tell me. That is what you should have discovered for me. I don't know. You were to create it and offer it to me. That was your trust, your obligation, your responsibility. But you won't be the first man to default on that promise. It's the easiest of all debts to repudiate. Oh, you'd never welsh on a payment for a load of iron ore delivered to you. Only on a life."

She was moving casually across the room, the green-yellow folds of her skirt coiling in long waves about her.

"I know that claims of this kind are impractical," she said. "I have no mortgage on you, no collateral, no guns, no chains. I have no hold on you at all, Henry—nothing but your honor."

He stood looking at her as if it took all of his effort to keep his eyes directed at her face, to keep seeing her, to endure the sight. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Darling, there are so many things you could guess by yourself, if you really wished to know what I want. For instance, if you have been avoiding me so blatantly for months, wouldn't I want to know the reason?"

"I have been very busy."

She shrugged. "A wife expects to be the first concern of her husband's existence. I didn't know that when you swore to forsake all others, it didn't include blast furnaces."

She came closer and, with an amused smile that seemed to mock them both, she slipped her arms around him.

It was the swift, instinctive, ferocious gesture of a young bridegroom at the unrequested contact of a whore—the gesture with which he tore her arms off his body and threw her aside.

He stood, paralyzed, shocked by the brutality of his own reaction. She was staring at him, her face naked in bewilderment, with no mystery, no pretense or protection; whatever calculations she had made, this was a thing she had not expected.

"I'm sorry, Lillian . . ." he said, his voice low, a voice of sincerity and of suffering.

She did not answer.

"I'm sorry . . . It's just that I'm very tired," he added, his voice lifeless; he was broken by the triple lie, one part of which was a disloyalty he could not bear to face; it was not the disloyalty to Lillian.

She gave a brief chuckle. "Well, if that's the effect your work has on you, I may come to approve of it. Do forgive me. I was merely trying to do my duty. I thought that you were a sensualist who'd never rise above the instincts of an animal in the gutter. I'm not one of those bitches who belong in it." She was snapping the words dryly, absently, without thinking. Her mind was on a question mark, racing over every possible answer.

It was her last sentence that made him face her suddenly, face her simply, directly, not as one on the defensive any longer. "Lillian, what purpose do you live for?" he asked.

"What a crude question! No enlightened person would ever ask it."

"Well, what is it that enlightened people do with their lives?"

"Perhaps they do not attempt to do anything. *That* is their enlightenment."

"What do they do with their time?"

"They certainly don't spend it on manufacturing plumbing pipes."

"Tell me, why do you keep making those cracks? I know that you feel contempt for the plumbing pipes. You've made that clear long ago. Your contempt means nothing to me. Why keep repeating it?"

He wondered why this hit her; he did not know in what manner, but he knew that it did. He wondered why he felt with absolute certainty that *that* had been the right thing to say.

She asked, her voice dry, "What's the purpose of the sudden questionnaire?"

He answered simply, "I'd like to know whether there's anything that you really want. If there is, I'd like to give it to you, if I can."

"You'd like to *buy* it? That's all you know *paying* for things. You get off easily, don't you? No, it's not as simple as that. What I want is non-material."

"What is it?"

"You."

"How do you mean that, Lillian? You don't mean it in the gutter sense."

"No, not in the gutter sense."

"How, then?"

She was at the door, she turned, she raised her head to look at him and smiled coldly.

"You wouldn't understand it," she said and walked out.

The torture remaining to him was the knowledge that she would never want to leave him and he would never have the right to leave—the thought that he owed her at least the feeble recognition of sympathy, of respect for a feeling he could neither understand nor return—the knowledge that he could summon nothing for her, except contempt, a strange, total, unreasoning contempt, impervious to pity, to reproach, to his own pleas for justice—and, hardest to bear, the proud revulsion against his own verdict, against his demand that he consider himself lower than this woman he despised.

Then it did not matter to him any longer, it all receded into some outer distance, leaving only the thought that he was willing to bear anything—leaving him in a state which was both tension and peace—because he lay in bed, his face pressed to the pillow, thinking of Dagny, of her slender, sensitive body stretched beside him, trembling under the touch of his fingers. He wished she were back in New York. If she were, he would have gone there, now, at once, in the middle of the night.

* *

Eugene Lawson sat at his desk as if it were the control panel of a bomber plane commanding a continent below. But he forgot it, at times, and slouched down, his muscles going slack inside his suit, as if he were pouting at the world. His mouth was the one part of him which he could not pull tight at any time; it was uncomfortably prominent in his lean face, attracting the eyes of any listener; when he spoke, the movement ran through his lower lip, twisting its moist flesh into extraneous contortions of its own.

"I am not ashamed of it," said Eugene Lawson. "Miss Taggart, I