

all virtue for her sake—and *that* is a real tribute of love, because you sacrifice your conscience, your reason, your integrity and your invaluable self-esteem."

He looked at her blankly. It sounded like some sort of monstrous corruption that precluded the possibility of wondering whether anyone could mean it; he wondered only what was the point of uttering it.

"What's love, darling, if it's not self-sacrifice?" she went on lightly, in the tone of a drawing-room discussion. "What's self-sacrifice, unless one sacrifices that which is one's most precious and most important? But I don't expect you to understand it. Not a stainless-steel Puritan like you. That's the immense selfishness of the Puritan. You'd let the whole world perish rather than soil that immaculate self of yours with a single spot of which you'd have to be ashamed."

He said slowly, his voice oddly strained and solemn, "I have never claimed to be immaculate."

She laughed. "And what is it you're being right now? You're giving me an honest answer, aren't you?" She shrugged her naked shoulders. "Oh, darling, don't take me seriously! I'm just talking."

He ground his cigarette into an ashtray; he did not answer.

"Darling," she said, "I actually came here only because I kept thinking that I had a husband and I wanted to find out what he looked like."

She studied him as he stood across the room, the tall, straight, taut lines of his body emphasized by the single color of the dark blue pajamas.

"You're very attractive," she said. "You look so much better—these last few months. Younger. Should I say happier? You look less tense. Oh, I know you've rushed more than ever and you act like a commander in an air raid, but that's only the surface. You're less tense—inside."

He looked at her, astonished. It was true; he had not known it, had not admitted it to himself. He wondered at her power of observation. She had seen little of him, in these last few months. He had not entered her bedroom since his return from Colorado. He had thought that she would welcome their isolation from each other. Now he wondered what motive could have made her so sensitive to a change in him—unless it was a feeling much greater than he had ever suspected her of experiencing.

"I was not aware of it," he said.

"It's quite becoming, dear—and astonishing, since you've been having such a terribly difficult time."

He wondered whether this was intended as a question. She paused, as if waiting for an answer, but she did not press it and went on gaily:

"I know you're having all sorts of trouble at the mills—and then the political situation is getting to be ominous, isn't it? If they pass those laws they're talking about, it will hit you pretty hard, won't it?"

"Yes. It will. But that is a subject which is of no interest to you, Lillian, is it?"

"Oh, but it is!" She raised her head and looked straight at him; her eyes had the blank, veiled look he had seen before, a look of deliberate mystery and of confidence in his inability to solve it. "It is of great

interest to me . . . though not because of any possible financial losses," she added softly.

He wondered, for the first time, whether her spite, her sarcasm, the cowardly manner of delivering insults under the protection of a smile, were not the opposite of what he had always taken them to be—not a method of torture, but a twisted form of despair, not a desire to make him suffer, but a confession of her own pain, a defense for the pride of an unloved wife, a secret plea—so that the subtle, the hinted, the evasive in her manner, the thing begging to be understood, was not the open malice, but the hidden love. He thought of it, aghast. It made his guilt greater than he had ever contemplated.

"It we're talking politics, Henry, I had an amusing thought. The side you represent—what is that slogan you all use so much, the motto you're supposed to stand for? 'The sanctity of contract'—is that it?"

She saw his swift glance, the intentness of his eyes, the first response of something she had struck, and she laughed aloud.

"Go on," he said; his voice was low, it had the sound of a threat.

"Darling, what for?—since you understood me quite well."

"What was it you intended to say?" His voice was harshly precise and without any color of feeling.

"Do you really wish to bring me to the humiliation of complaining? It's so trite and such a common complaint—although I did think I had a husband who prides himself on being different from lesser men. Do you want me to remind you that you once swore to make my happiness the aim of your life? And that you can't really say in all honesty whether I'm happy or unhappy, because you haven't even inquired whether I exist?"

He felt them as a physical pain—all the things that came tearing at him impossibly together. Her words were a plea, he thought—and he felt the dark, hot flow of guilt. He felt pity—the cold ugliness of pity without affection. He felt a dim anger, like a voice he tried to choke, a voice crying in revulsion: Why should I deal with her rotten, twisted lying?—why should I accept torture for the sake of pity?—why is it I who should have to take the hopeless burden of trying to spare a feeling she won't admit, a feeling I can't know or understand or try to guess?—it she loves me, why doesn't the damn coward say so and let us both face it in the open? He heard another, louder voice, saying evenly: Don't switch the blame to her, that's the oldest trick of all cowards—you're guilty—no matter what she does, it's nothing compared to your guilt—she's right—it makes you sick, doesn't it, to know it's she who's right?—let it make you sick, you damn adulterer—it's she who's right!

"What would make you happy, Lillian?" he asked. His voice was toneless.

She smiled, leaning back in her chair, relaxing; she had been watching his face intently.

"Oh, dear!" she said, as in bored amusement. "That's the shyster question. The loophole. The escape clause."

She got up, letting her arms fall with a shrug, stretching her body in a limp, graceful gesture of helplessness.

"What would make me happy, Henry? That is what you ought to