BETWEEN THREE AND FOUR

This happened nowadays, with everyone somewhat discouraged. A lot of less fortunate spirits cracked when money troubles came to be added to all the nervous troubles accumulated in the prosperity—neurosis being a privilege of people with a lot of extra money. And some cracked merely because it was in the air, or because they were used to the great, golden figure of plenty standing behind them, as the idea of prudence and glory stands behind the French, and the idea of "the thing to do" used to stand behind the English. Almost everyone cracked a little.

Howard Butler had never believed in anything, including himself, except the system, and had not believed in that with the intensity of men who were its products or its prophets. He was a quiet, introverted man, not at all brave or resilient and, except in one regard, with no particular harm in him. He thought a lot without much apparatus for thinking, and in normal circumstances one would not expect him to fly very high or sink very low. Nevertheless, he had a vision, which is the matter of this story.

Howard Butler stood in his office on the ninth floor of a building in New York, deciding something. It was a branch and a showroom of B. B. Eddington's Sons, office furniture and supplies, of which he was a branch manager—a perfect office ceremoniously equipped throughout, though now a little empty because of the decreased personnel due to hard times. Miss Wiess had just telephoned the name of an unwelcome caller, and he was deciding whether he hadn't just as well see the person now—it was a question of sooner or later. Mrs. Summer was to be shown in.

Mrs. Summer did not need to be shown in, since she had worked there for eight years, up until six months ago. She was a handsome and vital lady in her late forties, with golden-greyish hair, a stylish-stout figure with a reminiscent touch of the Gibson Girl bend to it, and fine young eyes of bright blue. To Howard Butler she was

still as vivid a figure as when, as Sarah Belknap, she had declined to marry him nearly thirty years ago—with the essential difference that he hated her.

She came into his private office with an alert way she had and, in a clear, compelling voice that always affected him, said, "Hello, Howard," as if, without especially liking him, she didn't object to him at all. This time there was just a touch of strain in her manner.

"Hello, Sarah."

"Well," she breathed. "It's very strange to be back here. Tell me you've got a place for me."

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Things don't pick up."

"H'm." She nodded and blinked several times.

"Cancellations, bad debts—we've closed two branches and there've been more pay cuts since you left. I've had to take one."

"Oh, I wouldn't expect the salary I used to get. I realize how things are. But, literally, I can't find anything. I thought, perhaps, there might be an opening say as office manager or head stenographer, with full responsibility. I'd be very glad of fifty dollars a week."

"We're not paying anything like that."

"Or forty-five. Or even forty. I had a chance at twenty-five when I first left here and, like an idiot, I let it go. It seemed absurd after what I'd been getting—I couldn't keep Jack at Princeton on that. Of course, he's partly earning his way, but even in the colleges the competition is pretty fierce now—so many boys need money. Anyhow, last week I went back and tried to get the job at twenty-five, and they just laughed at me." Mrs. Summer smiled grimly, but with full control over herself—yet she could only hold the smile a minute and she talked on to conceal its disappearance: "I've been eating at the soup-kitchens to save what little I've got left. When I think that a woman of my capacity— That's not conceit, Howard; you know I've got capacity. Mr. Eddington always thought so. I never quite understood—"

"It's tough, Sarah," he said quickly. He looked at her shoes—they were still good shoes—on top anyhow. She had always been well turned out.

"If I had left earlier, if I'd been let out before the worst times came, I could have placed myself—but when I started hunting, everyone had got panicky."

"We had to let Muller go too."

"Oh, you did," she said, with interest; the news restored her a measure of self-respect.

"A week ago."

Six months before, the choice had been between Mr. Muller and Mrs. Summer, and Sarah Summer knew, and Howard Butler knew that she knew, that he had made a ticklish decision. He had satisfied an old personal grudge by keeping Muller, who was a young man, clearly less competent and less useful to the firm than Mrs. Summer, and who received the same salary.

Now they stared at each other—she trying to fix on him, to pin him down, to budge him—he trying to avoid her, and succeeding, but only by retreating into recently hollowed out cavities in his soul, but safe cavities, from which he could even regard her plight with a certain satisfaction. Yet he was afraid of what he had done—he was trying to be hard, but in her actual presence the sophistries he had evolved did not help him.

"Howard, you've got to give me a job," she broke out. "Anything—thirty dollars, twenty-five dollars. I'm desperate. I haven't thirty dollars left. I've got to get Jack through this year—his junior year. He wants to be a doctor. He thinks he can hold out till June on his own, but someone drove him down to New York on Washington's Birthday, and he saw the way I was living. I tried to lie to him, but he guessed, and now he says he's going to quit and get a job. Howard, I'd rather be dead than stand in his way. I've been thinking of nothing else for a week. I'd better be dead. After all, I've had my life—and a lot of happiness."

For an instant Butler wavered. It could be done, but the phrase "a lot of happiness" hardened him, and he told himself how her presence in the office now would be a continual reproach.

. . . Thirty years ago, on the porch of a gabled house in Rochester, he had sat in misery while John Summer and Sarah Belknap had told him moonily about their happiness. "I wanted you to be the first to

know, Howard," Sarah had said. Butler had blundered into it that evening, bringing flowers and a new offer of his heart; then he was suddenly made aware that things were changed, that he wasn't very alive for either of them. Later, something she had said was quoted or misquoted to him—that if John Summer had not come along, she'd have been condemned to marry Howard Butler.

. . . Years later he had walked into the office one morning to find her his subordinate. This time there was something menacing and repellent in his wooing, and she had put a stop to it immediately, definitely and finally. Then, for eight years, Butler had suffered her presence in the office, drying out in the sunshine of her vitality, growing bitter in the shadow of her indifference; aware that, despite her widowhood, her life was more complete than his . . .

"I can't do it," he said, as if regretfully. "Things are stripped to the bone here. There's no one you could displace. Miss Wiess has been here twelve years."

"I wonder if it would do any good to talk to Mr. Eddington."

"He's not in New York, and it wouldn't do any good."

She was beaten, but she went on evenly, "Is there any likelihood of a change, in the next month, say?"

Butler shrugged his shoulders. "How does anybody know when business will pick up? I'll keep you in mind if anything turns up." Then he added, in a surge of weakness: "Come back in a week or so, some afternoon between three and four."

Mrs. Summer got up—she looked older than when she had come into the office.

"I'll come back then." She stood twisting her gloves, and her eyes seemed to stare out into more space than the office enclosed. "If you haven't anything for me then, I'll probably just—quit permanently."

She walked quickly to the window, and he half rose from his chair.

"Nine floors is a nice height," she remarked. "You could think things out one more time on the way down."

"Oh, don't talk that way. You'll get a break any day now."

"Business Woman Leaps Nine Floors to Death," said Mrs. Summer, her eyes still fixed out the window. She sighed in a long, frightened breath, and turned toward the door.

"Good-bye, Howard. If you think things over, you'll see I was right in not even trying to love you. I'll be back some day next week—between three and four."

He thought of offering her five dollars, but that would break down something inside him, so he let her go like that.

II

He saw her through the transparent place where the frosting was rubbed from the glass of his door. She was thinner than she had been last week, and obviously nervous, starting at anyone coming in or going out. Her foot was turned sideways under the chair and he saw where an oval hole was stopped with a piece of white cardboard. When her name was telephoned, he said, "Wait," letting himself be annoyed that she had come slightly before three; but the real cause of his anger lay in the fact that he wasn't up to seeing her again. To postpone his realization of the decision made in his subconscious, he talked several letters into his Dictaphone and held a telephone conversation with the head office. When he had finished, he found it was five minutes to four—he hadn't meant to detain her an hour. He phoned Miss Wiess that he had no news for Mrs. Summer and couldn't see her.

Through the glass he watched her take the news. It seemed to him that she swayed as she got up and stood blinking at Miss Wiess.

"I hope to God she's gone for good," Butler said to himself. "I can't be responsible for everybody out of work in this city. I'd go crazy."

Later he came downstairs into a belt of low, stifling city heat; twice on his way home he stopped at soda fountains for cold drinks. In his apartment he locked the door, as he so often did lately, as if he were raising a barrier against all the anxiety outside. He moved about, putting away some laundry, opening bills, brushing his coat and hanging it up—for he was very neat—and singing to himself:

"*I can't give you anything but love, baby,*
That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby—"

He was tired of the song, but he continually caught himself humming it. Or else he talked to himself, like many men who live alone.

"Now, that's two colored shirts and two white ones. I'll wear this one out first, because it's almost done. Almost done.... Seven, eight, and two in the wash—ten—"

Six o'clock—all the offices were out now, people hurrying out of elevators, swarming down the stairs. But the picture came to Butler tonight with a curious addition; he seemed to see someone climbing up the stairs, too, passing the throng, climbing very slowly and resting momentarily on the landings.

"Oh, what nonsense!" he thought impatiently. "She'd never do it. She was just trying to get my goat."

But he kept on climbing up flights of stairs with her, the rhythm of the climbing as regular and persistent as the beat of fever. He grabbed his hat suddenly and went out to get dinner.

There was a storm coming; the sultry dust rose in swirls along the street. The people on the street seemed a long way removed from him in time and space. It seemed to him that they were all sad, all walking with their eyes fixed on the ground, save for a few who were walking and talking in pairs. These latter seemed absurd, with their obliviousness to the fact that they were making a show of themselves with those who were walking as it was fitting—silent and alone.

But he was glad that the restaurant where he went was full. Sometimes, when he read the newspapers a lot, he felt that he was almost the only man left with enough money to get along with; and it frightened him, because he knew pretty well that he was not much of a man and they might find it out and take his position away from him. Since he was not all right with himself in his private life, he had fallen helplessly into the clutches of the neurosis that gripped the nation, trying to lose sight of his own insufficiencies in the universal depression.

"Don't you like your dinner?" the waitress asked.

"Yes—sure." He began to eat self-consciously.

"Its'a heat. I just seen by the papers another woman threw herself out of a ninth-story window this afternoon."

Butler's fork dropped to the floor.

"Imagine a woman doing that," she went on, as she stooped for the fork. "If I ever wanted to do that, I'd go drown myself."

"What did you say?"

"I say I'd go drown myself. I can't swim anyhow. But I said if—"

"No, before that—about a woman."

"About a woman that threw herself out a ninth-story window. I'll get the paper."

He tried to stop her—he couldn't look at the paper. With trembling fingers he laid a dollar on the table and hurried out of the restaurant.

It couldn't possibly be her, because he had seen her at four, and it was now only twenty after seven. Three hours. A newsstand drifted up to him, piled with late editions. Forming the sound of "*Agh*" in his throat, he hurried past, hurried on, into exile.

He had better look. It couldn't be Sarah.

But he knew it was Sarah.

BUSINESS WOMAN, DISPIRITED, LEAPS NINE FLOORS TO DEATH

He passed another newsstand and, turning into Fifth Avenue, walked north. The rain began in large drops that sent up whiffs of dust, and Butler, looking at the crawling sidewalk, suddenly stopped, unable to go forward or to retrace his steps.

"I'll have to get a paper," he muttered. "Otherwise I won't sleep."

He walked to Madison Avenue and found a newsstand; his hand felt over the stacked papers and picked up one of each; he did not look at them, but folded them under his arm. He heard the rain falling on them in crisp pats, and then more softly, as if it was shredding them away. When he reached his door, he suddenly flung the soggy bundle down a basement entrance and hurried inside. Better wait till morning.

He undressed excitedly, as if he hadn't a minute to lose. "It's probably not her," he kept repeating aloud. "And if it is, what did I have to do with it? I can't be responsible for everybody out of work in this city." With the help of this phrase and a hot double gin, he fell into a broken sleep.

He awoke at five, after a dream which left him shaken with its reality. In the dream he was talking to Sarah Belknap again.

She lay in a hammock on a porch, young once more, and with a childish wistfulness. But she knew what was going to happen to her presently—she was going to be thrown from a high place and be broken and dead. Butler wanted to help her—tears were running out of his eyes and he was wringing his hands—but there was nothing he could do now; it was too late. She did not say that it was all his fault, but her eyes, grieving silently and helplessly about what was going to happen, reproached him for not having prevented it.

The sound that had awakened him was the plop of his morning paper against the door. The resurgent dream, heartbreaking and ominous, sank back into the depths from which it came, leaving him empty; and now his consciousness began to fill up with all the miserable things that made their home there. Torn between the lost world of pity and the world of meanness where he lived, Butler sprang out of bed, opened the door and took up the paper. His eyes, blurred with sleep, ran across the columns:

BUSINESS WOMAN, DISPIRITED, LEAPS NINE FLOORS TO DEATH

For a moment he thought it was an illusion. The print massed solidly below the headline; the headline itself disappeared. He rubbed his eyes with one fist; then he counted the columns over, and found that two columns were touching that should have flanked the story—but, no; there it was:

BUSINESS WOMAN, DISPIRITED, LEAPS NINE FLOORS TO DEATH

He heard the cleaning woman moving about in the hall, and going to the door, he flung it open.

"Mrs. Thomas!"

A pale Negress with corded glasses looked up at him from her pail.

"Look at this, Mrs. Thomas!" he cried. "My eyes are bad! I'm sick! I've got to know! Look!"

He held the paper before her; he felt his voice quivering like a muscle: "Now, you tell me. Does it say, 'Business Woman Leaps to Death'? Right there! Look, can't you?"

The Negress glanced at him curiously, bent her head obediently to the page.

"Indeed it does, Mr. Butler."

"Yes?" He passed his hand across his eyes. "Now, below that. Does it say, 'Mrs. John Summer'? Does it say, 'Mrs. John Summer'? Look carefully now."

Again she glanced sharply at him before looking at the paper. "Indeed it does, Mr. Butler. 'Mrs. John Summer.'" After a minute she added, "Man, you're sick."

Butler closed his door, got back into bed and lay staring at the ceiling. After awhile he began repeating his formulas aloud:

"I mustn't get to thinking that I had anything to do with it, because I didn't. She'd been offered another job, but she thought she was too good for it. What would she have done for me if she'd been in my place?"

He considered telephoning the office that he was ill, but young George Eddington was expected back any day, and he did not dare. Miss Wiess had gone on her vacation yesterday, and there was a substitute to be broken in. The substitute had not known Mrs. Summer, so there would be no discussion of what had happened.

It was a day of continuing heat, wasted unprolific heat that cradled the groans of the derrick and the roar of the electric riveters in the building going up across the street. In the heat every sound was given its full discordant value, and by early afternoon Butler was sick and dizzy. He had made up his mind to go home, and was walking restlessly about his office when the thing began to happen. He heard the clock outside his office ticking loud in the hot silence, heard the little buzzing noise it made, passing the hour; and at the same moment he heard the sigh of pneumatic hinges, as the corridor door swung open and someone came into the outer office. Then there wasn't a sound.

For a moment he hoped that it was someone he would have to see; then he shivered and realized that he was afraid—though he did not know why—and walked toward his own door. Before reaching it, he stopped. The noise of the riveting machine started again, but it seemed farther away now. For an instant he had the impression

that the clock in the next room had stopped, too, but there it was again, marking rather long seconds against the silence.

Suddenly he did not want to know who had come into the next room; yet he was irresistibly impelled to find out. In one corner of his door was the transparent spot through which almost the whole outer office was visible, but now Butler discovered a minute scrape in the painted letter B of his name. Through it he could see the floor, and the dark little hall giving on the corridor where chairs for visitors were placed. Clamping his teeth together, he put his eye to this crack.

Tucked beneath the chair and crisscrossing the chair legs were a pair of women's tan shoes. The sole of one shoe turned toward him, and he made out a grey oval in the center. Breathlessly he moved until his eye was at the other hole. There was something sitting in the chair—rather, slumped in it, as if it had been put down there and had immediately crumpled. A dangling hand and what he could see of the face were of a diaphanous pallor, and the whole attitude was one of awful stillness. With a little choking noise, Butler sprang back from the door.

III

It was several minutes before he was able to move from the wall against which he had backed himself. It was as if there was a sort of bargain between himself and the thing outside that, by staying perfectly still, playing dead, he was safe. But there was not a sound, not a movement in the outer office and, after awhile, a surface rationality asserted itself. He told himself that this was all the result of strain; that the frightening part of it was not the actual phantom, but that his nerves should be in a state to conjure it up. But he drew little consolation from this; if the terror existed, it was immaterial whether it originated in another world or in the dark places of his own mind.

He began making a systematic effort to pull himself together.

In the first place, the noises outside were continuing as before; his office, his own body, were as tangible as ever, and people were passing in the street; Miss Rousseau would answer the pressure of