I’m keeping out of it—just as I left it to the firemen to discover Dr. Emil Slyker “suffocated by smoke” from a fire in his “weird” private office, a fire which it was reported did little more than char the furniture and burn the contents of his files and the tapes of his hifi.

I think a little more was burned. When I looked back the last time I saw the Doctor lying in a strait jacket of pale flames. It may have been scattered papers or the electronic plastic. I think it was ghost-girls burning.

**Rump-Titty-Titty-Tum-Tah-Tee**

ONCE UPON a time, when just for an instant all the molecules in the world and in the collective unconscious mind got very slippery, so that just for an instant something could pop through from the past or the future or other places, six very important intellectual people were gathered together in the studio of Simon Grue, the accidental painter.

There was Tally B. Washington, the jazz drummer. He was beating softly on a gray hollow African log and thinking of a composition he would entitle “Duet for Water Hammer and Whistling Faucet.”

There were Lafcadio Smits, the interior decorator, and Lester Phlegius, the industrial designer. They were talking very intellectually together, but underneath they were wishing very hard that they had, respectively, a really catchy design for modernistic wallpaper and a really new motif for industrial advertising.

There were Gorius James McIntosh, the clinical psychologist, and Norman Saylor, the cultural anthropologist. Gorius James McIntosh was drinking whisky and wishing there were a psychological test that would open up patients a lot wider than the Rorschach or the TAT, while Norman Saylor was smoking a pipe but not thinking or drinking anything especially.

It was a very long, very wide, very tall studio. It had to be, so there would be room on the floor to spread flat one of Simon Grue’s canvases, which were always big enough to dominate any exhibition with yards to spare, and room under the ceiling for a very tall, very strong scaffold.

The present canvas hadn’t a bit of paint on it, not a spot or a smudge or a smear, except for the bone-white ground. On top of the scaffold were Simon Grue and twenty-seven big pots of paint and nine clean brushes, each eight inches wide. Simon Grue was about to have a new accident—a semi-controlled accident, if you please. Any minute now he’d plunge a brush in one of the cans of paint and raise it over his right shoulder and bring it forward and down with a great loose-wristed snap, as if he were cracking a bullwhip, and a great fissioning gob of paint would go splaaAAT on the canvas in a random, chance, arbitrary, spontaneous and therefore quintuply accidental pattern which would constitute the core of the composition and determine the form and rhythm for many, many subsequent splatters and maybe even a few contact brush strokes and impulsive smearings.

As the rhythm of Simon Grue’s bouncy footsteps quickened, Norman Saylor glanced up, though not apprehensively. True, Simon had been known to splatter his friends as well as his canvases, but his anticipation of this Norman was wearing a faded shut, old sneakers and the frayed tweed suit he’d sported as assistant instructor, while his fishing hat was within easy reach. He and his armchair were crowded close to a wall, as were the other four intellectuals. This canvas was an especially large one, even for Simon.

As for Simon, pacing back and forth atop his scaffold, he was experiencing the glorious intoxication and expansion of vision known only to an accidental painter in the great tradition of Wassily Kandinsky, Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock, when he is springfly based a good twenty feet above a spotless, perfectly prepared canvas. At moments like this Simon was especially grateful for these
weekly gatherings. Having his five especial friends on hand helped create the right intellectual milieu. He listened happily to the hollow rhythmic thrum of Tally’s drumming, the multisyllabic rippling of Lester’s and Lafcadio’s conversation, the gurgle of Gorius’ whisky bottle, and happily watched the mystic curls of Norman’s pipe smoke. His entire being, emotions as well as mind, was a blank tablet, ready for the kiss of the universe.

Meanwhile the instant was coming closer and closer when all the molecules in the world and in the collective unconscious mind would get very slippery.

Tally B. Washington, beating on his African log, had a feeling of oppression and anticipation, almost (but not quite) a feeling of apprehension. One of Tally’s ancestors, seven generations back, had been a Dahomey witch doctor, which is the African equivalent of an intellectual with artistic and psychiatric leanings. According to a very private family tradition, half joking, half serious, his five-greats-grandfather of Tally had discovered a Jumbo Magic which could “lay holt” of the whole world and bring it under its spell, but he had perished before he could try the magic or transmit it to his sons. Tally himself was altogether skeptical about the Jumbo Magic, but he couldn’t help wondering about it wistfully from time to time, especially when he was beating on his African log and hunting for a new rhythm. The wistful feeling came to him right now, building on the feeling of oppression and anticipation, and his mind became a tablet blank as Simon’s.

The slippery instant arrived.

Simon seized a brush and plunged it deep in the pot of black paint. Usually he used black for a final splatter if he used it at all, but this time he had the impulse to reverse himself.

Of a sudden Tally’s wrists lifted high, hands dangling loosely, almost like a marionette’s. There was a dramatic pause. Then his hands came down and beat out a phrase on the log, loudly and with great authority.

*Rump-titty-titty-tum-T Mi-tee!*

Simon’s wrist snapped and the middle air was full of free-falling paint which hit the canvas in a fast series of *splaaAAAT’s* which was an exact copy of Tally’s phrase.

*Rump-titty-titty-tum-TAa-tee!*

Intrigued by the identity of the two sounds, and with then- back hairs lifting a little for the same reason, the five intellectuals around the wall rose and stared, while Simon looked down from his scaffold like God after the first stroke of creation.

The big black splatter on the bone-white ground was itself an exact copy of Tally’s phrase, sound made sight, music transposed into visual pattern. First there was a big roundish blot—that was the *rump*. Then two rather delicate, many-tongued splatters—those were the *titties*. Next a small *rump*, which was the *turn*. Following that a big blot like a bent spearhead, not so big as the *rump* but even more emphatic—the TAH. Last of all an indescribably curled and broken little splatter which somehow seemed exactly right for the *tee*.

The whole big splatter was as like the drummed phrase as an identical twin reared in a different environment and as fascinating as a primeval symbol found next to bison paintings in a Cro-Magnon cave. The six intellectuals could hardly stop looking at it and when they did, it was to do things in connection with it, while their minds were happily a-twitter with all sorts of exciting new projects.

There was no thought of Simon doing any more splattering on the new painting until this first amazing accidental achievement had been digested and pondered.

Simon’s wide-angle camera was brought into play on the scaffold and negatives were immediately
developed and prints made in the darkroom adjoining the studio. Each of Simon’s friends carried at least one print when he left. They smiled at each other like men who share a mysterious but powerful secret. More than one of them drew his print from under his coat on the way home and hungrily studied it.

At the gathering next week there was much to tell. Tally had introduced the phrase at a private jam session and on his live jazz broadcast. The jam session had improvised on and developed the phrase for two solid hours and the musicians had squeaked with delight when Tally finally showed them the photograph of what they had been playing, while the response from the broadcast had won Tally a new sponsor with a fat pocketbook.

Gorius McIntosh had got phenomenal results from using the splatter as a Rorschach inkblot. His star patient had seen her imagined incestuous baby in it and spilled more in one session than he the previous hundred and forty. Stubborn blocks in two other analyses had been gloriously broken, while three catatonics at the state mental hospital had got up and danced.

Lester Phlegius rather hesitantly described how he was using “something like the splatter, really not too similar” (he said) as an attention-getter in a forthcoming series of Industrial-Design-for-Living advertisements.

Lafcadio Smits, who had an even longer and more flagrant history of stealing designs from Simon, brazenly announced that he had reproduced the splatter as a silk-screen pattern on linen. The pattern was already selling like hotcakes at five arty gift shops, while at this very moment three girls were sweating in Lafcadio’s loft turning out more. He braced himself for a blast from Simon, mentally rehearsing the attractive deal he was prepared to offer, one depending on percentages of percentages, but the accidental painter was strangely abstracted. He seemed to have something weighing on his mind.

The new painting hadn’t progressed any further than the first splatter.

Norman Saylor quizzed him about it semi-privately.

“I’ve developed a sort of artist’s block,” Simon confessed to him with relief. “Whenever I pick up a brush I get afraid of spoiling that first tremendous effect and I don’t go on.” He paused. “Another thing—I put down papers and tried some small test-splatters. They all looked almost exactly like the big one. Seems my wrist won’t give out with anything else.” He laughed nervously. “How are you cashing in on the thing, Norm?”

The anthropologist shook his head. “Just studying it, trying to place it in the continuum of primitive signs and universal dream symbols. It goes very deep. But about this block and this… er… fancied limitation of yours—I’d just climb up there tomorrow morning and splatter away. The big one’s been photographed, you can’t lose that.”

Simon nodded doubtfully and then looked down at his wrist and quickly grabbed it with his other hand, to still it. It had been twitching in a familiar rhythm.

If the tone of the gathering after the first week was enthusiastic, that after the second was euphoric. Tally’s new drummed theme had given rise to a musical fad christened Drum ‘n’ Drag which promised to rival Rock ‘n’ Roll, while the drummer himself was in two days to appear as a guest artist on a network TV program. The only worry was that no new themes had appeared. All the Drum ‘n’ Drag pieces were based on duplications or at most developments of the original drummed phrase. Tally also mentioned with an odd reluctance that a few rabid cats had taken to greeting each other with a four-handed patty-cake that beat out rump-titty-titty-tum-TAK-tee.

Gorius McIntosh was causing a stir in psychiatric circles with his amazing successes in opening up
recalcitrant cases, many of them hitherto thought fit for nothing but eventual lobotomy. Colleagues with M.P.S quit emphasizing the lowly “Mister” in his name, while several spontaneously addressed him as “Doctor” as they begged him for copies of the McSPAT (McIntosh’s Splatter Pattern Apperception Test). His name had been mentioned in connection with the assistant directorship of the clinic where he was a humble psychologist. He also told how some of the state patients had taken to pommelling each other playfully while happily spouting some gibberish variant of the original phrase, such as “Bump-biddy-biddy-bum-KAa-bee!” The resemblance in behavior to Tally’s hepcats was noted and remarked on by the six intellectuals.

The first of Lester Phlegms’ attention-getters (identical with the splatter, of course) had appeared and attracted the most favorable notice, meaning chiefly that his customer’s front office had received at least a dozen curious phone calls from the directors and presidents of cognate firms. Lafcadio Smits reported that he had rented a second loft, was branching out into dress materials, silk neckties, lampshades and wallpaper, and was deep in royalty deals with several big manufacturers. Once again Simon Grue surprised him by not screaming robbery and demanding details and large simple percentages. The accidental painter seemed even more unhappily abstracted than the week before.

When he ushered them from his living quarters into the studio they understood why.

It was as if the original big splatter had whelped. Surrounding and overlaying it were scores of smaller splatters. They were all colors of a well-chosen artist’s-spectrum, blending with each other and pointing each other up superbly. But each and every one of them was a perfect copy, reduced to one half or less, of the original big splatter.

Lafcadio Smits wouldn’t believe at first that Simon had done them free-wrist from the scaffold. Even when Simon showed him details proving they couldn’t have been stencilled, Lafcadio was still unwilling to believe, for he was deeply versed in methods of mass-producing the appearance of handwork and spontaneity.

But when Simon wearily climbed the scaffold and, hardly looking at what he was doing, flipped down a few splatters exactly like the rest, even Lafcadio had to admit that something miraculous and frightening had happened to Simon’s wrist.

Gorius James McIntosh shook his head and muttered a remark about “stereotyped compulsive behavior at the artistic-creative level. Never heard of it getting that stereotyped, though.”

Later during the gathering, Norman Saylor again consulted with Simon and also had a long confidential talk with Tally B. Washington, during which he coaxed out of the drummer the whole story of his five-greats-grandfather. When questioned about his own researches, the cultural anthropologist would merely say that they were “progressing.” He did, however, have one piece of concrete advice, which he delivered to all the five others just before the gathering broke up.

“This splatter does have an obsessive quality, just as Gory said. It has that maddening feeling of incompleteness which cries for repetition. It would be a good thing if each of us, whenever he feels the thing getting too strong a hold on him, would instantly shift to some engrossing activity which has as little as possible to do with arbitrarily ordered sight and sound. Play chess or smell perfumes or eat candy or look at the moon through a telescope, or stare at a point of light in the dark and try to blank out your mind—something like that. Try to set up a countercompulsion. One of us might even hit on a counterformula—a specific antidote—like quinine for malaria.”

If the ominous note of warning in Norman’s statement didn’t register on all of them just then, it did at some time during the next seven days, for the frame of mind in which the six intellectuals came to the gathering after the third week was one of paranoid grandeur and hysterical desperation.
Tally’s TV appearance had been a huge success. He’d taken to the TV station a copy of the big splatter and although he hadn’t intended to (he said) he’d found himself showing it to the M.C. and the unseen audience after his drum solo. The immediate response by phone, telegram and letter had been overwhelming but rather frightening, including a letter from a woman in Smallhills, Arkansas, thanking Tally for showing her “the wondrous picture of God.”

Drum ‘n’ Drag had become a national and even international craze. The patty-cake greeting had become general among Tally’s rapidly-growing horde of fans and it now included a staggering slap on the shoulder to mark the TAH. (Here Gorius McIntosh took a drink from his bottle and interrupted to tell of a spontaneous, rhythmic, lock-stepping procession at the state hospital with an even more violent TAH-blow. The mad march had been forcibly broken up by attendants and two of the patients treated at the infirmary for contusions.) The New York Times ran a dispatch from South Africa describing how police had dispersed a disorderly mob of University of Capetown students who had been chanting, “Shlump Shliddy Shliddy Shlump SHLAH Shlee!”—which the correspondents had been told was an anti-apartheid cry phrased in pig-Afrikaans.

For both the drummed phrase and the big splatter had become a part of the news, either directly or by inferences that made Simon and his friends alternately cackle and shudder. An Indiana town was fighting a juvenile phenomenon called Drum Saturday. A radio-TV columnist noted that Blotto Cards were the latest rage among studio personnel; carried in handbag or breast pocket, whence they could be quickly whipped out and stared at, the cards were claimed to be an infallible remedy against boredom or sudden attacks of anger and the blues. Reports of a penthouse burglary included among the objects listed as missing “a recently-purchased spotted linen wall-hanging”; the woman said she did not care about the other objects, but pleaded for the hanging’s return, “as it was of great psychological comfort to my husband.” Splatter-marked raincoats were a high-school fad, the splattering being done ceremoniously at Drum ‘n’ Drag parties. An English prelate had preached a sermon inveighing against “this deafening new American craze with its pantherine overtones of mayhem.” At a press interview Salvador Dali had refused to say anything to newsmen except the cryptic sentence, “The time has come.”

In a halting, hiccupy voice Gorius McIntosh reported that things were pretty hot at the clinic. Twice during the past week he had been fired and triumphantly reinstated. Rather similarly at the state hospital Bump Parties had been alternately forbidden and then encouraged, mostly on the pleas of enthusiastic psychiatric aides. Copies of the McSPAT had come into the hands of general practitioners who, ignoring its original purpose, were using it as a substitute for electroshock treatment and tranquilizing drugs. A group of progressive psychiatrists calling themselves the Young Turks were circulating a statement that the McSPAT constituted the worst threat to classical Freudian psychoanalysis since Alfred Adler, adding a grim scholarly reference to the Dancing Mania of the Middle Ages. Gorius finished his report by staring around almost frightenedly at his five friends and clutching the whisky bottle to his bosom.

Lafcadio Smits seemed equally shaken, even when telling about the profits of his pyramiding enterprises. One of his four lofts had been burglarized and another invaded at high noon by a red-bearded Greenwich Village Satanist protesting that the splatter was an illicitly procured Taoist magic symbol of direst power. Lafcadio was also receiving anonymous threatening letters which he believed to be from a criminal drug syndicate that looked upon Blotto Cards as his creation and as competitive to heroin and lesser forms of dope. He shuddered visibly when Tally volunteered the information that his fans had taken to wearing Lafcadio’s splatter-patterned ties and shirts.

Lester Phlegms said that further copies of the issue of the costly and staid industrial journal carrying his attention-getter were unprocurable and that many had vanished from private offices and wealthy homes
or, more often, simply had the crucial page ripped out.

Norman Saylor’s two photographs of the big splatter had been pilfered from his locked third-floor office at the university, and a huge copy of the splatter, painted in a waterproof black substance, had appeared on the bottom of the swimming pool in the girls’ gymnasium.

As they continued to share their experiences, it turned out that the six intellectuals were even more disturbed at the hold the drummed phrase and the big splatter had got on them individually and at their failure to cope with the obsession by following Norman’s suggestions. Playing at a Sunday-afternoon bar concert, Tally had got snagged on the phrase for fully ten minutes, like a phonograph needle caught in one groove, before he could let go. What bothered him especially was that no one in the audience had seemed to notice and he had the conviction that if something hadn’t stopped him (the drum skin ruptured) they would have sat frozen there until, wrists flailing, he died of exhaustion.

Norman himself, seeking escape in chess, had checkmated his opponent in a blitz game (where each player must move without hesitation) by banging down his pieces in the *rump-titty* rhythm—and his subconscious mind had timed it, he said, so that the last move came right on the *tee*; it was a little pawn-move after a big queen-check on the TAH. Lafcadio, turning to cooking, had found himself mixing salad with a *rump-titty* flourish. (“… and a madman to mix it, as the old Spanish recipe says,” he finished with a despairing giggle.) Lester Phlegius, seeking release from the obsession in the companionship of a lady spiritualist with whom he had been carrying on a strictly Platonic love affair for ten years, found himself enlivening with the *rump-titty* rhythm the one chaste embrace they permitted themselves to each meeting. Phoebe had torn herself away and slapped him full-arm across the face. What had horrified Lester was that the impact had coincided precisely with the TAH.

Simon Grue himself, who hadn’t stirred out of his apartment all week but wandered shivering from window to window in a dirty old bathrobe, had dozed in a broken armchair and had a terrifying vision. He had imagined himself in the ruins of Manhattan, chained to the broken stones (before dozing off he had wound both wrists heavily with scarves and cloths to cushion the twitching), while across the dusty jagged landscape all humanity tramped in an endless horde screeching the accursed phrase and every so often came a group of them carrying a two-story-high poster (“… like those Soviet parades,” he said) with the big splatter staring blackly down from it. His nightmare had gone on to picture the dreadful infection spreading from the Earth by spaceship to planets revolving around other stars.

As Simon finished speaking Gorius McIntosh rose slowly from his chair, groping ahead of himself with his whisky bottle.

“That’s it!” he said from between bared clenched teeth, grinning horribly. “That’s what’s happening to all of us. Can’t get it out of our minds. Can’t get it out of our muscles. Psychosomatic bondage!” He stumbled slowly across the circle of intellectuals toward Lester, who was sitting opposite him. “It’s happening to me. A patient sits down across the desk and says with his eyes dripping tears, ‘Help me, Doctor McIntosh,’ and I see his problems clearly and I know just how to help him and I get up and I go around the desk to him”—he was standing right over Lester now, bottle raised high above the industrial designer’s shoulder—“and I lean down so that my face is close to his and then I shout RUMP-TITTY-TITTY-TUM-TAH-TEE!”

At this point Norman Saylor decided to take over, leaving to Tally and Lafcadio the restraining of Gorius, who indeed seemed quite docile and more dazed than anything else now that his seizure was spent, at least temporarily. The cultural anthropologist strode to the center of the circle, looking very reassuring with his darkly billowing pipe and his strong jaw and his smoky tweeds, though he kept his hands clasped tightly together behind him, after snatching his pipe with one of them.

“Men,” he said sharply, “my research on this thing isn’t finished by a long shot, but I’ve carried it far
enough to know that we are dealing with what may be called an ultimate symbol, a symbol that is the summation of all symbols. It has everything in it—birth, death, mating, murder, divine and demonic possession, all of life, the whole lot—to such a degree that after you’ve looked at it, or listened to it, or made it, for a time, you simply don’t need life any more.”

The studio was very quiet. The five other intellectuals looked at him. Norman rocked on his heels like any normal college professor, but his arms grew perceptibly more rigid as he clasped his hands even more tightly behind his back, fighting an exquisite compulsion.

“As I say, my studies aren’t finished, but there’s clearly no time to carry them further—we must act on such conclusions as I have drawn from the evidence assembled to date. Here’s briefly how it shapes up: We must assume that mankind possesses an actual collective unconscious mind stretching thousands of years into the past and, for all I know, into the future. This collective unconscious mind may be pictured as a great dark space across which radio messages can sometimes pass with difficulty. We must also assume that the drummed phrase and with it the big splatter came to us by this inner radio from an individual living over a century in the past. We have good reason to believe that this individual is, or was, a direct male ancestor, in the seventh generation back, of Tally here. He was a witch doctor. He was acutely hungry for power. In fact, he spent his life seeking an incantation that would put a spell on the whole world. It appears that he found the incantation at the end, but died too soon to be able to use it—without ever being able to embody it in sound or sign. Think of his frustration!”

“Norm’s right,” Tally said, nodding somberly. “He was a mighty mean man, I’m told, and mighty persistent.”

Norman’s nod was quicker and also a plea for undivided attention. Beads of sweat were dripping down his forehead. “The thing came to us when it did—came to Tally specifically and through him to Simon—because our six minds, reinforcing each other powerfully, were momentarily open to receive transmissions through the collective unconscious, and because there is—was—this sender at the other end long desirous of getting his message through to one of his descendants. We cannot say precisely where this sender is—a scientifically oriented person might say that he is in a shadowed portion of the space-time continuum while a religiously oriented person might aver that he is in Heaven or Hell.”

“I’d plump for the last-mentioned,” Tally volunteered. “He was that kind of man.”

“Please, Tally,” Norman said. “Wherever he is, we must operate on the hope that there is a counter formula or negative symbol—yang to this yin—which he wants, or wanted, to transmit too—something that will stop this flood of madness we have loosed on the world.”

“That’s where I must differ with you, Norm,” Tally broke in, shaking his head more somberly than he had nodded it, “if Old Five-Greats ever managed to start something bad, he’d never want to stop it, especially if he knew how. I tell you he was mighty mighty mean and—”

“Please, Tally! Your ancestor’s character may have changed with his new environment, there may be greater forces at work on him—in any case, our only hope is that he possesses and will transmit to us the counter formula. To achieve that, we must try to recreate, by artificial means, the conditions that obtained in this studio at the time of the first transmission.”

A look of acute pain crossed his face. He unclasped his hands and brought them in front of him. His pipe fell to the floor. He looked at the large blister the hot bowl had raised in one palm. Then clasping his hands together in front of him, palm to palm, with a twisting motion that made Lafcadio wince, he continued rapping out the words.

“Men, we must act at once, using only such materials as can be rapidly assembled. Each of you must trust me implicitly. Tally, I know you don’t use it any more, but can you still get weed, the genuine
crushed leaf? Good, we may need enough for two or three dozen sticks. Gory, I want you to fetch the self-hypnotism rigmarole that’s so effective—no, I don’t trust your memory and we may need copies. Lester, if you’re quite through satisfying yourself that Gory didn’t break your collarbone with his bottle, you go with Gory and see that he drinks lots of coffee. On your way back buy several bunches of garlic, a couple of rolls of dimes, and a dozen red railway flares. Oh yes, and call up your mediumistic lady and do your damnedest to get her to join us here—her talents may prove invaluable. Laf, tear off to your home loft and get the luminous paint and the black velvet hangings you and your red-bearded ex-friend used—yes, I know about that association!—when you and he were dabbling with black magic. Simon and I will hold down the studio. All right, then—” A spasm crossed his face and the veins in his forehead and cords in his neck bulged and his arms were jerking with the struggle he was waging against the compulsion that threatened to overpower him. “All right, then—Rump-titty-titty-tum-GET-MOVJING!”

An hour later the studio smelt like a fire in a eucalyptus grove. Such light from outside as got past the cabalistically figured hangings covering windows and skylight revealed the shadowy forms of Simon, atop the scaffold, and the other five intellectuals, crouched against the wall, all puffing their reefers, sipping the sour smoke industriously. Their marijuana-blanked minds were still reverberating to the last compelling words of Gory’s rigmarole, read by Lester Phlegius in a sonorous bass.

Phoebe Saltonstall, who had refused reefers with a simple, “No thank you, I always carry my own peyote,” had one wall all to herself. Eyes closed, she was lying along it on three small cushions, her pleated Grecian robe white as a winding sheet.

Round all four walls waist-high went a dimly luminous line with six obtuse angles in it besides the four corners; Norman said that made it the topological equivalent of a magician’s pentalpha or pentagram. Barely visible were the bunches of garlic nailed to each door and the tiny silver discs scattered hi front of them.

Norman flicked his lighter and the little blue flame added itself to the six glowing red points of the reefers. In a cracked voice he cried, “The time approaches!” and he shambled about rapidly setting fire to the twelve railway flares spiked into the floor through the big canvas.

In the hellish red glow they looked to each other like so many devils. Phoebe moaned and tossed. Simon coughed once as the dense clouds of smoke billowed up around the scaffold and filled the ceiling.

Norman Saylor cried, “This is it!”

Phoebe screamed thinly and arched her back as if in electroshock.

A look of sudden agonized amazement came into the face of Taliaferro Booker Washington, as if he’d been jabbed from below with a pin or hot poker. He lifted his hands with great authority and beat out a short phrase on his gray African log.

A hand holding a brightly-freighted eight-inch brush whipped out of the hellish smoke clouds above and sent down a great fissioning gout of paint that landed on the canvas with a sound that was an exact visual copy of Tally’s short drummed phrase.

Immediately the studio became a hive of purposeful activity. Heavily-gloved hands jerked out the railway flares and plunged them into strategically located buckets of water. The hangings were ripped down and the windows thrown open. Two electric fans were turned on. Simon, half-fainting, slipped down the last feet of the ladder, was rushed to a window and lay across it gasping. Somewhat more carefully Phoebe Saltonstall was carried to a second window and laid in front of it. Gory checked her pulse and gave a reassuring nod.
Then the five intellectuals gathered around the big canvas and stared. After a while Simon joined them. The new splatter, in Chinese red, was entirely different from the many ones under it and it was an identical twin of the new drummed phrase.

After a while the six intellectuals went about the business of photographing it. They worked systematically but rather listlessly. When their eyes chanced to move to the canvas they didn’t even seem to see what was there. Nor did they bother to glance at the black-on-white prints (with the background of the last splatter touched out) as they shoved them under their coats.

Just then there was a rustle of draperies by one of the open windows. Phoebe Saltonstall, long forgotten, was sitting up. She looked around her with some distaste.

“Take me home, Lester,” she said faintly but precisely.

Tally, half-way through the door, stopped. “You know,” he said puzzledly, “I still can’t believe that Old Five-Greats had the public spirit to do what he did. I wonder if she found out what it was that made him —”

Norman put his hand on Tally’s arm and laid a ringer of the other on his own lips. They went out together, followed by Lafcadio, Gorius, Lester and Phoebe. Like Simon, all five men had the look of drunkards in a benign convalescent stupor, and probably dosed with paraldehyde, after a bout of DTs.

The same effect was apparent as the new splatter and drummed phrase branched out across the world, chasing and eventually overtaking the first one. Any person who saw or heard it proceeded to repeat it once (make it, show it, wear it, if it were that sort of thing, in any case pass it on) and then forget it—and at the same time forget the first drummed phrase and splatter. All sense of compulsion or obsession vanished utterly.

Drum ‘n’ Drag died a-borning. Blotto Cards vanished from handbags and pockets, the McSPATS I and II from doctor’s offices and psychiatric clinics. Bump Parties no longer plagued and enlivened mental hospitals. Catatronics froze again. The Young Turks went back to denouncing tranquilizing drugs. A fad of green-and-purple barber-pole stripes covered up splattermarks on raincoats. Satanists and drug syndicates presumably continued their activities unhampered except by God and the Treasury Department. Capetown had such peace as it deserved. Spotted shirts, neckties, dresses, lampshades, wallpaper, and linen wall hangings all became intensely passe. Drum Saturday was never heard of again. Lester Phlegius’ second attention-getter got none.

Simon’s big painting was eventually hung at one exhibition, but it got little attention even from critics, except for a few heavy sentences along the lines of “Simon Grue’s latest elephantine effort fell with a thud as dull as those of the gobs of paint that in falling composed it.” Visitors to the gallery seemed able only to give it one dazed look and then pass it by, as is not infrequently the case with modern paintings.

The reason for this was clear. On top of all the other identical splatters it carried one in Chinese red that was a negation of all symbols, a symbol that had nothing in it—the new splatter that was the identical twin of the new drummed phrase that was the negation and completion of the first, the phrase that had vibrated out from Tally’s log through the red glare and come slapping down out of Simon’s smoke cloud, the phrase that stilled and ended everything (and which obviously can only be stated here once): “Tah-titty-titty-tee-toe’t”

The six intellectual people continued their weekly meetings almost as if nothing had happened, except that Simon substituted for splatter-work a method of applying the paint by handfuls with the eyes
closed, later treading it in by foot. He sometimes asked his friends to join him in these impromptu marches, providing wooden shoes imported from Holland for the purpose.

One afternoon, several months later, Lester Phlegius brought a guest with him—Phoebe Saltonstall.

“Miss Saltonstall has been on a round-the-world cruise,” he explained. “Her psyche was dangerously depleted by her experience in this apartment, she tells me, and a complete change was indicated. Happily now she’s entirely recovered.”

“Indeed I am,” she said, answering their solicitous inquiries with a bright smile.

“By the way,” Norman said, “at the time your psyche was depleted here, did you receive any message from Tally’s ancestor?”

“Indeed I did,” she said.

“Well, what did Old Five-Greats have to say?” Tally asked eagerly. “Whatever it was, I bet he was pretty crude about it!”

“Indeed he was,” she said, blushing prettily. “So crude, in fact, that I wouldn’t dare attempt to convey that aspect of his message. For that matter, I am sure that it was the utter fiendishness of his anger and the unspeakable visions in which his anger was clothed that so reduced my psyche.” She paused.

“I don’t know where he was sending from,” she said thoughtfully. “I had the impression of a warm place, an intensely warm place, though of course I may have been reacting to the railway flares.” Her frown cleared. “The actual message was short and simple enough:

‘Dear Descendant, They made me stop it. It was beginning to catch on down here.’”

**Little Old Miss Macbeth**

THE SPHERE of dim light from the electric candle on the orange crate was enough to show the cot, a little bare wall behind it and concrete floor beneath it, a shrouded birdcage on the other side of the cot, and nothing more. Spent batteries and their empty boxes overflowed the top of the orange crate and made a little mound. Three fresh batteries remained in a box by the candle.

The little old woman turned and tossed in her sleep under the blankets. Her face was troubled and her mouth pursed in a thin line that turned downward at the corners—a tragic mask scaled down for a little old lady. At times, without waking, she’d creep her hands up from under the blanket and touch her ears, as though they were assaulted by noise—though the silence was profound.

At last, as if she could bear it no longer, she slowly sat up. Her eyes opened, though she did not wake, staring out with the fixity of unconscious seeing. She put her feet into snug felt slippers with a hole in the left toe. She took a woolly bathrobe from the foot of the cot and pulled it around her. Without looking, still sitting on the edge of the cot, she reached for the electric candle. Then she got up and crossed the floor to a door, carrying the candle, which made on the ceiling a circle of light that followed her. At no time was the full size of the room revealed. Her face was still a prim little tragic mask, eyes open, fast asleep.

Outside the door she went down one flight of an iron stairway, which sounded from its faint deep ringing under her light tread as if there were many more flights above. She went through another door, a heavy, softly moaning one like the stage door of a theater, and closed it behind her and stood still.

If you’d been there outside, you’d have seen her holding the electric candle, and a small semicircle of brick wall and iron door behind her and another semicircle of sidewalk under her feet, and nothing more, no other side to the street, no nothing—the feeble light went no further. Then after a while you’d