

When they sped down a dark road through an empty countryside, with the strands of snow glittering across their headlights—she remembered how he had looked in the summer of their vacation, dressed in slacks, stretched on the ground of a lonely ravine, with the grass under his body and the sun on his bare arms. He belonged in the countryside, she thought—he belonged everywhere—he was a man who belonged on earth—and then she thought of the words which were more exact: he was a man to whom the earth belonged, the man at home on earth and in control. Why, then—she wondered—should he have had to carry a burden of tragedy which, in silent endurance, he had accepted so completely that he had barely known he carried it? She knew part of the answer; she felt as if the whole answer were close and she would grasp it on some approaching day. But she did not want to think of it now, because they were moving away from the burdens, because within the space of a speeding car they held the stillness of full happiness. She moved her head imperceptibly to let it touch his shoulder for a moment.

The car left the highway and turned toward the lighted squares of distant windows, that hung above the snow beyond a grillwork of bare branches. Then, in a soft, dim light, they sat at a table by a window facing darkness and trees. The inn stood on a knoll in the woods; it had the luxury of high cost and privacy, and an air of beautiful taste suggesting that it had not been discovered by those who sought high cost and notice. She was barely aware of the dining room: it blended away into a sense of superlative comfort, and the only ornament that caught her attention was the glitter of iced branches beyond the glass of the window.

She sat, looking out, the blue fur half-slipping off her naked arms and shoulders. He watched her through narrowed eyes, with the satisfaction of a man studying his own workmanship.

"I like giving things to you," he said, "because you don't need them."

"No?"

"And it's not that I want you to have them. I want you to have them *from me*."

"That is the way I do need them, Hank. From you."

"Do you understand that it's nothing but vicious self-indulgence on my part? I'm not doing it for your pleasure, but for mine."

"Hank!" The cry was involuntary; it held amusement, despair, indignation and pity. "If you'd given me those things just for *my* pleasure, not yours, I would have thrown them in your face."

"Yes . . . Yes, then you would—and should."

"Did you call it your vicious self-indulgence?"

"That's what they call it."

"Oh, yes! That's what they call it. What do *you* call it, Hank?"

"I don't know," he said indifferently, and went on intently. "I know only that if it's vicious, then let me be damned for it, but that's what I want to do more than anything else on earth."

She did not answer; she sat looking straight at him with a faint smile, as if asking him to listen to the meaning of his own words.

"I've always wanted to enjoy my wealth," he said. "I didn't know

how to do it. I didn't even have time to know how much I wanted to. But I knew that all the steel I poured came back to me as liquid gold, and the gold was meant to harden into any shape I wished, and it was I who had to enjoy it. Only I couldn't. I couldn't find any purpose for it. I've found it, now. It's I who've produced that wealth and it's I who am going to let it buy for me every kind of pleasure I want—including the pleasure of seeing how much I'm able to pay for—including the preposterous feat of turning *you* into a luxury object."

"But I'm a luxury object that you've paid for long ago," she said; she was not smiling.

"How?"

"By means of the same values with which you paid for your mills."

She did not know whether he understood it with that full, luminous finality which is a thought named in words; but she knew that what he felt in that moment was understanding. She saw the relaxation of an invisible smile in his eyes.

"I've never despised luxury," he said, "yet I've always despised those who enjoyed it. I looked at what they called their pleasures and it seemed so miserably senseless to me—after what I felt at the mills. I used to watch steel being poured, tons of liquid steel running as I wanted it to, where I wanted it. And then I'd go to a banquet and I'd see people who sat trembling in awe before their own gold dishes and lace tablecloths, as if their dining room were the master and they were just objects serving it, objects created by their diamond shirt studs and necklaces, not the other way around. Then I'd run to the site of the first slag heap I could find—and they'd say that I didn't know how to enjoy life, because I cared for nothing but business."

He looked at the dim, sculptured beauty of the room and at the people who sat at the tables. They sat in a manner of self-conscious display, as if the enormous cost of their clothes and the enormous care of their grooming should have fused into splendor, but didn't. Their faces had a look of rancorous anxiety.

"Dagny, look at those people. They're supposed to be the playboys of life; the amusement-seekers and luxury-lovers. They sit there, waiting for this place to give them meaning, not the other way around. But they're always shown to us as the enjoyers of material pleasures—and then we're taught that enjoyment of material pleasures is evil. Enjoyment? Are they enjoying it? Is there some sort of perversion in what we're taught, some error that's vicious and very important?"

"Yes, Hank—very vicious and very, very important."

"They are the playboys, while we're just tradesmen, you and I. Do you realize that we're much more capable of enjoying this place than they can ever hope to be?"

"Yes."

He said slowly, in the tone of a quotation, "Why have we left it all to fools? It should have been ours." She looked at him, startled. He smiled. "I remember every word you said to me at that party. I didn't answer you then, because the only answer I had, the only thing your words meant to me, was an answer that you would hate