

now, for the first time, was granted with full awareness to the real, the actual nature of his deed: a tone of admiration.

Suddenly, he knew that this was the goal of his restless hours, this was the pleasure he had despaired of finding, *this* was the celebration he had wanted.

"Let's have a drink, Lil," he said.

Pouring the liquor, he glanced at her across the room, as she lay stretched limply in her chair. "Let him get his divorce," he said. "He won't have the last word. *They* will. The butcher's assistants. Señor Gonzales and Cuffy Meigs."

She did not answer. When he approached, she took the glass from him with a sloppily indifferent sweep of her hand. She drank, not in the manner of a social gesture, but like a lonely drinker in a saloon—for the physical sake of the liquor.

He sat down on the arm of the davenport, improperly close to her, and sipped his drink, watching her face. After a while, he asked, "What does he think of me?"

The question did not seem to astonish her. "He thinks you're a fool," she answered. "He thinks life's too short to notice your existence."

"He'd notice it, if—" He stopped.

"—if you bashed him over the head with a club? I'm not too sure. He'd merely blame himself for not having moved out of the club's reach. Still, that would be your only chance."

She shifted her body, sliding lower in the armchair, stomach forward, as if relaxation were ugliness, as if she were granting him the kind of intimacy that required no poise and no respect.

"That was the first thing I noticed about him," she said, "when I met him for the first time—that he was not afraid. He looked as if he felt certain that there was nothing any of us could do to him—so certain that he didn't even know the issue or the nature of what he felt."

"How long since you saw him last?"

"Three months. I haven't seen him since . . . since the Gift Certificate . . ."

"I saw him at an industrial meeting two weeks ago. He still looks that way—only more so. *Now*, he looks as if he knows it." He added, "You *have* failed, Lillian."

She did not answer. She pushed her hat off with the back of her hand: it rolled down to the carpet, its feather curling like a question mark. "I remember the first time I saw his mills," she said. "*His* mills! You can't imagine what he felt about them. You wouldn't know the kind of intellectual arrogance it takes to feel as if anything pertaining to him, anything he touched, were made sacred by the touch. *His* mills, *his* Metal, *his* money, *his* bed, *his* wife!" She glanced up at him, a small flicker piercing the lethargic emptiness of her eyes. "He never noticed your existence. He did notice mine. I'm still Mrs. Rearden—at least for another month."

"Yes . . ." he said, looking down at her with a sudden, new interest.

"Mrs. Rearden!" she chuckled. "You wouldn't know what that

meant to him. No feudal lord ever felt or demanded such reverence for the title of *his* wife—or held it as such a symbol of honor. Of his unbending, untouchable, inviolate, stainless honor!" She waved her hand in a vague motion, indicating the length of her sprawled body. "Caesar's wife!" she chuckled. "Do you remember what she was supposed to be? No, you wouldn't. She was supposed to be above reproach."

He was staring down at her with the heavy, blind stare of impotent hatred—a hatred of which she was the sudden symbol, not the object. "He didn't like it when his Metal was thrown into common, public use, for any chance passer-by to make . . . did he?"

"No, he didn't."

His words were blurring a little, as if weighted with drops of the liquor he had swallowed: "Don't tell me that you helped us to get that Gift Certificate as a favor to me and that you gained nothing. . . . I know why you did it."

"You knew it at the time."

"Sure. That's why I like you, Lillian."

His eyes kept coming back to the low cut of her gown. It was not the smooth skin that attracted his glance, not the exposed rise of her breasts, but the fraud of the safety pin beyond the edge.

"I'd like to see him beaten," he said. "I'd like to hear him scream with pain, just once."

"You won't, Jimmy."

"Why does he think he's better than the rest of us—he and that sister of mine?"

She chuckled.

He rose as if she had slapped him. He went to the bar and poured himself another drink, not offering to refill her glass.

She was speaking into space, staring past him. "He did notice my existence—even though I can't lay railroad tracks for him and erect bridges to the glory of his Metal. I can't build his mills—but I can destroy them. I can't produce his Metal—but I can take it away from him. I can't bring men down to their knees in admiration—but I can bring them down to their knees."

"Shut up!" he screamed in terror, as if she were coming too close to that fogbound alley which had to remain unseen.

She glanced up at his face. "You're such a coward, Jim."

"Why don't you get drunk?" he snapped, sticking his unfinished drink at her mouth, as if he wanted to strike her.

Her fingers half-closed limply about the glass, and she drank, spilling the liquor down her chin, her breast and her gown.

"Oh hell, Lillian, you're a mess!" he said and, not troubling to reach for his handkerchief, he stretched out his hand to wipe the liquor with the flat of his palm. His fingers slipped under the gown's neckline, closing over her breast, his breath catching in a sudden gulp, like a hiccough. His eyelids were drawing closed, but he caught a glimpse of her face leaning back unresistingly, her mouth swollen with revulsion. When he reached for her mouth, her arms embraced him obediently and her mouth responded, but the response was just a pressure, not a kiss.

He raised his head to glance at her face. Her teeth were bared in a smile, but she was staring past him, as if mocking some invisible presence, her smile lifeless, yet loud with malice, like the grin of a fleshless skull.

He jerked her closer, to stifle the sight of his own shudder. His hands were going through the automatic motions of intimacy—and she complied, but in a manner that made him feel as if the beats of her arteries under his touch were snickering giggles. They were both performing an expected routine, a routine invented by someone and imposed upon them, performing it in mockery, in hatred, in defiling parody on its inventors.

He felt a sightless, heedless fury, part-horror, part-pleasure—the horror of committing an act he would never dare confess to anyone—the pleasure of committing it in blasphemous defiance of those to whom he would not dare confess it. He was himself!—the only conscious part of his rage seemed to be screaming to him—he was, at last, himself!

They did not speak. They knew each other's motive. Only two words were pronounced between them. "*Mrs. Rearden*," he said.

They did not look at each other when he pushed her into his bedroom and onto his bed, falling against her body, the look of partners in guilt, the furtive, smutty look of children defiling someone's clean fence by chalking sneaky scratches intended as symbols of obscenity.

Afterward, it did not disappoint him that what he had possessed was an inanimate body without resistance or response. It was not a woman that he had wanted to possess. It was not an act in celebration of life that he had wanted to perform—but an act in celebration of the triumph of impotence

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Cherryl unlocked the door and slipped in quietly, almost surreptitiously, as if hoping not to be seen or to see the place which was her home. The sense of Dagny's presence—of Dagny's world—had supported her on her way back, but when she entered her own apartment the walls seemed to swallow her again into the suffocation of a trap.

The apartment was silent; a wedge of light cut across the anteroom from a door left half-open. She dragged herself mechanically in the direction of her room. Then she stopped.

The open band of light was the door of Jim's study, and on the illuminated strip of its carpet she saw a woman's hat with a feather stirring faintly in a draft.

She took a step forward. The room was empty, she saw two glasses, one on a table, the other on the floor, and a woman's purse lying on the seat of an armchair. She stood, in unreacting stupor, until she heard the muffled drawl of two voices behind the door of Jim's bedroom; she could not distinguish the words, only the quality of the sounds; Jim's voice had a tone of irritation, the woman's—of contempt.

Then she found herself in her own room, fumbling frantically to lock her door. She had been flung here by the blind panic of escape.