

desire, so violent that it could not be given to a casual encounter. He had surrendered to it, on a few rare occasions through the years, with women he had thought he liked. He had been left feeling an angry emptiness—because he had sought an act of triumph, though he had not known of what nature, but the response he received was only a woman's acceptance of a casual pleasure, and he knew too clearly that what he had won had no meaning. He was left, not with a sense of attainment, but with a sense of his own degradation. He grew to hate his desire. He fought it. He came to believe the doctrine that this desire was wholly physical, a desire, not of consciousness, but of matter, and he rebelled against the thought that his flesh could be free to choose and that its choice was impervious to the will of his mind. He had spent his life in mines and mills, shaping matter to his wishes by the power of his brain—and he found it intolerable that he should be unable to control the matter of his own body. He fought it. He had won his every battle against inanimate nature; but this was a battle he lost.

It was the difficulty of the conquest that made him want Lillian. She seemed to be a woman who expected and deserved a pedestal; this made him want to drag her down to his bed. To drag her down, were the words in his mind; they gave him a dark pleasure, the sense of a victory worth winning.

He could not understand why—he thought it was an obscene conflict, the sign of some secret depravity within him—why he felt, at the same time, a profound pride at the thought of granting to a woman the title of his wife. The feeling was solemn and shining; it was almost as if he felt that he wished to honor a woman by the act of possessing her. Lillian seemed to fit the image he had not known he held, had not known he wished to find; he saw the grace, the pride, the purity; the rest was in himself; he did not know that he was looking at a reflection.

He remembered the day when Lillian came from New York to his office, of her own sudden choice, and asked him to take her through his mills. He heard a soft, low, breathless tone—the tone of admiration—growing in her voice, as she questioned him about his work and looked at the place around her. He looked at her graceful figure moving against the bursts of furnace flame, and at the light swift steps of her high heels stumbling through drifts of slag, as she walked resolutely by his side. The look in her eyes, when she watched a heat of steel being poured, was like his own feeling for it made visible to him. When her eyes moved up to his face, he saw the same look, but intensified to a degree that seemed to make her helpless and silent. It was at dinner, that evening, that he asked her to marry him.

It took him some time after his marriage before he admitted to himself that this was torture. He still remembered the night when he admitted it, when he told himself—the veins of his wrists pulled tight as he stood by the bed, looking down at Lillian—that he deserved the torture and that he would endure it. Lillian was not looking at him; she was adjusting her hair. "May I go to sleep now?" she asked.

She had never objected; she had never refused him anything; she submitted whenever he wished. She submitted in the manner of complying with the rule that it was, at times, her duty to become an inanimate object turned over to her husband's use.

She did not censure him. She made it clear that she took it for granted that men had degrading instincts which constituted the secret, ugly part of marriage. She was condescendingly tolerant. She smiled, in amused distaste, at the intensity of what he experienced. "It's the most undignified pastime I know of," she said to him once, "but I have never entertained the illusion that men are superior to animals."

His desire for her had died in the first week of their marriage. What remained was only a need which he was unable to destroy. He had never entered a whorehouse; he thought, at times, that the self-loathing he would experience there could be no worse than what he felt when he was driven to enter his wife's bedroom.

He would often find her reading a book. She would put it aside, with a white ribbon to mark the pages. When he lay exhausted, his eyes closed, still breathing in gasps, she would turn on the light, pick up the book and continue her reading.

He told himself that he deserved the torture, because he had wished never to touch her again and was unable to maintain his decision. He despised himself for that. He despised a need which now held no shred of joy or meaning, which had become the mere need of a woman's body, an anonymous body that belonged to a woman whom he had to forget while he held it. He became convinced that the need was depravity.

He did not condemn Lillian. He felt a dreary, indifferent respect for her. His hatred of his own desire had made him accept the doctrine that women were pure and that a pure woman was one incapable of physical pleasure.

Through the quiet agony of the years of his marriage, there had been one thought which he would not permit himself to consider: the thought of infidelity. He had given his word. He intended to keep it. It was not loyalty to Lillian; it was not the person of Lillian that he wished to protect from dishonor—but the person of his wife.

He thought of that now, standing at the window. He had not wanted to enter her room. He had fought against it. He had fought, more fiercely, against knowing the particular reason why he would not be able to withstand it tonight. Then, seeing her, he had known suddenly that he would not touch her. The reason which had driven him here tonight was the reason which made it impossible for him.

He stood still, feeling free of desire, feeling the bleak relief of indifference to his body, to this room, even to his presence here. He had turned away from her, not to see her lacquered chastity. What he thought he should feel was respect; what he felt was revulsion.

"... but Dr. Pritchett said that our culture is dying because our universities have to depend on the aims of the meat packers, the steel puddlers and the purveyors of breakfast cereals."

Why had she married him?—he thought. That bright, crisp voice was not talking at random. She knew why he had come here. She