

"Yes," said Dagny, without any astonishment

The ballroom of the Wayne-Falkland Hotel had been decorated under Mrs Taggart's direction she had an artist's taste, and the setting of that evening was her masterpiece "Dagny, there are things I would like you to learn to notice," she said, "lights, colors, flowers, music They are not as negligible as you might think " "I've never thought they're negligible," Dagny answered happily For once, Mrs Taggart felt a bond between them Dagny was looking at her with a child's grateful trust "They're the things that make life beautiful," said Mrs Taggart "I want this evening to be very beautiful for you, Dagny The first ball is the most romantic event of one's life "

To Mrs Taggart the greatest surprise was the moment when she saw Dagny standing under the lights looking at the ballroom This was not a child not a girl, but a woman of such confident dangerous power that Mrs Taggart stared at her with shocked admiration In an age of casual cynical, indifferent routine among people who held themselves as if they were not flesh but metal—Dagny's bearing seemed almost indecent because this was the way a woman would have faced a ballroom centuries ago when the act of displaying one's half naked body for the admiration of men was an act of daring, when it had meaning and but one meaning acknowledged by all as a high adventure And this—thought Mrs Taggart smiling—was the girl she had believed to be devoid of sexual capacity She felt an immense relief and a touch of amusement at the thought that a discovery of this kind should make her feel relieved

The relief lasted only for a few hours At the end of the evening she saw Dagny in a corner of the ballroom sitting on a balustrade as if it were a fence rail her legs dangling under the chiffon skirt as if she were dressed in slacks She was talking to a couple of helpless young men her face contemptuously empty

Neither Dagny nor Mrs Taggart said a word when they rode home together But hours later on a sudden impulse Mrs Taggart went to her daughter's room Dagny stood by the window still wearing the white evening gown it looked like a cloud supporting a body that now seemed too thin for it, a small body with sagging shoulders Beyond the window the clouds were gray in the first light of morning

When Dagny turned Mrs Taggart saw only puzzled helplessness in her face the face was calm but something about it made Mrs Taggart wish she had not wished that her daughter should discover sadness

"Mother do they think it's exactly in reverse?" she asked

"What?" asked Mrs Taggart bewildered

"The things you were talking about The lights and the flowers Do they expect those things to make them romantic not the other way around?"

"Darling what do you mean?"

"There wasn't a person there who enjoyed it," she said her voice lifeless, "or who thought or felt anything at all They moved about, and they said the same dull things they say anywhere I suppose they thought the lights would make it brilliant."

"Darling, you take everything too seriously. One is not supposed to be intellectual at a ball. One is simply supposed to be gay."

"How? By being stupid?"

"I mean, for instance, didn't you enjoy meeting the young men?"

"What men? There wasn't a man there I couldn't squash ten of."

Days later, sitting at her desk at Rockdale Station, feeling light heartedly at home, Dagny thought of the party and shrugged in contemptuous reproach at her own disappointment. She looked up: it was spring and there were leaves on the tree branches in the darkness outside; the air was still and warm. She asked herself what she had expected from that party. She did not know. But she felt it again here now, as she sat slouched over a battered desk, looking out into the darkness, a sense of expectation without object rising through her body slowly like a warm liquid. She slumped forward across the desk, lazily, feeling neither exhaustion nor desire to work.

When Francisco came that summer, she told him about the party and about her disappointment. He listened silently, looking at her for the first time with that glance of unmoving mockery which he reserved for others, a glance that seemed to see too much. She felt as if he heard in her words more than she knew she told him.

She saw the same glance in his eyes on the evening when she left him too early. They were alone, sitting on the shore of the river. She had another hour before she was due at Rockdale. There were long, thin strips of fire in the sky, and red sparks floating lazily on the water. He had been silent for a long time when she rose abruptly and told him that she had to go. He did not try to stop her; he leaned back, his elbows in the grass, and looked at her without moving; his glance seemed to say that he knew her motive. Hurrying angrily up the slope to the house, she wondered what had made her leave; she did not know; it had been a sudden restlessness that came from a feeling she did not identify till now, a feeling of expectation.

Each night she drove the five miles from the country house to Rockdale. She came back at dawn, slept a few hours, and got up with the rest of the household. She felt no desire to sleep. Undressing for bed in the first rays of the sun, she felt a tense, joyous, causeless impatience to face the day that was starting.

She saw Francisco's mocking glance again across the net of a tennis court. She did not remember the beginning of that game; they had often played tennis together and he had always won. She did not know at what moment she decided that she would win this time. When she became aware of it, it was no longer a decision or a wish, but a quiet fury rising within her. She did not know why she had to win; she did not know why it seemed so crucially, urgently necessary; she knew only that she had to, and that she would.

It seemed easy to play; it was as if her will had vanished and someone's power were playing for her. She watched Francisco's figure—a tall, swift figure, the suntan of his arms stressed by his short white shirt sleeves. She felt an arrogant pleasure in seeing the skill of his movements, because *this* was the thing which she would beat, so that his every expert gesture became her victory, and the brilliant competence of his body became the triumph of hers.