

he knew that if she were beside him through every hour of his days, it would still be the same, he would never have enough of it, he would have to invent some senseless form of torture for himself in order to bear it—he knew he would see her tonight, and the thought of leaving without it made the pleasure greater, a moment's torture to underscore his certainty of the hours ahead. He would leave the light on in her living room, he thought, and hold her across the bed, and see nothing but the curve of the strip of light running from her waist to her ankle, a single line drawing the whole shape of her long, slim body in the darkness, then he would pull her head into the light, to see her face, to see it falling back, unresisting, her hair over his arm, her eyes closed, the face drawn as in a look of pain, her mouth open to him.

He stood at the wall, waiting, to let all the events of the day drop away from him, to feel free, to know that the next span of time was his.

When the door of his room flew open without warning, he did not quite hear or believe it, at first. He saw the silhouette of a woman, then of a bellboy who put down a suitcase and vanished. The voice he heard was Lillian's: "Why, Henry! All alone and in the dark?"

She pressed a light switch by the door. She stood there, fastidiously groomed, wearing a pale beige traveling suit that looked as if she had traveled under glass; she was smiling and pulling her gloves off with the air of having reached home.

"Are you in for the evening, dear?" she asked. "Or were you going out?"

He did not know how long a time passed before he answered, "What are you doing here?"

"Why, don't you remember that Jim Taggart invited us to his wedding? It's tonight."

"I didn't intend to go to his wedding."

"Oh, but I did!"

"Why didn't you tell me this morning, before I left?"

"To surprise you, darling." She laughed gaily. "It's practically impossible to drag you to any social function, but I thought you might do it like this, on the spur of the moment, just to go out and have a good time, as married couples are supposed to. I thought you wouldn't mind it—you've been staying overnight in New York so often!"

He saw the casual glance thrown at him from under the brim of her fashionably tilted hat. He said nothing.

"Of course, I was running a risk," she said. "You might have been taking somebody out to dinner." He said nothing. "Or were you, perhaps, intending to return home tonight?"

"No."

"Did you have an engagement for this evening?"

"No."

"Fine." She pointed at her suitcase. "I brought my evening clothes. Will you bet me a corsage of orchids that I can get dressed faster than you can?"

He thought that Dagny would be at her brother's wedding tonight;

the evening did not matter to him any longer. "I'll take you out, if you wish," he said, "but not to that wedding."

"Oh, but that's where I want to go! It's the most preposterous event of the season, and everybody's been looking forward to it for weeks, all my friends. I wouldn't miss it for the world. There isn't any better show in town—nor better publicized. It's a perfectly ridiculous marriage, but just about what you'd expect from Jim Taggart."

She was moving casually through the room, glancing around, as if getting acquainted with an unfamiliar place. "I haven't been in New York for years," she said. "Not with you, that is. Not on any formal occasion."

He noticed the pause in the aimless wandering of her eyes, a glance that stopped briefly on a filled ashtray and moved on. He felt a stab of revulsion.

She saw it in his face and laughed gaily. "Oh but, darling, I'm not relieved! I'm disappointed. I did hope I'd find a few cigarette butts smeared with lipstick."

He gave her credit for the admission of the spying, even if under cover of a joke. But something in the stressed frankness of her manner made him wonder whether she was joking; for the flash of an instant, he felt that she had told him the truth. He dismissed the impression, because he could not conceive of it as possible.

"I'm afraid that you'll never be human," she said. "So I'm sure that I have no rival. And if I have—which I doubt; darling—I don't think I'll worry about it, because if it's a person who's always available on call, without appointment—well, everybody knows what sort of a person *that* is."

He thought that he would have to be careful, he had been about to slap her face. "Lillian, I think you know," he said, "that humor of this kind is more than I can stand."

"Oh, you're so serious!" she laughed. "I keep forgetting it. You're so serious about everything—particularly yourself."

Then she whirled to him suddenly, her smile gone. She had the strange, pleading look which he had seen in her face at times, a look that seemed made of sincerity and courage:

"You prefer to be serious, Henry? All right. How long do you wish me to exist somewhere in the basement of your life? How lonely do you want me to become? I've asked nothing of you. I've let you live your life as you pleased. Can't you give me one evening? Oh, I know you hate parties and you'll be bored. But it means a great deal to me. Call it empty, social vanity—I want to appear, for once, with my husband. I suppose you never think of it in such terms, but you're an important man, you're envied, halted, respected and feared, you're a man whom any woman would be proud to show off as her husband. You may say it's a low form of feminine ostentation, but that's the form of any woman's happiness. You don't live by such standards, but I do. Can't you give me this much, at the price of a few hours of boredom? Can't you be strong enough to fulfill your obligation and to perform a husband's duty? Can't you go there, not for your own sake, but mine, not because *you* want to go, but only because *I* want it?"