ing tomorrow by proving that they're wrong. You ought to give in with good grace, simply because it's the practical thing to do. You ought to keep silent, *precisely* because they're wrong. They'll appreciate it. Make concessions for others and they'll make concessions for you. Live and let live. Give and take. Give in and take in. That's the policy of our age--and it's time you accepted it. Don't tell me you're too good for it. You know that you're not. You know that I know it."

The look of his eyes, held raptly still upon some point in space, was not in answer to her words; it was in answer to a man's voice saying to him, "Do you think that what you're facing is merely a conspiracy to seize your wealth? You, who know the source of wealth, should know it's much more and much worse than that."

He turned to look at Lillian. He was seeing the full extent of her failure—in the immensity of his own indifference. The droning stream of her insults was like the sound of a distant riveting machine, a long, impotent pressure that reached nothing within him. He had heard her studied reminders of his guilt on every evening he had spent at home in the past three months. But guilt had been the one emotion he had found himself unable to feel. The punishment she had wanted to inflict on him was the torture of shame; what she had inflicted was the torture of boredom.

He remembered his brief glimpse—on that morning in the Wayne-Falkland Hotel—of a flaw in her scheme of punishment, which he had not examined. Now he stated it to himself for the first time. She wanted to force upon him the suffering of dishonor--but his own sense of honor was her only weapon of enforcement. She wanted to wrest from him an acknowledgment of his moral depravity--but only his own moral rectitude could attach significance to such a verdict. She wanted to injure him by her contempt—but he could not be injured, unless he respected her judgment. She wanted to punish him for the pain he had caused her and she held her pain as a gun aimed at him, as if she wished to extort his agony at the point of his pity. But her only tool was his own benevolence, his concern for her, his compassion. Her only power was the power of his own virtues. What if he chose to withdraw it?

An issue of guilt, he thought, had to rest on his own acceptance of the code of justice that pronounced him guilty. He did not accept it; he never had. His virtues, all the virtues she needed to achieve his punishment, came from another code and lived by another standard. He felt no guilt, no shame, no regret, no dishonor. He felt no concern for any verdict she chose to pass upon him: he had lost respect for her judgment long ago. And the sole chain still holding him was only a last remnant of pity.

But what was the code on which she acted? What sort of code permitted the concept of a punishment that required the victim's own virtue as the fuel to make it work? A code—he thought—which would destroy only those who tried to observe it; a punishment, from which only the honest would suffer, while the dishonest would escape unhurt. Could one conceive of an infamy lower than to equate virtue with pain, to make virtue, not vice, the source and motive power of suffering? If he were the kind of rotter she was struggling to make him

believe he was, then no issue of his honor and his moral worth would matter to him. If he wasn't then what was the nature of her attempt?

To count upon his virtue and use it as an instrument of torture, to practice blackmail with the victim's generosity as sole means of extortion, to accept the gift of a man's good will and turn it into a tool for the giver's destruction . . . he sat very still, contemplating the formula of so monstrous an evil that he was able to name it, but not to believe it possible.

He sat very still, held by the hammering of a single question: Did Lillian know the exact nature of her scheme?—was it a conscious policy, devised with full awareness of its meaning? He shuddered; he did not hate her enough to believe it.

He looked at her. She was absorbed, at the moment, in the task of cutting a plum pudding that stood as a mount of blue flame on a silver platter before her, its glow dancing over her face and her laughing mouth—she was plunging a silver knife into the flame, with a practiced, graceful curve of her arm. She had metallic leaves in the red, gold and brown colors of autumn scattered over one shoulder of her black velvet gown, they glittered in the candlelight.

He could not get rid of the impression, which he had kept receiving and rejecting for three months, that her vengeance was not a form of despair, as he had supposed—the impression, which he regarded as inconceivable, that she was enjoying it. He could find no trace of pain in her manner. She had an air of confidence new to her. She seemed to be at home in her house for the first time. Even though everything within the house was of her own choice and taste, she had always seemed to act as the bright, efficient, resentful manager of a high-class hotel, who keeps smiling in bitter amusement at her position of inferiority to the owners. The amusement remained, but the bitterness was gone. She had not gained weight, but her features had lost their delicate sharpness in a blurring, softening look of satisfaction; even her voice sounded as if it had grown plump.

He did not hear what she was saying; she was laughing in the last flicker of the blue flames, while he sat weighing the question: Did she know? He felt certain that he had discovered a secret much greater than the problem of his marriage, that he had grasped the formula of a policy practiced more widely throughout the world than he dared to contemplate at the moment. But to convict a human being of that practice was a verdict of irrevocable damnation, and he knew that he would not believe it of anyone, so long as the possibility of a doubt remained.

No—he thought, looking at Lillian, with the last effort of his generosity—he would not believe it of her. In the name of whatever grace and pride she possessed—in the name of such moments when he had seen a smile of joy on her face, the smile of a living being—in the name of the brief shadow of love he had once felt for her—he would not pronounce upon her a verdict of total evil.

The butler slipped a plate of plum pudding in front of him, and he heard Lillian's voice: "Where have you been for the last five minutes, Henry—or is it for the last century? You haven't answered me. You haven't heard a word I said."