THE HOUSE

1947

IT WAS AN INCREDIBLE, insane old house looking wildly out over the city with staring eyes. Birds had built nests in its high cupolas so that the place resembled nothing more than a thin, night-haunted old woman, hair untidily kept.

They had walked up the long hill in the windy autumn night, Maggie and William, and now when she saw the house she set her Saks Fifth Avenue suitcase down and said, "Oh, *no*."

"Oh, yes." He carried his battered old luggage buoyantly. "Isn't it a bean? Look at her, isn't she priceless!"

"You paid two thousand dollars for *that*?" she cried.

"Why, it cost thirty thousand dollars, fifty years ago," he declared, proudly. "And it's all ours. Boy!"

She waited for her heart to beat again. She was sick. She looked at him and then at the house. "It—it looks a little like a Charles Addams house, doesn't it? You know, the man who draws the vampire cartoons for *The New Yorker*?"

But he was already up the walk. She came carefully after him up the moaning front steps. The house soared up, three mansarded, pillared, fluted, rococo flights of it, towers and peaks and bay windows pregnant with broken glass; a fine nicotine stain of years upon it. Inside there was a silence of moths and hung window shades and furniture draped like little white tombs.

Again she felt everything sink within her. When you have lived in a big clean house on a big secluded street all of your life, with servants invisibly keeping the order, with a phone wherever you put out your hand, with a bathtub big as a swimming pool, and your only exercise is the energy it takes to lift an immensely heavy dry martini, then what is one to think when confronted by a rusty mountain, a haunted catacomb, a thing of gray work and utter chaos? Oh God, she thought, if Americans' lives come to this, fewer houses, incredible prices. Why did people marry at all?

It was hard to keep her face together, to make it look right, because William was shouting up and down stairs, walking swiftly, tall, through the rooms, proud as if he'd built it himself.

"I am Hamlet's father's ghost," said William, coming down the dim stairs.

"—father's ghost," said an echo from up the stairwell, at the top of the house.

William smiled and pointed up. "Hear that? That's the Listener at the top of the house. Old friend of mine. He hears everything you say. I was saying to him only yesterday, *I love Maggie!*"

"I love Maggie," said the Listener at the top of the house.

"A man of taste, that Listener," said Bill. He came and held Maggie's shoulders. "Isn't this house *swell?*"

"It's big, I'll give you that. And it's dirty, I'll give you that. And it most certainly *is* old."

She watched his face watching hers. And by the slow change of his face she knew that her own face wasn't doing a very good job of loving the vast place. She had ripped her nylon stockings on a nail, coming in the door. There was dirt on the expensive tweed skirt she had brought from 'Frisco already, and—

He took his hands from her shoulders. He looked at her mouth. "You don't much care for it, do you?"

"Oh, it's not that—"

"Maybe we should have bought that trailer."

"Oh, no, don't be silly. It's just I have to get used to this. Who'd want to live in a bread box trailer? There's more *room* here."

"Or maybe waited another year to get married, with more money."

"Perhaps we won't have to stay here long, anyway," she

said, trying to be gay. But it was the wrong thing to say. He didn't want to go, ever. This was a place he loved and wanted to fix over. There was a permanence in the way he looked at it.

"Up here is the bedroom." At the top of the first landing, where a feeble bulb burned, he opened a door. There was a room with a four-poster bed in it. He had scrubbed and swept the room himself and fixed the bed as a surprise for her. There were bright pictures on the wall and new fresh yellow-print wallpaper.

"It's nice," she said, still forcing it.

He did not look at her as he said, tonelessly, "I'm glad you like it."

THE NEXT MORNING he was all through the house, up and down the stairs, whistling and singing, full of breakfast vigor and ideas. She heard him ripping down the old shades, sweeping the hall, breaking the old glass shards from a broken kitchen window. She lay in bed. The warm yellow sun streamed in the south window and touched her idle hand on the coverlet. She lay, not wanting to move, incredulous at the sound of her resilient husband ricocheting from room to room with the momentum of his inspiration. *Resilient* was the word. You hurt or disappointed him one day, and the next day it was forgotten. He bounced back. That was more than she could say for herself. He was like a string of

firecrackers set off to explode all through the echoing house.

She slid from the bed. Let's try and make it better, she thought. Let's keep the face right. She looked in the mirror. Is there any way, she wondered, to *paint* a smile on?

He handed her a dust mop and a kiss after the instantaneous burnt breakfast.

"Onward, upward, excelsior!" he cried. "Do you realize that man's preoccupation is not with love or sex or getting on or keeping up with the Joneses? It is not for fame or fortune! No, man's longest battle, mistress, is with the element of dust. It comes in every joint and elbow of the house! Why, if we sat down and rocked in our rocking chairs for a year we'd be buried in dust, the cities would be lost, the gardens would be deserts, the living rooms dustbins! Christ, I wish we could pick the whole house up and shake it out!"

They worked.

But she tired. First it was her back and then it was, "My head aches." He brought her aspirin. And then it was sheer exhaustion from the many many rooms. She had lost count of the rooms. And the particles of dust in the rooms? God, it ran into the billions! She went sneezing and running her small nose into a hankie, confused and bitter-red, all through the house.

"You'd better sit down," he said.

"No, I'm all right," she said.

"You'd better go rest." He wasn't smiling.

"I'll be fine. It's not lunchtime yet."

That was the trouble. The first morning, and herself tired already. And she felt a rush of guilty color to her cheeks. Because it was a strange tiredness made of unnecessary strains and superfluous actions and tensions. You can only deceive yourself so far, no further. She was tired, yes, but not of the work, only of this place. Not twenty hours new in it, and already tired of it, sick of it. And he saw her sickness. One small part of her face showed it. Which part she could not tell. It was like a puncture in a tube, you couldn't tell where the puncture was until you submerged the tube and then bubbles rose in the water. She didn't want him to know her sickness. But every time she thought of her friends coming to see her and what they would say to one another at their private teas: "Whatever happened to Maggie Clinton?" "Oh, didn't you hear? She married that writer fellow and they live on Bunker Hill. On Bunker Hill, can you imagine? In an old haunted house or some such!" "We must go up some time." "Oh, yes, it's priceless. The thing is toppling over, simply toppling. Poor Mag!"

"You used to be able to play I-don't-know-how-many tennis sets every morning and afternoon, with a round of golf thrown in," he said.

"I'll be all right," she said, knowing nothing else to say.

They were on the landing. The morning sun fell through the tinted rim glasses of the high window. There were little pink glasses and blue glasses and red and yellow and purple

and orange glasses. The many colors glowed on her arms and on the banister.

He had been staring for some moments at the little colored windowpanes. Now he looked at her. "Pardon the melodramatics," he said. "But I learned something when I was a kid, pretty young. My grandmother had a hall and at the top of the stairs was a window with little colored glass in it, just like this. I used to go up and look through the colored panes, and—" He tossed down the dust rag. "It's no use. You wouldn't understand." He walked down the stairs away from her.

She stood looking after him. She looked at the colored panes. What had he been trying to say, some ridiculous, obvious thing he had decided finally not to say? She moved to the window.

Through the pink pane the world was roseate below, and warm. The neighborhood, poised like a squalorous avalanche on the brink of a cliff, took on tones of the rose and a sunset.

She looked through a yellow pane. And the world was the sun, all bright and luminous and fresh.

She looked through a purple glass. The world was covered with cloud, the world was infected and sick, and people moving in that world were leprous, lost, and abandoned. The houses were black and monstrous. Everything seemed bruised.

She returned to the yellow pane. The sun was back. The smallest dog looked clever and bright. The dirtiest child looked washed. The rusty houses were seemingly painted afresh.

She looked down the stairs at where William was dialing

the phone, quietly, no expression on his face. And then she looked at the colored panes again and knew what he meant. You had a choice of panes to look through. The dark one or the light one.

She felt quite lost. She felt it was too late. Even when it isn't too late, sometimes you feel it is. To say something, to speak a word. One word. But she wasn't ready. The whole idea was too new to her. She couldn't speak now and fully mean it. It would have to seep into her. She could feel the first faint excitement, but then smothered with fear and hatred of herself. And then quick little thrusts of hate at the house and William, because they had made her hate herself. But finally it resolved into simple irritation, and only at her own blindness.

William was phoning below. His voice came up the bright stairwell. He was calling the real estate agent.

"Mr. Woolf? About that house you sold me last week. Look, do you think *I* could sell it? With maybe a *little* profit?"

There was a silence. She heard her heart beating swiftly.

William lay the phone down. He did not look up at her.

"He can sell it," William said. "For a little profit."

"For a little profit," said the Listener at the top of the house.

THEY WERE HAVING A SILENT LUNCHEON when somebody banged on the front door. William, with a silence unusual to him, went to answer.

"The darn doorbell doesn't work!" cried a woman's voice in the hall.

"Bess!" cried William.

"Bill, you old son of a—hey, this is a swell place!"

"Do you like it?"

"Do I *like* it? Tie a bandanna on my hairdo and hand me a mop!"

They jabbered on. Maggie, in the kitchen, put down her butter knife and listened, cold and apprehensive.

"God, what I wouldn't give for a place like this!" cried Bess Alderdice, stamping about the house. "Look at the hand-carved banister. Hey-soose; as the Spanish say; look at that crystal chandelier! Who'd you hit over the head, Bill?"

"We were lucky it was for sale," said Bill, in the hall.

"I've had my eye on this place for years! And you, you lucky bun-of-a-sitch, you grab it out from under sweet Bess Alderdice's grimy little claws."

"Bring your grimy little claws out into the kitchen and have some lunch."

"Lunch, hell, when do we work? I want a hand in this!"

Maggie appeared in the hall.

"Maggie!" Bess Alderdice in her tailored gabardines and flat-heeled shoes and wild black hair shouted at her. "How I *envy* you!"

"Hello, Bess."

"Girl, you look tired, or something," cried Bess. "Look,

you sit down and I'll help Bill. I've got muscles from eating Wheaties!"

"We're not going to stay here," said Bill quietly.

"You're what?" Bess looked at him as if he was insane. "In again out again, what's your name? Finnegan? Well, sell it to mama, mama wants it."

"We're going to try to find a small cottage somewhere," said Bill, falsely hearty.

"You know what you can do with cottages," said Bess, snorting. "Well, look here, since I'm going to buy this house out from under you, Bill, you can at least help me clean up *my* place! Give me a hand with these shades!" And she walked in to tear the moth-eaten shades off the parlor windows.

They worked all that afternoon, Bess and William. "You just go lie down, honey," said Bess, patting Maggie. "I'm getting free help."

The house thundered with echoes and scrapings. There were explosions of laughter. There were monster dust storms raging in the halls, and once Bess almost fell downstairs in her laughing. There was a banging and a creaking of nails drawn from walls, there was a musical tinkling of bumped chandeliers, there was the rip of old wallpaper coming off. "We'll make this into a tea room, and this here, why, we'll knock this wall out!" shouted Bess in the dust storms. "Right!" laughed William. "And I saw a reasonably priced set of antique chairs would just go in here!" said Bess. "Good idea!" said Bill. They gibbered and walked around, their hands on everything. He

made blue chalk marks and threw useless furniture out windows, and banged the plumbing. "That's my boy!" cried Bess. "How about having a rack of fine Bavarian plates around this wall, Bill?" "Great! Wonderful!"

Maggie was outside of it. First she went uselessly up to her bedroom, then she walked down and out into the sunlight. But she couldn't escape the sound of Bill's happiness. He was planning and pounding and laughing, and all with another woman. He had forgotten about selling the house. What would he do later, when he remembered that he had called the real estate agent? Stop laughing, of course.

Maggie tightened her hands together. What was it that this Bess Alderdice had? Certainly not her breastless, hard, clumsy body, nor the wild unshorn locks of hair or unplucked brows! Whatever it was it was an enthusiasm and freshness and power that she, Maggie, did not have. But *might* have? After all, what right did Bess have coming here? It wasn't *her* house, was it? Not yet, anyway.

She heard Bess's voice through an open window. "Do you realize what a history this house has? It was built in 1899 by that lawyer. This used to be *the* neighborhood. This house had and still *has* dignity. People were proud to live here. They can *still* be."

Maggie stood in the hall. How did you make things right in the world? Things had been wrong until Bess walked in, righting them. How? Not with words. Words could not really make things one way or another. There was more than that. There

were actions, continuous, going-on actions. Right now, Bill enjoyed Bess more than he would enjoy Maggie the rest of the day. Why? Because Bess did things with quick hands and an alive face, finished them, and went on to others.

Most of all, though, it was Bill. Had he ever worked in *his* life, nailed a nail, carried a carpet? No. Being a writer he had sat and sat and sat all his life until today. He was no more prepared for this House of Horror—step up, only a dime, one tenth of a dollar!—than she was. How then could he change suddenly overnight, fling himself on this house tooth and nail? The answer started with its simplicity. He loved Maggie. This would be her house. He'd have done the same if they stayed in an overnight cave. *Anywhere* was good, if Maggie was there.

Maggie closed her eyes. It all revolved around herself. *She* was the catalyst. Without her, he'd sit down, never work at all. And she'd been half gone all day. The secret lay not in Bess or William, but in love itself. Love was always the reason for work, for enthusiasm. And if William worked to make her happy, then couldn't she do the same for him? Love has always been building something somewhere. Either that or it decays. All married life you build—build egos, build houses, build children. If one stops, the other keeps going from the momentum. But then it's only a half structure. It roars down, finally, like a tower of cards.

Maggie looked at her hands. An apology now to Bill would be embarrassing, and superfluous. How to make things right,

then? The same way you made them wrong. The same process, reversed. Things were wrong when you shattered a vase, ripped a drape, or left a book in the rain. You righted them by mending the vase, sewing the drape, buying a new book. These were *done* things. Her failure to this house was a history of things undone, the slow hand, the unwilling eyes, the lifeless voice.

She picked up a dust rag, climbed the stepladder, shined the chandelier; then she swept the halls with a great idea filling her. She saw the house, finished. Clean antiques, plush and warm color. New copper, shined woodwork, clean chandeliers, fresh-cut rose carpets, the upright piano rewaxed, the old oil lamps circuited with lights, the hand-carved banister re-stained, and the sun pouring though the high colored windows. It would be another age. Friends would dance in the wide ballroom on the third floor, under the eight huge chandeliers. There would be old music boxes, old wine, and a mellow warmth through the house like a fine sherry aroma. It would take time, they had little money, but in a year perhaps—

People would say, "It's wonderful at Bill and Mag's, like another age; so comfortable. You'd never guess from outside. I wish *we* could live on Bunker Hill in one of those wondrous old mansions!"

She ripped off great faded hunks of wallpaper. It was only then that Bill heard her and came to the hall door, surprised. "I *thought* I heard a noise. How long've *you* been working?"

"The last half hour." This time her smile was whole.