

Dagny—he thought desperately—Dagny, who had never said a word about his life at home, who had never made a claim, uttered a reproach or asked a question—he could not appear before her with his wife, he could not let her see him as the husband being proudly shown off—he wished he could die now, in this moment, before he committed this action—because he knew that he would commit it.

Because he had accepted his secret as guilt and promised himself to take its consequences—because he had granted that the right was with Lillian, and he was able to bear any form of damnation, but not able to deny the right when it was claimed of him—because he knew that the reason for his refusal to go, was the reason that gave him no right to refuse—because he heard the pleading cry in his mind: “Oh God, Lillian, anything but that party!” and he did not allow himself to beg for mercy—

—he said evenly, his voice lifeless and firm:

“All right, Lillian. I’ll go.”

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The wedding veil of rose-point lace caught on the splintered floor of her tenement bedroom. Cherryl Brooks lifted it cautiously, stepping to look at herself in a crooked mirror that hung on the wall. She had been photographed here all day, as she had been many times in the past two months. She still smiled with incredulous gratitude when newspaper people wanted to take her picture, but she wished they would not do it so often.

An aging sob sister, who had a drippy love column in print and the bitter wisdom of a policewoman in person, had taken Cherryl under her protection weeks ago, when the girl had first been thrown into press interviews as into a meat grinder. Today, the sob sister had chased the reporters out, had snapped, “All right, all right, beat it!” at the neighbors, had slammed Cherryl’s door in their faces and had helped her to dress. She was to drive Cherryl to the wedding; she had discovered that there was no one else to do it.

The wedding veil, the white satin gown, the delicate slippers and the strand of pearls at her throat, had cost five hundred times the price of the entire contents of Cherryl’s room. A bed took most of the room’s space, and the rest was taken by a chest of drawers, one chair, and her few dresses hanging behind a faded curtain. The huge hoop skirt of the wedding gown brushed against the walls when she moved, her slender figure swaying above the skirt in the dramatic contrast of a tight, severe, long-sleeved bodice; the gown had been made by the best designer in the city.

“You see, when I got the job in the dime store, I could have moved to a better room,” she said to the sob sister, in apology, “but I don’t think it matters much where you sleep at night, so I saved my money, because I’ll need it for something important in the future—” She stopped and smiled, shaking her head dazedly. “I *thought* I’d need it,” she said.

“You look fine,” said the sob sister. “You can’t see much in that alleged mirror, but you’re okay.”

“The way all this happened, I . . . I haven’t had time to catch up

with myself. But you see, Jim is wonderful. He doesn't mind it, that I'm only a salesgirl from a dime store, living in a place like this. He doesn't hold it against me."

"Uh-huh," said the sob sister; her face looked grim.

Cherry remembered the wonder of the first time Jim Taggart had come here. He had come one evening, without warning, a month after their first meeting when she had given up hope of ever seeing him again. She had been miserably embarrassed, she had felt as if she were trying to hold a sunrise within the space of a mud puddle—but Jim had smiled, sitting on her only chair, looking at her flushed face and at her room. Then he had told her to put on her coat, and he had taken her to dinner at the most expensive restaurant in the city. He had smiled at her uncertainty, at her awkwardness, at her terror of picking the wrong fork, and at the look of enchantment in her eyes. She had not known what he thought. But he had known that she was stunned, not by the place, but by his bringing her there, that she barely touched the costly food, that she took the dinner, not as booty from a rich sucker—as all the girls he knew would have taken it—but as some shining award she had never expected to deserve.

He had come back to her two weeks later, and then their dates had grown progressively more frequent. He would drive up to the dime store at the closing hour, and she would see her fellow salesgirls gaping at her, at his limousine, at the uniformed chauffeur who opened the door for her. He would take her to the best night clubs, and when he introduced her to his friends, he would say, "Miss Brooks works in the dime store in Madison Square." She would see the strange expressions on their faces and Jim watching them with a hint of mockery in his eyes. He wanted to spare her the need of pretense or embarrassment, she thought with gratitude. He had the strength to be honest and not to care whether others approved of him or not, she thought with admiration. But she felt an odd, burning pain, new to her, the night she heard some woman, who worked for a highbrow political magazine, say to her companion at the next table, "How generous of Jim!"

Had he wished, she would have given him the only kind of payment she could offer in return. She was grateful that he did not seek it. But she felt as if their relationship was an immense debt and she had nothing to pay it with, except her silent worship. He did not need her worship, she thought.

There were evenings when he came to take her out, but remained in her room, instead, and talked to her, while she listened in silence. It always happened unexpectedly, with a kind of peculiar abruptness, as if he had not intended doing it, but something burst within him and he had to speak. Then he sat slumped on her bed, unaware of his surroundings and of her presence, yet his eyes jerked to her face once in a while, as if he had to be certain that a living being heard him.

" . . . it wasn't for myself, it wasn't for myself at all—why won't they believe me, those people? I had to grant the unions' demands to cut down the trains—and the moratorium on bonds was the only