-table. As she looked closely, she could see the small lines beginning to show around her eyes and mouth. That’s not age, she thought, that’s mileage, and suddenly she said, “I think that I shall go south next month. Nassau should be gay this season.”

Washington and winter slipped away, and Paula stood upon a moonlit beach. The water was soft and silvery as it lapped the shore in tiny waves. Music drifted to her from the club where people sat sipping rum punches, people who were tanned and young and laughing. Here in the moonlight no one could see the lines around her eyes and mouth. Soon she would return to the club, and she would be laughing too...

“Look, Mademoiselle, it’s snowing.” The maid’s voice was like a knife which cut Paula from her dream.

Paula turned angrily toward the window. So what? she thought, but she said simply, “Yes, I see. It’s snowing.”