

the room. What he put down before her, when he returned, was a thick album of clippings: it contained his newspaper interviews and his press agent's releases.

"I was one of the big industrialists, too," he said proudly. "I was a national figure as you can see. My life will make a book of deep, humane significance. I'd have written it long ago, if I had the proper tools of production." He banged angrily upon his typewriter. "I can't work on this damn thing. It skips spaces. How can I get any inspiration and write a best seller with a typewriter that skips spaces?"

"Thank you, Mr. Hunsacker," she said. "I believe this is all you can tell me—" She rose. "You don't happen to know what became of the Starnes heirs?"

"Oh, they ran for cover after they'd wrecked the factory. There were three of them, two sons and a daughter. Last I heard, they were hiding their faces out in Durance, Louisiana."

The last sight she caught of Lee Hunsacker, as she turned to go, was his sudden leap to the stove; he seized the lid off the pot and dropped it to the floor, scorching his fingers and cursing; the stew was burned

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Little was left of the Starnes fortune and less of the Starnes heirs.

"You won't like having to see them, Miss Taggart," said the chief of police of Durance, Louisiana; he was an elderly man with a slow, firm manner and a look of bitterness acquired not in blind resentment, but in fidelity to clear-cut standards. "There's all sorts of human beings to see in the world, there's murderers and criminal maniacs—but, somehow, I think these Starnes persons are what decent people shouldn't have to see. They're a bad sort, Miss Taggart. Clammy and bad . . . Yes, they're still here in town—two of them, that is. The third one is dead. Suicide. That was four years ago. It's an ugly story. He was the youngest of the three, Eric Starnes. He was one of those chrome young men who go around whining about their sensitive feelings, when they're well past forty. He needed love, was his line. He was being kept by older women, when he could find them. Then he started running after a girl of sixteen, a nice girl who wouldn't have anything to do with him. She married a boy she was engaged to. Eric Starnes got into their house on the wedding day, and when they came back from church after the ceremony, they found him in their bedroom, dead, messy dead, his wrists slashed. . . . Now I say there might be forgiveness for a man who kills himself quietly. Who can pass judgment on another man's suffering and on the limit of what he can bear? But the man who kills himself, making a show of his death in order to hurt somebody, the man who gives his life for malice—there's no forgiveness for him, no excuse, he's rotten clear through, and what he deserves is that people spit at his memory, instead of feeling sorry for him and hurt, as he wanted them to be. . . . Well, that was Eric Starnes. I can tell you where to find the other two, if you wish."

She found Gerald Starnes in the ward of a flophouse. He lay half-twisted on a cot. His hair was still black, but the white stubble of his chin was like a mist of dead weeds over a vacant face. He was soggy

drunk. A pointless chuckle kept breaking his voice when he spoke, the sound of a static, unfocused malevolence.

"It went bust, the great factory. That's what happened to it. Just went up and bust. Does that bother you, madame? The factory was rotten. Everybody is rotten. I'm supposed to beg somebody's pardon, but I won't. I don't give a damn. People get fits trying to keep up the show, when it's all rot, black rot, the automobiles, the buildings and the souls, and it doesn't make any difference, one way or another. You should've seen the kind of literati who turned flip-flops when I whistled, when I had the dough. The professors, the poets, the intellectuals, the world-savers and the brother-lovers. Any way I whistled. I had lots of fun. I wanted to do good, but now I don't. There isn't any good. Not any goddamn good in the whole goddamn universe. I don't propose to take a bath if I don't feel like it, and that's that. If you want to know anything about the factory, ask my sister. My sweet sister who had a trust fund they couldn't touch, so she got out of it safe, even if she's in the hamburger class now, not the *filet mignon à la Sauce Béarnaise*, but would she give a penny of it to her brother? The noble plan that busted was her idea as much as mine, but will she give me a penny? Hah! Go take a look at the duchess, take a look. What do I care about the factory? It was just a pile of greasy machinery. I'll sell you all my rights, claims and title to it--for a drink. I'm the last of the Starnes name. It used to be a great name --Starnes. I'll sell it to you. You think I'm a stinking bum, but that goes for all the rest of them and for rich ladies like you, too. I wanted to do good for humanity. Hah! I wish they'd all boil in oil. Be lots of fun. I wish they'd choke. What does it matter? What does anything matter?"

On the next cot, a white-haired, shriveled little tramp turned in his sleep, moaning; a nickel clattered to the floor out of his rags. Gerald Starnes picked it up and slipped it into his own pocket. He glanced at Dagny. The creases of his face were a malignant smile.

"Want to wake him up and start trouble?" he asked. "If you do, I'll say that you're lying."

The ill-smelling bungalow, where she found Ivy Starnes, stood on the edge of town, by the shore of the Mississippi. Hanging strands of moss and clots of waxy foliage made the thick vegetation look as if it were drooling; the too many draperies, hanging in the stagnant air of a small room, had the same look. The smell came from undusted corners and from incense burning in silver jars at the feet of contorted Oriental deities. Ivy Starnes sat on a pillow like a baggy Buddha. Her mouth was a tight little crescent, the petulant mouth of a child demanding adulation--on the spreading, pallid face of a woman past fifty. Her eyes were two lifeless puddles of water. Her voice had the even, dripping monotone of rain:

"I can't answer the kind of questions you're asking, my girl. The research laboratory? The engineers? Why should I remember anything about them? It was my father who was concerned with such matters, not I. My father was an evil man who cared for nothing but business. He had no time for love, only for money. My brothers and I lived on a different plane. Our aim was not to produce gadgets, but to do good. We brought a great, new plan into the factory. It was eleven