

had to see you." She added a small, gruntlike sound of amusement, to dilute her statement's frankness.

"Good," he said, his voice comfortable and noncommittal.

"I had to come here, because I thought it best, in this particular matter, not to be seen together in public."

"That is always wise."

"I seem to remember having been useful to you in the past."

"In the past--yes."

"I am sure that I can count on you."

"Of course—only isn't that an old-fashioned, unphilosophical remark? How can we ever be sure of anything?"

"Jim," she snapped suddenly, "you've got to help me!"

"My dear, I'm at your disposal, I'd do anything to help you," he answered, the rules of their language requiring that any open statement be answered by a blatant lie. Lillian was slipping, he thought—and he experienced the pleasure of dealing with an inadequate adversary.

She was neglecting, he noted, even the perfection of her particular trademark: her grooming. A few strands were escaping from the drilled waves of her hair—her nails, matching her gown, were the deep shade of coagulated blood, which made it easy to notice the chipped polish at their tips—and against the broad, smooth, creamy expanse of her skin in the low, square cut of her gown, he observed the tiny glitter of a safety pin holding the strap of her slip.

"You've got to prevent it!" she said, in the belligerent tone of a plea disguised as a command. "You've got to stop it!"

"Really? What?"

"My divorce."

"Oh . . ." His features dropped into sudden earnestness.

"You know that he's going to divorce me, don't you?"

"I've heard some rumors about it."

"It's set for next month. And when I say *set*, that's just what I mean. Oh, it's cost him plenty—but he's bought the judge, the clerks, the bailiffs, their backers, their backers' backers, a few legislators, half a dozen administrators—he's bought the whole legal process, like a private thoroughfare, and there's no single crossroad left for me to squeeze through to stop it!"

"I see."

"You know, of course, what made him start divorce proceedings?"

"I can guess."

"And I did it as a favor to *you*!" Her voice was growing anxiously shrill. "I told you about your sister in order to let you get that Gift Certificate for your friends, which—"

"I swear I don't know who let it out!" he cried hastily. "Only a very few at the top knew that you'd been our informer, and I'm sure nobody would dare mention—"

"Oh, I'm sure nobody did. He'd have the brains to guess it, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, then you knew that you were taking a chance."

"I didn't think he'd go that far. I didn't think he'd ever divorce me. I didn't--"

He chuckled suddenly, with a glance of astonishing perceptiveness. "You didn't think that guilt is a rope that wears thin, did you, Lillian?"

She looked at him, startled, then answered stonily. "I don't think it does."

"It does, my dear—for men such as your husband."

"I don't want him to divorce me!" It was a sudden scream. "I don't want to let him go free! I won't permit it! I won't let the whole of my life be a total failure!" She stopped abruptly, as if she had admitted too much.

He was chuckling softly, nodding his head with a slow movement that had an air of intelligence, almost of dignity, by signifying a complete understanding.

"I mean . . . after all, he's my husband," she said defensively

"Yes, Lillian, yes, I know."

"Do you know what he's planning? He's going to get the decree and he's going to cut me off without a penny—no settlement, no alimony, nothing! He's going to have the last word. Don't you see? If he gets away with it, then . . . then the Gift Certificate was no victory for me at all!"

"Yes, my dear, I see."

"And besides . . . It's preposterous that I should have to think of it, but what am I going to live on? The little money I had of my own is worth nothing nowadays. It's mainly stock in factories of my father's time, that have closed long ago. What am I going to do?"

"But, Lillian," he said softly, "I thought you had no concern for money or for any material rewards."

"You don't understand! I'm not talking about money—I'm talking about poverty! Real, stinking, hall-bedroom poverty! That's out of bounds for any civilized person! I—I too have to worry about food and rent?"

He was watching her with a faint smile; for once, his soft, aging face seemed tightened into a look of wisdom, he was discovering the pleasure of full perception—in a reality which he could permit himself to perceive.

"Jim, you've got to help me! My lawyer is powerless. I've spent the little I had, on him and on his investigators, friends and fixers—but all they could do for me was find out that they can do nothing. My lawyer gave me his final report this afternoon. He told me bluntly that I haven't a chance. I don't seem to know anyone who can help against a setup of this kind. I had counted on Bertram Scudder, but . . . well, you know what happened to Bertram. And that, too, was because I had tried to help you. You pulled yourself out of that one, Jim, you're the only person who can pull me out now. You've got your gopher-hole pipe line straight up to the top. You can reach the big boys. Slip a word to your friends to slip a word to their friends. One word from Wesley would do it. Have them order that divorce decree to be refused. Just have it refused."

He shook his head slowly, almost compassionately, like a tired

professional at an overzealous amateur. "It can't be done, Lillian," he said firmly. "I'd like to do it—for the same reason as yours—and I think you know it. But whatever power I have is not enough in this case."

She was looking at him, her eyes dark with an odd, lifeless stillness; when she spoke, the motion of her lips was twisted by so evil a contempt that he did not dare identify it beyond knowing that it embraced them both; she said, "I know that you'd like to do it."

He felt no desire to pretend; oddly, for the first time, for this one chance, truth seemed much more pleasurable—truth, for once, serving his particular kind of enjoyment. "I think you know that it can't be done," he said. "Nobody does favors nowadays, if there's nothing to gain in return. And the stakes are getting higher and higher. The gopher holes, as you called them, are so complex, so twisted and intertwined that everybody has something on everybody else, and nobody dares move because he can't tell who'll crack which way or when. So he'll move only when he has to, when the stakes are life or death—and that's practically the only kind of stakes we're playing for now. Well, what's your private life to any of those boys? That you'd like to hold your husband—what's in it for them, one way or another? And my personal stock-in-trade—well, there's nothing I could offer them at the moment in exchange for trying to blast a whole court clique out of a highly profitable deal. Besides, right now, the top boys wouldn't do it at any price. They have to be mighty careful of your husband—he's the man who's safe from them right now—even since that radio broadcast of my sister's."

"*You* asked me to force her to speak on that broadcast!"

"I know, Lillian. We lost, both of us, that time. And we lose, both of us, now."

"Yes," she said, with the same darkness of contempt in her eyes, "both of us."

It was the contempt that pleased him, it was the strange, heedless, unfamiliar pleasure of knowing that this woman saw him as he was, yet remained held by his presence, remained and leaned back in her chair, as if declaring her bondage.

"You're a wonderful person, Jim," she said. It had the sound of damnation. Yet it was a tribute, and she meant it as such, and his pleasure came from the knowledge that they were in a realm where damnation was value.

"You know," he said suddenly, "you're wrong about those butcher's assistants, like Gonzales. They have their uses. Have you ever liked Francisco d'Anconia?"

"I can't stand him."

"Well, do you know the real purpose of that cocktail-swilling occasion staged by Señor Gonzales tonight? It was to celebrate the agreement to nationalize d'Anconia Copper in about a month."

She looked at him for a moment, the corner of her lips lifting slowly into a smile. "He was your friend, wasn't he?"

Her voice had a tone he had never earned before, the tone of an emotion which he had drawn from people only by fraud, but which