By now I had learned to make the nighttime trip out to Pickwick’s almost as skillfully as could Kik. One evening when I had gratefully accepted a cup of coffee, my wall-eyed friend had sat me down for a lecture.

“Cornelia,” he said, settling his bulk on a velvet chair too small for him, “I understand you have no alarm system in your house. This is purest folly. Also I am given to believe that you are not carrying on regular drills for your guests.”

I was always amazed at how well Pickwick knew what went on at the Beje.

“You know that a raid may come any day,” Pickwick continued. “I don’t see how you can avoid one. Scores of people in and out—and the NSB agent over Kan’s up the street.

“Your secret room is no good to you if people can’t get to it in time. I know this Leendert. He is a good man and a very passable electrician. Get him to put a buzzer in every room with a door or window on the street. Then hold practice drills until your people can disappear into that room without a trace in less than a minute. I’ll send someone to get you started.”

Leendert did the electrical work that weekend. He installed a buzzer near the top of the stairs—loud enough to be heard all over the house but not outside. Then he placed buttons to the sounds of the buzzer at every vantage point where trouble might first be spotted.

We were ready for our first trial run. The four unacknowledged members of our household were already climbing up to the secret room two times a day: in the morning to store their clothes at night, bedding and toilet articles, and in the evening to put away their day things. Members of our group, too, who had to spend the night, kept raincoats, hats, anything they had brought with them, in that room.

But the purpose of those drills was to see how rapidly people could reach the room at any hour of the day or night without prior notice. A tall, sallow-faced young man arrived from Pickwick one morning to teach me how to conduct the drills.

“Mealtimes,” he said. “That’s a favorite hour for a raid. Also the middle of the night.” He strode from room to room pointing everywhere to evidence that more than three people lived in the house. “Watch wastebaskets and ashtrays.”

He paused in a bedroom. “If the raid comes at night they must not only take their sheets and blankets but get the mattress turned. That’s the S.D.’s favorite trick—feeling for a warm spot on a bed.”
Mr. Smit stayed for lunch. There were eleven of us at the table that day, including a Jewish lady who had arrived the night before and a Gentile woman and her small daughter, members of our underground, who acted as “escorts.”

Betsie had just passed around a stew so artfully prepared you scarcely missed the meat when, without warning, Mr. Smit leaned back in his chair and pushed the button below the window.

Above us the buzzer sounded. People sprang to their feet, snatching up glasses and plates, scrambling for the stairs, while the cat clawed halfway up the curtain in consternation. Cries of “Faster!” “Not so loud!” and “You’re spilling it!” reached us as Father, Betsie, and I hastily rearranged table and chairs to look like a lunch for three in progress.

“No, leave my place,” Mr. Smit instructed. “Why shouldn’t you have a guest for lunch? The lady and the little girl could have stayed too.”

At last we were seated again and silence reigned upstairs.

The whole process had taken four minutes.

A little later we were all gathered again around the dining room table. Mr. Smit set out before him the incriminating evidence he had found: two spoons and a piece of carrot on the stairs, pipe ashes in an “unoccupied” bedroom. Everyone looked at Eusie who blushed at his ears.

“Also those,” he pointed to the hats of mother and daughter still dangling from the pegs on the dining room wall. “If you have to hide, stop and think about what you arrived with. Besides which, you’re all simply too slow.”

The next night I sounded the alarm again and this time we shaved a minute thirty-three seconds off our run. By our fifth trial we were down to two minutes. We never did achieve Pickwick’s ideal of under a minute, but with practice we learned to jump up from whatever we were doing and get those who had to hide into the secret room in seventy seconds. Father, Toos, and I worked on “stalling techniques” which we would use if the Gestapo came through the shop door; Betsie invented a similar strategy for the side door. With these delaying tactics we hoped we could gain a life-saving seventy ticks of a second hand.

Because the drills struck so close to the fear which haunted each of our guests—never spoken[,] always present—we tried to keep these times from becoming altogether serious. “Like a game!” we’d tell each other: “a race to beat our own record!” One of our group members owned a bakery in the next street. Early in the month I would deposit a supply of sugar coupons with him. Then when I decided it was time for a drill I would go to him for a bag of cream puffs—an inexpressible treat in those sweetless days—to be secreted in my workbench and brought out as a reward for a successful
practice.