

GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL NO. 10 COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

JAY FRANKLIN •••

RAT RACE



THE RAT RACE

by JAY FRANKLIN

The Astonishing Narrative of a Man Who Was Somebody
Else ... Mixed Up With Politics and Three Luscious Women!

A COMPLETE NOVEL

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"THE RAT RACE"

By Jay Franklin

When an atomic explosion destroys the battleship Alaska, Lt. Commander Frank Jacklin returns to consciousness in New York and is shocked to find himself in the body of Winnie Tompkins, a dissolute stock-broker. Unable to explain his real identity, Jacklin attempts to fit into Tompkins' way of life. Complications develop when Jacklin gets involved with Tompkins' wife, his red-haired mistress and his luscious secretary. Three too many women for Jacklin to handle.

His foreknowledge of the Alaska sinking and other top secret matters plunges him into a mad world of intrigue and excitement in Washington—that place where anything can happen and does! Where is the real Tompkins is a mystery explained in the smashing climax.

Completely delightful, wholly provocative, the Rat Race is a striking novel of the American Scene.

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

CHAPTER 1

When the bomb exploded, U.S.S. Alaska, was steaming westward, under complete radio silence, somewhere near the international date-line on the Great Circle course south of the Aleutian Islands.

It was either the second or the third of April, 1945, depending on whether the Alaska, the latest light carrier to be added to American naval forces in the Pacific, had passed the 180th meridian.

I was in the carrier, in fact in the magazine, when the blast occurred and I am the only person who can tell how and why the Alaska disappeared without a trace in the Arctic waters west of Adak. I had been assigned by Navy Public Relations to observe and report on Operation Octopus—the plan to blow up the Jap naval base at Paramushiro in Kuriles with the Navy's recently developed thorium bomb.

My name, by the way, is Frank Jacklin, Lieutenant-Commander, U.S.N.R. I had been commissioned shortly after Pearl Harbor, as a result of my vigorous editorial crusade on the Hartford (Conn.) Courant to Aid America by Defending the Allies. I was a life-long Republican and a personal friend of Frank Knox, so I had no trouble with Navy Intelligence in getting a reserve commission in the summer of 1940. (I never told them that I had voted for Roosevelt twice, so I was never subjected to the usual double-check by which the Navy kept its officer-corps purged of subversive taints and doubtful loyalties.) So I had a first-rate assignment, by the usual combination of boot-licking and "yessing" which marks a good P.R.O.

It was on the first night in Jap waters, after we had cleared the radius of the Naval Air Station at Adak, that Professor Chalmis asked me to accompany him to the magazine. He said that his orders were to make effective disclosure of the mechanics of the thorium bomb as soon as we were clear of the Aleutians. Incidentally, he, I and Alaska's commander, Captain Horatio

McAllister, U.S.N., were the only people aboard who knew the real nature of Operation Octopus. The others had been alerted, via latrine rumor, that we were engaged in a sneak-raid on Hokkaido.

The thorium bomb, Chalmis told me, had been developed by the Navy, parallel to other hitherto unsuccessful experiments conducted by the Army with uranium. The thorium bomb utilized atomic energy, on a rather low and inefficient basis by scientific standards, but was yet sufficiently explosive to destroy a whole city. He proposed to show me the bomb itself, so that I could describe its physical appearance, and to brief me on the mechanics of its detonation, leaving to the Navy scientists at Washington a fuller report on the whole subject of atomic weapons. He had passes, signed by Captain McAllister, to admit us to the magazine and proposed, after supper, that we go to examine his gadget.

It was cold as professional charity on the flight-deck, with sleet driving in from the northwest as the icy wind from Siberia hit the moist air of the Japanese Current. There was a nasty cross-sea and the Alaska was wallowing and pounding as she drove towards Paramushiro at a steady 30 knots.

"You know, Jacklin," said Chalmis, as the Marine sentry took our passes and admitted us to the magazine, "I don't like this kind of thing."

"You mean this war?" I asked, noticing irrelevantly the way the electric light gleamed on his bald head.

"I mean this thorium bomb," he replied. "I had most to do with developing it and now in a couple of days one of these nice tanned naval aviators at the mess will take off with it and drop it on Paramushiro from an altitude of 30,000 feet. The timer is set to work at an altitude of 500 feet and then two or three thousand human beings will cease to exist."

"The Japs aren't human," I observed, quoting the Navy.

Chalmis looked at me in a strange, staring way.

"Thank you, Commander," he said. "You have settled my problem. I was in doubt as to whether to complete this operation in the name of scientific inquiry, but now I see I have no choice. See this!" he continued.

"This" was a spherical, finned object of aluminum about the size of a watermelon, resting on a gleaming chromium-steel cradle.

"If I take this ring, Jacklin," Chalmis remarked, "and pull it out, the bomb will explode within five seconds or at 500 feet altitude whichever takes longer. The five seconds is to give the pilot a margin of safety in case of accidental release at low altitude. However, dropping it from 30,000 feet means that the five seconds elapse before the bomb reaches the level at which it automatically explodes."

"You make me nervous, Professor," I objected. "Can't you explain without touching it?"

"If it exploded now, approximately twenty-four feet below the water-line," Chalmis continued, "it would create an earthquake wave which could cause damage at Honolulu and would register on the seismograph at Fordham University."

"I'll take your word for it," I said.

"So," concluded Chalmis, "if the bomb were to go off now, no one could know what had happened to the Alaska and the Navy—as I know the Navy—would decide that thorium bombs were impractical, too dangerous to use. And so the human race might be spared a few more years of life."

"Stop it!" I ordered, lunging forward and grabbing for his arm.

But it was too late. Chalmis gave a strong pull on the ring. It came free and a slight buzzing sound was heard above the whine of the turbines and the thud of the seas against Alaska's bow.

"You—" I began. Then I started counting: "Three—four—fi—"....

There was a hand on my shoulder and a voice that kept saying, "Snap out of it!" I opened bleary eyes to see a familiar figure in uniform bending over me. My head ached, my mouth tasted dry and metallic, and I felt strangely heavy around the middle.

"Hully, Ranty," I said. "Haven't seen you since Kwajalein. What's the word? What happened to the Alaska?"

Commander Tolan, U.S.N.R., who had been in my group in Quonset, straightened up with a laugh. "When were you ever at Kwajalein, Winnie?" he asked. "And what's the drip about the Alaska?"

"You remember," I said. "That time we went into the Marshalls with the Sara in forty-three. But what happened to my ship? There was a bomb.... Say, where am I and what day is it anyway?"

There was a burst of laughter from across the room and I turned my head. I seemed to be sitting in a deep, leather arm-chair in a small, nicely furnished bar, with sporting-prints on the wall and a group of three clean-shaven, only slightly paunchy middle-aged men, who looked like brokers, standing by the rail staring at me. Tolan was the only man in uniform. These couldn't be doctors and what were civilians doing in mess....

"We blew up!" I insisted. "Chalmis said...."

"You've been dreaming, Winnie," drawled one of the brokerish trio. "You were making horrible noises in your sleep so Ranty went over and woke you up."

"If you want to know where you are," remarked another, "you're in the bar of the Pond Club on West 54th Street, as sure as your name is Winfred S. Tompkins and this is April 2nd, 1945."

"Winnie Tompkins!" I exclaimed. "Why I once knew him quite well. He and I were at St. Mark's together, then he went to Harvard and Wall Street while I went to Yale and broke, so we didn't see much of each other after the depression."

"It's a good gag, Winnie," Tolan laughed, "but now you've had your fun, how about another drink?"

I shook my head. "Listen, Ranty," I begged. "Tell me what happened. I can take it. Are you dead? Are we all dead? Is this supposed to be heaven? What's the word?"

"That joke's played out," said Tolan. "Here, Tammy, another Scotch and soda for Mr. Tompkins. A double one."

Tompkins! My head ached. I stood up and walked across the room to study my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Instead of my painfully familiar freckled face and skinny frame, I saw a red, full jowled face with bags beneath the watery blue eyes, set on a distinctly portly body which was cleverly camouflaged as burliness by impeccable tweeds of the kind specially made up in London for the American broker's trade.

"I look like hell!" I muttered. "Well, tell me this, Ranty. What happened to Frank Jacklin? Or is that part of the gag?"

Tolan turned and stared at me with an official glitter in his Navy (Reserve) eye. "Jacklin? He *was* at Kwajalein with me, now that I think of it. A skinny sort of s.o.b., wasn't he?"

"I wouldn't say that," I hotly rejoined. "I thought he was a pretty decent sort of guy. Where is he?"

"Jacklin? Oh, he got another half-stripe last January and was given some screw-ball assignment which took him out of touch. He'll turn up sooner or later, without a scratch; those New Dealers always do."

"Say," Tolan added. "You always did have a Jacklin fixation but you never had a good word to say for the louse. What did he ever do to you, anyhow? Ever since I've known you, you've always been griping about him, specially since he got into uniform. Lay off, will you, and give us honest hard-drinking guys a chance to get a breath. Period."

I took my drink and sipped it attentively. Whatever had happened to me since the thorium bomb burst off Adak, this was Scotch and it was cold, so I doubted that this place was Hell. Probably it was all a dream in the last split-second of disintegration.

"Thanks, Ranty, that feels better. Now I've got to be going."

"Winnie," drawled one of the brokers, "tell us who she is this time. You ought to stop chasing at your age and blood-pressure or let your friends in on the secret."

"This time," I said, "I'm going home."

The steward came around from the bar and helped me into a fine fur-lined overcoat which I assumed was the lawful property of Winnie Tompkins.

"There were two telephone messages for you, sir, while you were dozing," he said.

"Who were they from, Tammy?"

"The first one, sir, was from the vet's to say that Ponto—that would be your dog, sir—would recover after all. He was the one that had distemper so bad,

wasn't it, sir? I remember you told me that he was expected to die any minute. Well, now, the vet says he will recover. The second call, sir, was from Mrs. Tompkins. She asked if you had left for your home."

"What did you tell her, Tammy?" I asked.

"Why, what you told me, sir, of course, when you came in, sir. I said that you hadn't been in all day, but that I would deliver any messages."

Wait a minute, Jacklin, I said to myself. Let's figure this one out. We were blown up on the Alaska, off the westernmost Aleutians, and now we find ourselves at the Pond Club, in New York City, masquerading in the flabby body of Winnie Tompkins. This must be Purgatory, since nobody who has ever been there would call the Pond—or, as the initiates prefer, the Puddle—either Heaven or Hell. This is one of those damned puzzles designed to test our intelligence. My cue is to turn in the best and most convincing performance as Winnie Tompkins, who has undoubtedly been sent to Hell. If we pass, we'll be like the rats the scientists send racing through mazes: we'll get the cheese and move on up. If we flunk, we'll be sent down, as the English say. Ingenious deity, the Manager!

"Tammy," I said, "will you get me the latest Social Register?"

"Certainly, sir."

I sat down by the door and thumbed through the testament of social acceptability as measured in Manhattan. There I was: Winfred S. (Sturgis) Tompkins. Born, New York City, April 27, 1898. St. Mark's School, Southboro, Mass., 1916. Harvard, A. B. 1920. Married: Miss Germaine Lewis Schuyler, of New York City, 1936. Clubs: Porcellian, Pond, Racquet, Harvard, Westchester Country. Residence: "Pook's Hill," Bedford Hills, N.Y. Office: No. 1 Wall Street, N.Y.C.

"Thanks, Tammy," I said and returned the register to him.

Then I reached inside my coat and pulled out the well-stuffed pocket-book I found inside the suave tweeds. It was of ostrich-hide with W.S.T. in gold letters on it, and contained—in addition to some junk which I didn't bother to examine—sixty-one dollars in small bills and a new commutation-ticket between New York City and Bedford Hills, N.Y.

So far, so good. My sense of identity was building up rapidly. I felt in my

trousers' pocket and found a bunch of keys and about a dollar and a half in silver. I peeled a five-dollar bill from the roll in the pocket-book and handed it to the club steward.

"This is for you, Tammy, and a happy Easter Monday to you. If anyone calls, you haven't seen me all day."

"Thank you very much, sir, I'm sure," he said, pocketing the five spot with the effortless ease of a prestidigitator or head-waiter.

I strolled out to the street—dusk was beginning to darken the city and already there were lights burning in the office windows—and walked across to the corner of Park Avenue. To my surprise, remembering New York, there were few taxis and those were already occupied. After about five minutes of vain waiting, I remembered reading somewhere of the cab shortage in the United States, and walked south to Grand Central. As I turned down Vanderbilt Avenue, I noticed something fairly bulky in the pocket of my overcoat. I stopped and dragged out two expensively tidy packages, with the Tiffany label on them. One was inscribed "For Jimmie" and the other "For Virginia."

This represented a new puzzle—perhaps a trap—so I paid a dime for the use of one of the pay-toilets in the Terminal and unwrapped my find. The one marked for "Jimmie"—who might be, I guessed, my wife Germaine—was a neat little solid gold bracelet, the sort of thing you give your eldest niece on graduation day. The one marked "Virginia" contained a diamond-brooch of the kind all too rarely given to a girl for any good reason.

"Uh-uh!" I shook my head. Whoever "Virginia" might be, she was obviously not my wife and the Social Register had not mentioned any children, ex-wives or such appertaining to Winnie Tompkins. And you don't give diamonds to your aged aunt or your mother-in-law. We can't have Winnie start off his new life by palming off mere gold on his wedded wife and diamonds on the Other Woman, I decided. So I switched the labels on the packages and returned to circulation in time to catch the 4:45 Westchester Express.

Here, I resorted to a low subterfuge. Instead of the broker's bible, "The New York Sun," with its dim view of all that had happened to the commuting public since 1932, I was coward enough to disguise myself by buying a copy

of "P.M." in order to lessen the risk of being recognized by fellow-passengers whom I certainly would not know by sight. I buried my face in that spirited journal, with its dim view of all that had ever happened outside the Soviet Union, as I slunk past the Club Car, and did not fully emerge from its gallant defense of the Negro and the Jew until I was in the smoker, directly behind the baggage compartment. The train was fairly crowded but I was able to find a seat far forward where few passengers could see my face. I decided that my strategy had been sound when the conductor, on punching my ticket, remarked: "See you're not using the Club Car today, Mr. Tompkins. Shall I tell Mr. Snyder not to wait for you for gin rummy?"

"Don't tell him a thing, please," I begged. "I'm feeling done in—a friend of mine was just killed in the Pacific—and I don't want to be bothered."

He clucked consolingly and passed on. I was lucky enough to reach Bedford Hills without other encounters and walked along the darkened platform until I spied a taxicab.

"Can you drive me out to my place?" I asked the driver.

"Sure, Mr. Tompkins. Glad to," he replied. "Goin' to leave your coop down here?"

I nodded. "Yep. I'm too damned tired to drive home. Got any other passengers?"

"Only a couple of maids from the Milgrim place," he said, "but we can drop you first and let them off afterwards if you're feelin' low."

"Hell, no!" I insisted. "This is a free country—first come first served. You can drive me on to Pook's Hill after you've left them at the Milgrim's. Perhaps they'd get in trouble if they were delayed."

The driver looked surprised and rather relieved.

"Haven't heard of any employers firin' maids in these parts since Wilkie was a candidate," he said.

I climbed into the cab, across the rather shapely legs and domestic laps of two attractive-looking girls who murmured vaguely at me and then resumed a discussion of the awful cost of hair-do's. I felt rather pleased with myself. I seemed to have won at least one man's approval in the opening stages of my

celestial rat-race. Now for my first meeting with the woman whom I had married nearly ten years ago, according to the Social Register. Surely she would recognize that there was something radically wrong with her husband before I had been five minutes at Pook's Hill. Why! I wouldn't know where the lavatory was, let alone her bedroom, and what should I call the maid who answered the door, assuming we had a maid?

CHAPTER 2

A pretty, dark-haired maid opened the door of "Pook's Hill" with a twitch of the hip that was wasted on Bedford Hills.

"Oh, it's you!" She remarked conversationally. "Shall I tell Mrs. Tompkins you are here?"

"And why not?" I asked.

She looked at me slant-eyed. "Why not, sir? She must have forgotten to eat an apple this morning. That's why."

"Where shall I dump my hat and coat, Mary?" I asked guessing wildly at her name. Suburban maids were named Mary as often as not.

"The name is Myrtle, Mr. Tompkins," she replied, and did not bother to add the "as well you know" she implied.

"From now on, Myrtle, you shall be Mary so far as I am concerned. And where, Mary, shall I leave my hat and coat?"

"In the den, sir, of course. Come, I'll lend a hand. You've been drinking again."

The girl moved quite close to me, in helping me off with my things and it was only by a distinct effort of will that I refrained from giving that provocative hip the tweak it so openly invited.

"This way, Mr. Tompkins," she said sarcastically, so I rewarded her with a half-hearted smack which brought the requisite "Oh!"—you never can tell when you will need a friend below stairs and it was obvious that Winnie, the dog! had been trifling with her young buttocks if not her affections. That sort of thing must stop, if I was going to get anywhere in my run through the maze. Too abrupt a change in the manners and morals of Winfred Tompkins, however, might arouse suspicion.

"Any news today, Mary?" I asked.

"Nothing, sir. The kennels telephoned to say that Ponto had made a miraculous recovery and could come home tomorrow. I had them send word to the Club to tell you. And Mrs. Tompkins, as I said, forgot to eat her apple."

I looked at her. This was a cue. I mustn't miss it.

"And the doctor didn't keep away?" I asked.

"Him? I should say not! Mrs. Tompkins felt quite unsettled right after lunch and phoned Dr. Rutherford to come over. He's with her now, upstairs, giving her an examination." She rolled her eyes significantly in the direction of the second story.

"Wait a few minutes till I catch my breath and get my bearings, Mary," I said, "and then tell Mrs. Tompkins most discreetly, if you know what I mean, that I have returned and am waiting in my—" I waved vaguely at the room.

"In your den, sir," she agreed. "The name is Myrtle."

The den was one of those things I have never attained, perhaps because I never wanted to. There was a field-stone fireplace, over which the antlered head of a small stag presided with four upturned feet—like a calf in a butcher shop—that held two well dusted shotguns. The walls were lined with books up to a dado—books in sets, with red morocco and gilt bindings: Dickens, Thackeray, Surtees, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dumas, Balzac and similar standard authors—all highly respectable and mostly unread. On the table, beside a humidor and cigarette cases, was a formidable array of unused pipes. Above the shelves, the walls were adorned with etchings of ducks: ducks sitting, ducks swimming, ducks nesting, ducks flying and ducks hanging dead. It was as though Winnie's conscience or attorney had advised him: "You can't go wrong on ducks, old boy!" Instead, he had gone wild.

In one corner of the den my unregenerate Navy eye discerned a small portable bar, with gleaming glasses, decanters and syphons. Further investigation was rewarded by the makings of a very fair Scotch-and-soda. To my annoyance, the cigarette box contained only de luxe Benson & Hedges—it would!—while I am a sucker for Tareytons. Still, any cigarette is better than no cigarette. A little mooching around the fireplace revealed the switch which turned on an electric fire, ingeniously contrived to represent an expensive Manhattan architect's idea of smouldering peat. The whole effect

was very cosy in the "Town and Country" sense—a gentleman's gun-room—and I had settled down most comfortably on the broad leather divan in front of this synthetic blaze when I was interrupted by an angry, tenor voice.

"I say, Tompkins," soared the voice. "I thought we had agreed to be civilized about this thing."

I raised my head to see a lean, dark-haired, dapper little man, with a dinky little British Raj mustache and a faint odor of antiseptics, glaring at me from the doorway.

"Dr. Rutherford, I presume!" I remarked.

"Yes, Winnie," came a pleasant but irritated womanly voice from somewhere behind the doctor, "and I too would like to know what this means."

"Is that you, Jimmie?" I guessed.

"Of course it's me! Who else did you expect? One of those flashy blondes from your office?"

"Sh!" shushed the doctor reprovingly. "What about Virginia? What have you done with her?"

This required serious thought. The glass of Scotch was a good alibi for amnesia. "To whom do you refer?" I asked, putting a slight thickness into my voice.

"To Virginia, my wife!" he snapped. "We agreed—it was understood between the four of us—"

I shook my head virtuously. "I haven't set eyes on her all day," I said. "I don't know where she is and I refuse to be held responsible for her in any particular. She's your look-out, not mine."

"Why, you!—" The doctor started forward, menacing me with his surgical little fists.

"Wait a minute, Jerry," the contralto voice ordered. "Let me handle this!"

Germaine Tompkins stepped forward into the room and stood in the flickering light of the electric peat. "Tell me, Winnie," she asked, "has anything gone wrong?"

My wife was a tall, slim girl, with dark eyes, dark hair parted sleekly in the

1860 style, and a cool, slender neck. She was wearing something low-cut in black velvet, with a white cameo brooch at the "V" of a bodice which suggested a potentially undemure Quakeress. I noticed that she had angry eyes, a sulky mouth and a puzzled expression.

"I'm sorry, Jimmie," I replied, after a good look at her, "but I have decided that I simply couldn't go through with it."

"Do you mean to say—" Dr. Rutherford began, only to be hushed by Germaine. "Let me handle him, Jerry," she whispered. "You'd better go. He's tight. I'll phone you in the morning."

"All right, if you say so, dear," the doctor obeyed.

"And be sure to send me a bill for this call," I added. "Professional services and what-not. And don't come back to my house without my personal invitation."

Dr. Rutherford emitted a muttered comment and disappeared into the gloom of the hall. My wife followed him and I could hear a series of confused and comforting whispers sending him on his way. I had finished my Scotch and poured myself another before my wife rejoined me.

"Have a drink?" I asked.

"No thank you!" she snapped.

"Mad at me?"

"What do you think?" Her tone was cool enough to freeze lava.

"You have every right to be!" That answer, I had found by experience, was unanswerable.

"What do you mean?" she asked in some bewilderment. "Yes, thanks, I will have a drink after all. You see, Winnie, after we had talked it all over the other night after the Bond Rally Dance and realized how we felt about it all, the four of us decided to be—well—civilized about things. And now—"

"I don't feel civilized about my wife," I said, pouring her a stiff one.

Her eyes glittered and her cheek was tinged with color. In spite of her anger, she responded to the idea of male brutes contesting for her favor.

"I didn't think you cared a damn," she said at last, "and it's pretty late in the

day to make a change now. After all, there is Virginia."

That was the cue to clinch the situation. "To hell with Virginia!" I announced. "I'd rather live with you as your friend than sleep with la Rutherford in ten thousand beds. I can't help it," I added boyishly.

She leaned forward and sniffed. "You *have* been drinking, haven't you?" she remarked.

"Of course I have! Today, in town, I suddenly realized what a damn fool I'd been to throw away something really fine for something very second-rate. So I drank. Too much. And the more I drank the more I knew that I was right and that it was here where I belong, with you. If you don't want me to stay, I'll go over to the Country Club for the night. I'll even phone Jerry Rutherford for you—him and his moustache—but I'm damned if I'll go running back to Virginia. She's not pukka!" ("How'm I doing?" I added silently for the benefit of the Master of Ceremonies.)

"Well—" she said, after a long pause. "Perhaps—It's so mixed up—Perhaps you'd better go to bed here and we can talk it over in the morning. All of us."

I shook my head. "I don't want to hold any more mass-meetings on the state of our mutual affections. If you want that tenor tonsil-snatcher, you're welcome to him but I'm damned if I'll be a good sport about it. If you insist, I'll buy you a divorce, but I won't marry Virginia—that's final!"

Germaine's face relaxed. She smiled. "We'll see how things look to you in the morning," she said.

Now was the time to play the trump card.

"Oh yes," I said. "I brought home a present for you."

I walked over to the hanger in the corner and pulled the Tiffany packages from my overcoat pocket.

"Here you are, Jimmie Tompkins," I said, "with all my alleged love."

"Alleged is right!" But she picked eagerly at the wrappings and swiftly ferreted out the diamond brooch. "Why, Winnie, it's lovely—" she began, then whirled on me, her eyes blazing. "Is this a joke?" she demanded.

"Of course not! What's the matter?"

Her laugh was wild. "Oh, nothing, Winnie. Nothing at all. It's just that you should have decided to give *me*—on *her* birthday—a brooch with her initials in diamonds. See them! V.M.R."

So that's the catch, I thought. I should have guessed there would be something wrong with the set-up and I kicked myself for not having bothered to trace out the monogram.

"Don't you see what I mean," I grated, "or must I spell it out for you? Some time back, when we were considering all this civilized swapping of husbands and wives, I put in the order at Tiffany's for Virginia's birthday present. Today, when I picked it up, the clerk smirked at me—he knows your initials don't begin with V—and I suddenly knew I couldn't go ahead with the whole business. So I brought the brooch back to you as a trophy, if you want it. You can do what you like about it. It's yours. You see, Jimmie," I added, "that's the way things are. I'm burning all my bridges."

"Oh!" she said. Then after a long pause, she added, "Ah!"

"I don't think," she remarked, after another pause, "that I'll want to keep this and I'm far too fond of Virginia Rutherford to humiliate her. I think I'll just take this back to Tiffany's and get something else."

So I had led trumps.

"Here's something else to be going on with," I told her. "I got this for you, anyhow, win, lose or draw"—and I produced the gold bracelet. "I thought it would go with that dress and your cameo and—if you still want to wear it—your wedding ring."

She cast quick glances from side to side, like a bird that suspects a snare.

"It's good," she sighed. "Winnie, it's so good. I guess...."

There was a knock at the door. It was Myrtle-Mary.

"Will the master be staying for dinner, Mrs. Tompkins?" she asked.

"Of course I will, Mary," I said. "Is there enough to eat?"

"I'll see, sir," she replied in a manner which was practically an insult to us both.

"And keep a civil tongue in your head," I added.

She handed it back to me. "And keep your hands to yourself, sir," she said as she closed the door.

"Winnie." It was Jimmie's hand restraining me, as I started up.

"Let her go!" I said at last. "It's my fault, I guess. I haven't been happy and I did make a few passes. From now on, I'll try to be a bit more decent and livable. God knows I have plenty to be ashamed of, but nothing disgraceful ... I hope."

"So do I," my wife began. "If you...."

The telephone rang.

She picked up the receiver and listened for a moment, frowning.

"Yes, he's here," she said, passing me the instrument.

"It's for you," she observed. "It's Virginia calling from New York and she sounds *most* annoyed."