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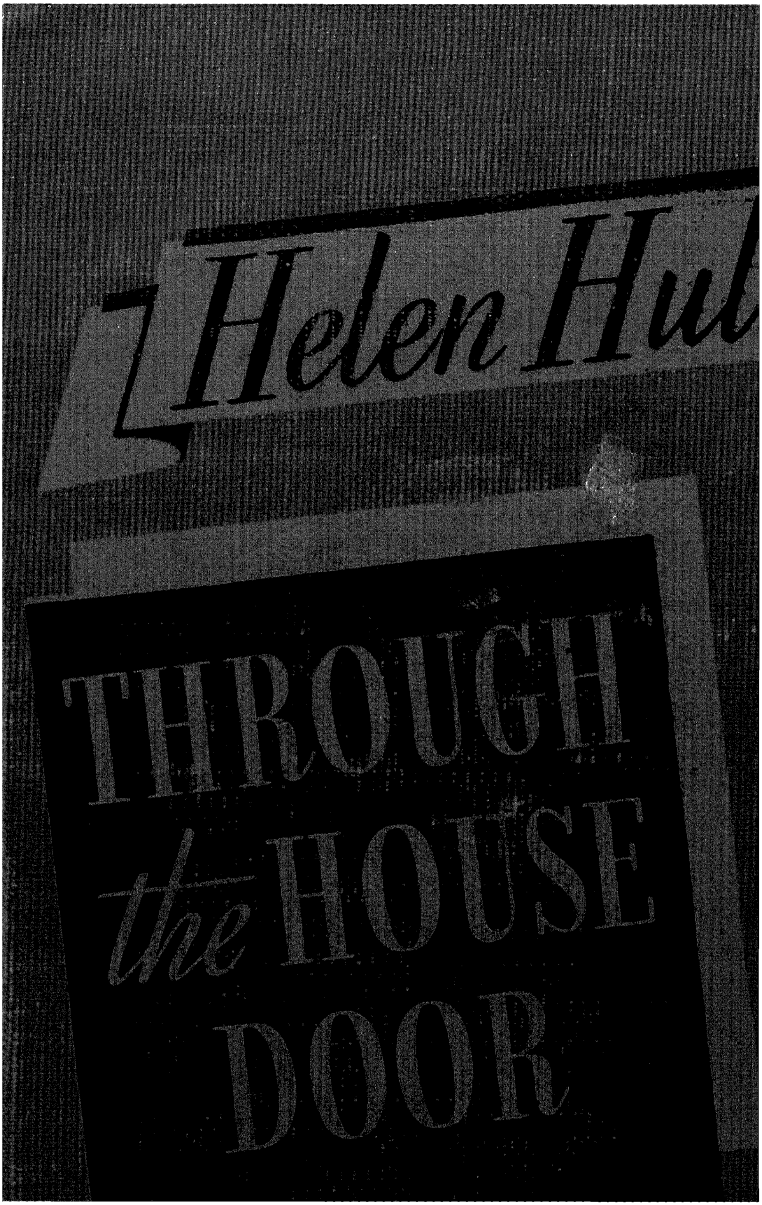
Helen Hul
THROUGH
the HOUSE
DOOR

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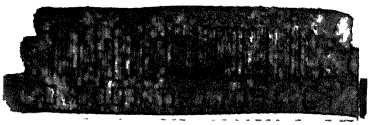

Through The House Door

BY

Helen Hull

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THROUGH THE HOUSE DOOR

1

As THE CAB shot across Fifty-ninth Street, escaping the erratic movement of day-end traffic, and settled into the rhythmic flow of the curving road through the Park, Beatrice relaxed, the February air with its faint tang of snow cool against her eyelids. The motion of the cab was a little like that of the skating she and Sheppard had watched as they drank cocktails in the bar at the edge of the rink; a swoop past a green light, a slackening of motion toward the next light, a long swoop again as it winked to green. Beatrice lifted her hands, feeling in her muscles the lovely beat of a skater's flight. That girl in white. "I wish I could skate like that!" She could feel herself poised, flying.

"Much easier to watch them." Sheppard turned toward her, head lowered, eyes aggressive under the heavy brows. He made a deliberate motion, his forefinger and thumb shut around her wrist and drew her hand down to his knee. "Stop skating," he said. "You've skated enough. Have a ride with me, now." His hand covered hers, pressed it down, the full palm flattening

her knuckles. His touch broke her sensation of flight, for a moment she was the skater, swaying outward against an abrupt, detaining grasp; then she was quiet, thinking, I will break the touch of his hand there at my wrist, I will not let him know, and all the time her blood hurried whispering to her heart. If she drew her hand away, he would be amused. Under his eyebrows his eyes watched her, malicious and alert. "Why not come to dinner with me? You said you would, sometime."

"I can't. Not tonight." Be practical, invoking the tasks that waited for her, the protection against an inner enemy that lay in the fact that she was expected at home, not eagerly, just matter-of-fact-ly, but still expected.

"We ought to celebrate." Sheppard released her hand as casually as if he had forgotten it. He leaned back in his corner, finding a cigarette, snapping his lighter.

"Celebrate what? Your return?" Beatrice's hand slipped to the seat between them, her voice was wary.

"No. Not that. But what's happened, while I've been gone."

Beatrice looked at him, her lips set against a quick, deep sigh. Behind his square head, with its crest of heavy, graying hair, the brown-green of winter grass, the brown-black shapes of trees ran backward, flowing under the gray twilight. "Nothing has happened," she

said. Quickly, run past his words into dull, safe impersonalities; only that intent gaze of his made his words significant, drove them too close to her own thoughts. "Nothing except that I've worked like mad, and Leslie had a cold, which made her very cross and disapproving. You've no idea how totally your own child can disapprove of you!" He could not know, how could he?—that while he had been gone she had thought of him only because she must put him out of her mind, out of her life; that she had lain wakeful, night after night, rejecting him, talking to him, some vaguely projected image of him, never the whole man seen clearly, the turn of his head in a sudden laugh, the shape of his hand, the way in which his gray eyes sought her out, calculated his effect upon her. What she had said to him was never a simple phrase, such as this must stop, this is wrong. That would only amuse him. Such a phrase was like a coin from a forgotten country, which Sheppard would thrust aside as obsolete and ridiculous. Beatrice had tried to change it into freshly minted tokens, negotiable at the border where he dwelt. "You disturb me too much, I'm just an old-fashioned flower, count me off, you're too fascinating, I'm through!"

Then, when he had telephoned this afternoon, she had forgotten her prepared words. She had thought it just a fan call, after the broadcast; she had gone out to the control room to take the call, flushed, tense,

always she seemed to hang in mid-air, as if the excitement of the quarter hour at the microphone projected as a thin spike beyond the actual work, dangling her, then letting her thump down to ordinary hours. Before Sheppard had gone away he had called her often before she left the studio, he had in a way been part of the excitement of her initial success. Cocktails, swing music, a suggestion for the next issue of her "women's column on the air," sometimes a good one. Sheppard was a publicity man. Sometimes a bit of ribald buffoonery which released her tension through its incongruity. Much pleasanter than going home to Julian's silence. Until Sheppard had gone west for a month she had not fully realized how pleasant, how necessary. She had not known he was back, today, and his deliberate rich voice had unloosened every knot of resolution she had tried to make fast. Her feet had carried her swiftly past the sound-proof studios, the length of the reception room, its crimson and chromium-like notes sounded by the first glimpse of him waiting for her. He was not lessened by her careful decision; instead he had gathered stature, gathered power, added to himself every stroke her imagination had drawn of him. She had thought, just this one time, this one hour, and then I will tell him. Now he was staring at her, derisively.

"You've evaded enough," he said. "As soon as I saw you, I knew." He tossed his cigarette out of the

window, the car slowed at the Park exit, the driver turned.

"D'yuh say a hundert fifteen?" he asked.

"I did not. I said one hundred and twenty-one." Sheppard's tone shoved the intruder back to his dashboard. The man shrugged, he retorted with his feet, letting the clutch jump, bucking the car across the avenue, along a side street. Beatrice, steadying herself, felt a dry prickle of apprehension, no more than peach fuzz brushed over her skin. With Sheppard, any moment was potential conflict; a word, a gesture, or the lack of it, had him on his toes, squaring off. Living always mobilized for attack, he shot at shadows. This time, however, he had not noticed. His eyes were bright under the thick brush of lashes, his teeth worried at his full under lip, he crouched a little toward her, one hand caught in the tasseled sling beside the window.

"I wasn't sure when I went away." His voice was unhurried. "But I had to go. There was a chance you might revert to your smug little hedged-in proper self. When something starts between a man and woman, if it's any good, it has its own vitality, it is a hunger which grows on starvation. The hollow is deeper above the neat hinge of your jaw, there's a new line past the corner of your stubborn little mouth, pretending to be wise and firm. I hope you've been wretched as hell. Suppose you'd died, and I had not yet made love to

you! Could you bear that? Beatrice, come along home with me now. Be done with this damned yawing!"

His face was close to hers, his breath warm on her cheek, his eyes enormous under heavy, twitching lids; his voice moved through her like touch itself, subtle and disarming, subduing her to quiescence. At a jolt of the cab she moved, twisting away from him, staring out at the familiar dinginess of the street as if to find there, somehow, the strength she had lost.

"I had made up my mind not to see you any more," she said.

"Your mind?" Sheppard laughed.

"I have one, when I'm not with you." She was bitter. All the dull men and women hurrying along the sidewalks, homeward bound from toil, to eat, to sleep, in order that tomorrow they might hurry back to toil, or even to seek desperately some chance at labor, in awkward, uneager, clumsy-footed haste, they were all of them, their dull faces merging, a reproach, an imprisonment. You are one of us, they said; what is this phantasy fever which burns you? "Or a conscience, or a knowledge of responsibility. No one is as free as you seem to think. You don't know anything about my life." She shivered, and a wire jerked all her languid muscles so that she sat erect, a hostile puppet figure.

"I don't want to. I don't give a damn about your life—up to now. From now on, yes! Listen. The first time I saw you I knew you were unhappy. I didn't care

much, not until about the third time. When women are unhappy, their eyes say, can't you do something about it? Yours didn't, you weren't asking for a thing. But if you try to run away, you'll run in a circle and come back to me. Why waste a lot of time?"

The cab had turned into the block where Beatrice lived, and Sheppard's words, with their deliberate arrogance, had the incongruity of a dream. He had never driven home with her before; all their hours together had been at another level, a brittle-bright surface remote from this street of ash cans tilted in area-ways, of city children careening on roller skates, of bleak façades of dingily respectable apartment houses. The driver sounded his horn, boys dodged the wheels, shouting, and the cab cruised to a standstill in front of an entrance flanked by brown cedars in painted urns.

"My God!" Sheppard stared at the number on the rubber mat.

"Sixth floor rear," said Beatrice. Sheppard wouldn't know, he wouldn't ever care to know, how long she had searched for that apartment, how marvelous it had seemed to find one they could almost afford, with a room for Leslie, too, so that she no longer slept on the couch in the living room. It hadn't mattered that Julian's room was dark. Sheppard wouldn't care to know that.

"But you're making good money," he said.

"Part of my life you don't give a damn about."

Debts, money borrowed for doctors, for hospitals, for consultations, that terrible rhyhmic beat, the clang of a great hammer, the first of the month again, recurrent, inescapable.

"You know what I meant." Was she fading away from him, losing substance, sinking out of sight beneath the surface of her life, her real life, just as he was retreating from her like a dream? "But I won't compete, here, with all your little notions of—what did you call it?—duty, responsibility." He took her hand, turning it so that it lay between his warm palms. "You see?" For a moment Beatrice felt herself fire-melted metal, flowing into the mold his desire for her had fashioned, filling it, her own self gone. Then he released her hand, pushed open the door, and stepped out to the sidewalk. Beatrice stumbled a trifle, following him, her purse slid to the curb, ducked under the cab. Sheppard fished out the bag, he dangled it over a finger. "You aren't at the studio tomorrow? Well, Friday then. Same place, same time. Yes?"

The air seemed bright between them, conflict whirled like separate tilted blades of a great propeller, striking off light, gathering momentum slowly. She should be done with this, it was not yet too late to stop, stop breathing, living, loving, say no, no more! The blades merged in the silver-shining ring of speed. "Yes," she said. "Friday."

Sheppard nodded, Beatrice crossed the walk to the

entrance. One hand on the handle of the door, she glanced back. Sheppard was not watching her, he had settled again in the cab, giving an address to the driver. Where was he going, what would he do? Rage, needle-small, needle-sharp, destroyed the whir of elation which had moved Beatrice, and she stood, amazed at its intensity. Sheppard was a stranger, she knew nothing of him, he was separate, complete, secretive. Then her hand shut over the handle. Slowly down the street came Julian and Leslie, Leslie's usual quick, light movement curbed to her father's hesitant, tentative step, her hand tucked into the crook of his arm. It's all there, the dreadful change in him, thought Beatrice; even in the dusk. That swift pride with which he had carried himself—This man walking toward her was a stranger, not Julian; the very quality of flesh and bone must have undergone the sad alchemy wrought by disaster. His thin face was lifted as if he listened, she could now see the dark glasses as a harsh streak across his pallor. Leslie, her little felt hat like a navy blue halo around her fair head, was watching the cab as it drove away. Has she seen me, wondered Beatrice, or can I run away? Just a scrap of time in which to shake down some of this turmoil! She released the handle and waited for them. Leslie had turned to her father in exaggerated chatter, hugging his arm, laughing, dramatizing her devotion to him as an answer to Beatrice's homecoming, in a taxi, with a strange man.

"Hello," said Beatrice. Leslie jumped, made her mouth, her blue eyes round, cried, "Why, Mother!" Julian said, "Beatrice?" bending forward, his brow strained above the glasses.

"Have a nice walk?" Julian's hand brushed her arm, as he groped for the door, he withdrew it hastily, opened the door, held it for her. He's had a bad day, thought Beatrice.

"Not a very long one," said Leslie, crossing the hall with a flirt of her full skirt. "Wednesdays I never can get home very early." She laid a thumb on the elevator button. "Meetings and meetings until I just don't know which way to turn. I came just as soon as I could get away."

"I've told you I don't want you rushing home for me." Julian stood beside her, his voice snapped. "Did you ring?"

"Yes, Father. I think I hear William coming now. You *know* I didn't mean I didn't want to come right home."

No, thought Beatrice, you just meant *I* wasn't home. She looked at her husband and daughter, and the dank smell of plaster and tiles and cooking, the winter smell of old apartment houses, was the very odor of despair. She *had* tried! Nothing should be like this. Leslie was only a child, confused by difficulty she could not understand, fair and smoothly round and secret as an almond, like an almond with her red-gold hair, with

her fine, clear skin, her young body just curving out of childhood, her eyes still innocent and hard with childhood. And Julian: for all he stood so quietly there, his tall lean figure with the stooping shoulders, the head held tense, seemed in movement, as if within the husk of his clothes, that old gray suit, worn threadbare at cuffs and pockets, hanging so loosely on him, he either balanced for attack or had a grip at the throat of an enemy, and could not let go, not for an instant. I have tried, repeated Beatrice's distress. But you have shut me out!

"Anyway"—Leslie's full skirt swung again as she gave an impatient hop, fastening her thumb over the button—"it's nicer in the Park late, isn't it, with the workmen all gone home? We went way down near the driveway, it's nice and flat there to walk."

"Yes," said Julian. "I don't stumble so much there."

The elevator clattered behind the closed doors, the door slammed open, William, the colored hall-man, said, "Evenin', Mis' Downing, evenin', Mist' Downing, jes a minute."

"My goodness, William, where you been?" Leslie accused him as he moved about the hall, snapping on the wall lights. "Didn't you hear the bell?"

"I been comin,' Miss Leslie." His teeth flashed as he grinned at her, and the three of them stood in a row behind him as the small car creaked up toward the sixth floor.

"Did Pansy turn up all right?" asked Beatrice. Julian had taken off his hat, his hair, darker, duller than Leslie's, fell forward over his high forehead, Beatrice couldn't tell whether, behind the dark glasses, his eyes turned toward her. Perhaps he'd look better when he could stay out in the sun more; he had a kind of ashiness, or was it just the dome light in the car? His long, sensitive mouth was compressed, colorless.

"She was here." Leslie looked at William and giggled. "William says you better ask her what she do nights. She was awfully late, she said she had the misery in her head."

"Didn't she come in time to get your lunch, Julian?" William peered around, grinning. "Oh, that's inexcusable, it's the third time!"

"It doesn't matter, Miss Burnham made me tea when she came."

"Why didn't you go out?" Oh, damn, thought Beatrice, as Julian shrugged. He wouldn't go to a restaurant, he wouldn't ask the waitress to read the menu card, he could just order something like ham and eggs, couldn't he? She thought she had everything arranged to work smoothly, and then— She hadn't time to look up another maid, she couldn't afford a real maid, anyway, not yet, and Pansy was willing to do anything.

The elevator stopped and William slid open the door. "You jus' tell that gal you ain't gonna stand for

her stepping out, 'ceptin' Sattiday," he said, with delight. "Ain' no sense at all, middle of the week."

"I'll tell her." Beatrice went quickly down the narrow hall, past the blank doors, 6 A, 6 B, C and D, and jabbed her key at the lock of 6 E. So Miss Burnham had made tea, had she, staring around the untidy kitchen with her smug, dark eyes. Of course it was nice of her, coming in to read to Julian, no one but a specialist could pronounce the words in the articles he wanted to hear. But prowling around the whole apartment! I can't say a word, she thought; Julian would ask if I preferred him to starve. Pansy ought to be here anyway, when Miss Burnham came. Not that Burnham was a siren, or anything like that, and Beatrice understood she had no other time free, just the hours beween one and three. She worked in the laboratory in the morning, that was where Julian had known her, and went on to a clinic later in the afternoon. As Beatrice opened the door she half expected to see Miss Burnham's plump figure, her white uniform rustling, her black bangs sooty over her low, wide forehead. Oh, I'm being horrid, she thought, and her mouth trembled.

She turned on the light in the entry, picked up the pile of letters from the table, and walked toward the kitchen. Julian's room was at the right, her room and the bathroom at the left, at the end of the hall the apartment widened into the top bar of the T, living

room, Leslie's small bedroom, dining room and kitchen. The living room was in order, the dining table was set; one thing about Pansy, she made up in speed what else she lacked. She was flying about the kitchen now, her head like a wet seal, her smile busy and ingratiating as she saw Beatrice. She caught her heel in a worn place in the linoleum, for an instant she was a gyrating pin wheel, only one potato slipped from the dish she carried, and she had her balance again. "My living goodness," she cried, "I was scared you was never coming. How come you so late, Mis' Downing? You don' want to spoil my good dinner."

Beatrice laughed. "How come you so late yourself? No lunch for Mr. Downing again. What am I—"

"Now don't you worry yourself, Mis' Downing. Ain' never gon' happen no more. Nex' time if I'm dead on my legs and mis'ry in my head, I'm gon' come crawling here. I got li'l lamb kidneys along with the chops, you think Mr. Downing gon' relish them?"

"But I mean it. I must have someone I can depend upon."

"That's what I says to myself. Pansy, she gotta have somebody to depend upon." Pansy clattered the cover of the kettle, she seized the potato masher and pounded lustily.

"We'll discuss it later." Beatrice wasn't sure Pansy even heard her. But the dingy, high-ceilinged kitchen smelled pleasantly of broiling chops and hot ginger-

bread, Pansy's spindle shanks jigged as she beat potatoes into fluffiness, and the dining table, as Beatrice retreated, had the glitter of freshly polished silver.

"Mis' Downing, your mother call you up." Pansy ran to the door, the kettle hugged to her bosom, the masher spinning. "She say kin you come over this evening, she like to see you. 'Bout nine o'clock, she say. Mis' Downing, you sure was good this afternoon."

"You heard me?"

"Jus' the minute Mr. Downing and Miss Leslie shut the door, I grabs the radio. Jus' as natural as if you was standing here talking to me."

"Good," said Beatrice. My public, she thought, as she went through the hall. Julian stood at his dresser, brushing his hair with uncertain pats of his brushes. The bathroom door was closed; Leslie had probably gone into one of her trances, and would, presently, have to be called. Beatrice stepped into her own room, she drew the shade at the one window, not glancing at the whitewashed wall, the windows across the court. She fingered through the letters. Circulars, bills, a few fan letters, the inscriptions in strange handwriting. She laid them in a basket on the flat table, beside the typewriter. She didn't want Julian and Leslie tuning in on her half hour; she would be—well, embarrassed—if she had to think that Julian sat here, listening, with that sardonic look about his mouth, a look of comment withheld; or if she knew Leslie heard some of her

advice to mothers, in her letter-box section. Would it always be true that the people who knew you intimately had the power to destroy the assurance you tried to build up for your public self? Yet, inconsistently, she minded because Julian and Leslie didn't listen. Julian had said, "They're for women only, aren't they, your talks?" Beatrice had been flip. "They'd bore you to extinction. Sentiment in one syllable words. The ladies love it, and oh, how the money rolls in!" She should think that Leslie might be curious, or had Julian seen to it, in a subtle projection of his own attitude, that the child classed her with—say, bedtime stories? For Leslie was on Julian's side.

In the days when the distance between Julian and Beatrice had been less, just a line, a thread, at first, they had been amused, both of them, at the child's fiercely partisan devotion for her father. Beatrice was still near enough to Julian then to reach the child, too. It was as if they had started at the head of a stream, not seeing that the ground was damp, that a trickle ran through the moss. They had come a long way since then, through the years the stream had widened, the child had clung to her father's hand, the water lay between them and Beatrice, too wide now to shout across, there was no returning to the spring-head. For all the talk of time and space there remained that difference, you retraced no steps through time. Now there was no longer any bank where she could walk, looking

across at them, the river roared into the sea. Beatrice flung off her hat and coat, her fingers trembled as she lifted a comb and touched her hair, her mirror gave her a bewildered reflection. (The hollow above the neat hinge of your jaw.) Julian's fingers, pain-sensitive, in those days in the hospital, how long ago? Was it only four years? His eyes bandaged, his fingers touching her face, his voice, in the huskiness of bravado, saying, "What a nice skull you'll make! Only even skulls grin. Can't you smile any more? Why are you so frightened? Have they lied to me? They said they'd save the other eye, didn't they? Were they lying?"

"I am smiling," she had said. "Feel me?" (Desperate fingers, under which a smile must be a grimace.) "No one lied, Julian. You must be patient."

"When you can't see faces, you have to learn a new technique. These voices in the blackness are too damned bland. I know the funny quirk your eyebrow gives when you detour from truth. How can I tell what your voice does?"

Beatrice drew a long breath. Julian moved along the hall, his footsteps deliberate until the thick rug in the living room silenced them. They had not lied, in a way. They had saved the other eye, they had arrested the disease, he could distinguish light, he was not totally blind. If he was careful, some day the fog in which he moved might lighten a little. Never enough for his work. At least it would grow no thicker. His work—

that was all he really cared about, she thought. Not me, at all. The fog, his fog, blew all about her, cold, distorting, obscuring. I did try, perhaps I wasn't wise enough, brave enough, for tragedy. (Poor Beatrice Downing, her husband's going blind, they say, you know, Dr. Julian Downing. He was doing something wonderful about cells, I suppose he strained his eyes with all that microscopic work. She's being simply marvelous!) Julian hadn't thought her marvelous. She didn't know what he thought, if he had thought of her at all. She had tried to be patient. If I leave him now, she thought, they will say I am abandoning him, deserting a man injured, in need. No one will ever know the truth, that he has abandoned me. Sometimes I think he hates me. All his passion is poured into his loss. If I should go away, he would feel only relief. And Leslie would be better off in some good school for girls.

Leslie rattled the lock of the bathroom door, she floated along the hall, trailing the scent of lotion from her slowly waving hands. She's being a graceful young lady tonight, thought Beatrice, as she went in to wash her own hands, and dry them, hastily. White, small-boned, helpless looking; am I a weak, a wicked woman? Scrub off the pressure of Sheppard's fingers, scrub off every thought of Sheppard, out, out damned spot!

A school would be better for Leslie than her defensive love for her father. And Julian— For an instant Beatrice hung at the edge of an appalling com-

prehension about Julian. She didn't know whether he moved in his imagination past the barrier of each day, whether he made of the hours a treadmill, so many to be trodden off, tomorrow the same dull round; Julian, who all his life had lived outside of time, his days part of a spiral which carried him up toward the knowledge he sought. What was he to do, in all the days ahead of him? He rejected violently her blundering attempts to suggest—oh, anything to fill even one hour. "My God, why not buy me a loom?" he had shouted. "Bedspreads, rugs, what do the blind weave?" She made no more suggestions. Not that Julian complained; he just said nothing, nothing whatever. She had tried to bring home amusing accounts of the work she was building up, but they fell flat against Julian's silence, a silence which seemed resentful of her small success. Someone had to be the breadwinner, and even if it hurt Julian's pride, perhaps she had thought that he might begin to face facts. She tried to. And if Sheppard, now, had turned into a fact—she had to face that, too.

Pansy was calling her. "Dinner's all ready, Mis' Downing."

Leslie had turned on the brilliant overhead light, Julian stood beside his chair, one hand outstretched, defining the exact edge of the table. When they were seated, he made a quick exploration with his fingers, identifying the shadowy objects about his plate, glass, silver. There had been, at first, dreadful moments

when he had knocked over a cup of coffee, or sent rolls flying, dreadful because he felt such humiliation. Beatrice had installed the glaring light, and he had grown more skillful, too, as he learned movement in his fog. But he stooped more, peering at the table, and his concentration threw bars across any easy run of talk.

"What kind of meeting did you have, Leslie?" asked Beatrice, as Pansy served the soup.

"Goodness, Mother, I told you yesterday. I even asked you for the money." Leslie's eyebrows, brown, feather-even, lifted, her mouth had the amusing firmness of youth measuring adult stupidity. "You gave it to me, a dollar."

"Oh, yes, of course. A wedding present for—let's see—Miss Eustis." She guessed wrong deliberately, she provoked the shriek of scorn from Leslie, thus prolonging the topic, defeating the silence which crept always from the corners of the room.

"Miss Eustis! Oh, Mother! Why, she's an old maid, she's, my goodness, she's thirty! It's Miss Smith, our gym teacher."

"Thirty isn't a hundred, you know." (Thirty, I'm thirty-six, I was older than Leslie when my mother and Humbert—) "What did you decide to get her? A nice hockey stick?" She didn't want to remember, now, herself at sixteen. She had adored her mother, her father's death had meant that as she grew out of childhood, her

mother had all her love. Humbert had been an interloper, a thief, a Pretender, and she loathed him. She had been rather difficult, but she really had suffered.

"Mother! For a wedding present?" Leslie gasped. "Aren't you terrible? No one would—" She ducked her head, her eyes suspicious. "Oh, you're being funny."

"Not very." Beatrice smiled. "Do tell me what you bought."

Leslie told, beginning offishly and then warming to the account of the battle. Some of the girls wanted a silver plate, with all their names engraved, and then Miss Smith would remember them. Not until Leslie had counted up the letters, at five cents a letter, had they seen that they couldn't buy a plate if they paid for the engraving. So they decided on candlesticks, with Miss Smith's own initials. "Agnes said she could keep those if she got divorced," finished Leslie, placidly. "She says you have to think of that. Her mother's had three divorces, and lots of her wedding presents just weren't any use to her at all."

"A traveling bag would seem the only safe article," said Julian.

"They cost too much, good ones."

Julian had lifted his face toward Beatrice, his mouth wry. Too much is lost between us, thought Beatrice; there are no words that take the place of that quick verifying in another's glance of your own response. If I could smile at him, she's just a child, these are just

borrowed phrases, don't worry about her, she likes to show off to her parents. We can't communicate, the moment is gone, we forget what it was we wondered, or if, later, we try to return to it in words, we exaggerate. Or Julian's on the defensive, thinking I'm taking pains because he is handicapped. "It doesn't do to be too practical about a wedding gift," she said, lightly. "But candlesticks should fit into any future."

"If her husband grows tiresome she can rap him over the head with one. I hope they're good strong alloy, not pure silver." Julian leaned back in his chair, hands arched a little, one each side of his plate, the veins branching between prominent knuckles.

"Sterling silver." Leslie giggled. Pansy moved briskly about the table, bringing the next course. Chops, thought Beatrice. We shouldn't have chops, they're too hard to manage. She watched Julian's hands, moving delicately, fingers curving over knife and fork.

"Pansy's given us chops," she said, diffidently. "Can't I help you?"

"No, thank you." (I'd starve first, said the spurt of anger in his voice.)

If he could only be a little matter of fact! Beatrice's cheeks were warm. It would be easier for her to cut up a thousand chops than to see his tentative, exploring movements, to see his shoulders bent, his head crouched, as if stubbornness could substitute for clarity of vision. One result was that he didn't eat enough.

The doctor said, quite as if she were to blame, that he needed to be built up. "More exercise, more food, you must see he gets them."

She'd try again. Her voice had a tightening of constraint. "Mother left word she wished to see me. About nine. Would you care to walk over with me?"

"Are you talking to me?" asked Julian.

"Yes. Leslie must have schoolwork to do, haven't you? The middle of the week—"

"Your mother doesn't wish to see me," said Julian. "Anyway, I told Leslie—"

"If you'd rather go, Father, it's all right. I don't have to turn that theme in until Friday."

"I've had a walk."

"As you like," said Beatrice. "I probably won't be late."

One more thing which had changed, she thought. Julian and her mother had always hit it off pretty well. Agatha liked good-looking younger men, she and Julian had worked out an amusing line of their own, with Agatha pretending to consult him about the actions of the characters in her next serial, and Julian offering the most absurd suggestions. How long since he had laughed at anything, thought Beatrice. When Julian was first ill, Agatha had dropped in often to see him, to read to him, and he had seemed to enjoy her. Just what had happened Beatrice did not know. She was afraid Julian might have overheard some comment

Agatha had made to her. For although Agatha was kind, she was also indiscreet and realistic and voluble, and during the weeks when Julian first suspected that the eyesight which the surgeons had assured him they could save would be forever insufficient for his work, Agatha had said to Beatrice, and more than once, "You're babying him too much, he's got to snap out of it, other men have learned to stand worse things than blindness." Perhaps she had even said it to Julian himself. Perhaps there was no reason why Julian no longer wished to meet Agatha except his increasing disposition to reject everything.

Before Beatrice left the apartment, she went to the door of the living room. Leslie had set the dial of the small radio for Station WQXR, Julian was lying back in an armchair, he had taken off his dark glasses, and twirled them slowly in one hand; the other hand lay across his eyes. The soft, recorded music mounted slowly to a finale, the repetition of the minor theme accumulating its effect of pure, clear wisdom out of grief. Beatrice couldn't identify it. Next the radio was the little cabinet in which Julian kept the scores of all the things he liked, and she thought of the hours he had spent, evenings after all day in the laboratory, or Sunday afternoon, reading the score as the symphony orchestra played, making notes in the margins. Was there nothing he had cared to do which he could now do? He had played a little, on the violin. That, too, he

no longer tried. "How can I, when I cannot see the notes?" Leslie sat at the table, books scattered, cheeks pink with concentration. Beatrice turned away, quietly, and the music which was the background of their evenings spoke somberly in its final chords as she closed the apartment door.

She knew, as she walked slowly along Amsterdam Avenue, that she was relieved to have an excuse to leave them. She hadn't seen Agatha for several days. Usually a summons meant that her mother was feeling a trifle low, either because she had struck a snag in her writing, or because Humbert had been up to something. How she puts up with him! And she's crazy about him, after all these years. Beatrice sighed, and hoped when she was sixty she would be an all-passion-spent old lady. Thirty-six from sixty, that's twenty-four years. Twenty-four and fourteen, why Leslie will be older than I am now. But she won't be like me, ever. She's like Julian.

She went across toward the Drive past the University buildings, the parked cars, the lighted windows attesting to zeal for knowledge even at night. The University had been generous, she supposed, to Julian. They had paid his salary for a year, and when Julian resigned—"I regret to say that I can be of no further service"—they had arranged his annuity. Pitifully small, for he was only forty. "Why can't you go on teaching," Beatrice had urged. "You can lecture."

"What about?" Julian had asked, harshly. "You forget I was a research professor. Can't you see me tapping along a hall with a cane, and lecturing on stuff five years stale?"

Beatrice felt through her whole body a sensation of torsion, as if she tried physically to twist herself away from an unendurable, immutable situation, in which part of herself was rooted so that she could only writhe a little. Could she wrench herself completely free? If Julian cared for me, she thought, if I helped him in any way! How much ought anyone have to bear?

The entrance hall of the house in which her mother lived was large and decorous, with tapestries and rugs and a doorman in maroon livery who recognized Beatrice, and said, yes, Mrs. Townsend was in. Beatrice glanced at her reflection in one of the large mirrors, surprised to see her face so sulky. She stood nearer the glass; it was a soft face, with delicate contours, the blue eyes with dark lashes were the best feature, the full mouth was decidedly sulky tonight, the line between the rather heavy eyebrows was deep. Looking at herself gave her no pleasure; instead, it made her uneasy, as if she saw in the mirror some quality she wished not to admit. (You have the most marvelous skin, Sheppard had said. That dead mat white is perfect. Transparent, too, all that vitality of yours showing. You don't know how to dress. I'd like to take you to a woman I know—) She pulled the gray fur of her

coat collar impatiently over her throat, and turned away.

The elevator man knew her, too. He had been with the house almost as long as Agatha had lived here, and that was a long time for New York.

"Your mother's expecting you," he said, his leathery face creasing pleasantly. "Mr. Flint went out, but she's home. If I may say so, Mrs. Downing, she's driving herself too hard. She don't have the spring about her, if you know what I mean. She says to me, Pete, I'd like a job working for somebody else, then I wouldn't have to work so hard. Why, sometimes in the middle of the night, if I stop at her floor, there's that peck-peck going and I say to myself, there's Mrs. Townsend, hard at it, pecking another book out on her typewriter."

They all like her, thought Beatrice, as she said, "No one can stop Mother." Not just because she's generous; she wants them to like her, janitors, delivery boys, everybody! She turns on her charm for anyone, man, woman, or child, she knows all about Pete's private life, his wife's operation, his lazy son— Am I like that? I don't like being disapproved of, but who does? "She's probably starting a new story, that always gets her down for a while."

"She's a fine woman," said Pete, as he slid the door back. "But she oughta take it easy, easier, that is. She ain't as young as she was."

Beatrice turned, as she left the car. "You better not tell her that," she said.

"I wouldn't," said Pete, earnestly. "But her looks got me worried, lately. Why, she mighta been your sister, Mrs. Downing, and lately—"

Beatrice went along the hall, a faint irritation drawing her brows together. Pete sounded too reproachful, implying that she ought to do something about her mother. Let him try to suggest to Agatha that she was growing older, if he dared. But Pete's words had at least broken the moody absorption in her own problems, and when Agatha herself opened the door, Beatrice looked at her. Like pausing to catch fresh meaning in words long spoken by rote, this search for signs in a familiar face.

The two were somewhat alike; Agatha had deep blue, heavily fringed eyes, but her mouth was firmer. Her body had thickened a trifle, but she carried herself well and wore excellent corsets. Her throat, in the deep V of her wine-colored dress, was smoothly white, and her hair, which she had never cut, because Humbert liked it long, had still almost no gray in its smooth russet wave from low, broad forehead to the coil at the nape of the neck. She looked astonishingly young, but tonight, in the first sharpened moment, Beatrice saw that under the rouge (too lavishly applied for once), the flesh of her face was like crumpled tissue paper, the

outer corners of the eyelids were deeply rayed, the throat just under the chin had a tremulous sag.

"Come in, Bee, I'm so glad you could come." Agatha kissed her quickly, her lips dry against Beatrice's cheek, she closed the door, and drew Beatrice's hand between her arm and her full, soft breast, hurrying her along the hall. "I hoped you'd come early, before Humbert got in. I simply have to talk to you!" Her voice was agitated, over-intense. "How are things going with you? I didn't tune in on your program this afternoon, I couldn't. Leslie and Julian all right?"

"Everything's about as usual." Beatrice could pick up no clue from the rooms of the apartment. The living room, spacious, high-ceilinged, had roses on the opened piano, the door of Humbert's room was ajar, Agatha had done that room over in the fall, in soft reds, curtains, Persian rug, deep leather armchairs. The room Agatha used for her study was almost too orderly; the typewriter was hooded, the flat desk had no scattered papers, the ebony book ends, carved primitive figures, held the battered dictionaries and synonym books tightly closed and idle. Agatha wasn't working, then. That left Humbert!

"Sit down, Bee, dear. You look a bit frazzled. Can I get you something, sherry, hot chocolate?"

"No, thanks, Agatha. I'm all right. You're the fellow who needs something, I'd say."

Agatha left the door wide open. "Minnie's gone to

the movies," she said. "I want to hear if anyone rings." She walked quickly in her ridiculous red-heeled pumps (she was proud of her feet!) around the desk, and seated herself in her desk chair, her fingers restless against the desk. Beatrice laid aside her hat and coat, and settled into an armchair. Everything about the room was familiar; she could recognize the backs of books along the shelves, the dull green draperies at the windows were the same, the two paintings on the wall she had known as a child, one of the sea, one of mountains. Even Minnie, gone to the movies. When Beatrice was a girl, Minnie had gone out with her young men; now she went alone, having preferred to go on living with Agatha, working for her, to any young man. Agatha had sat behind that desk, and her hands were restless that time, too, the night she told Beatrice she meant to marry Humbert, the day Beatrice told Agatha she meant to marry Julian, how many other days when other things were told! Occasionally Agatha would say, "We've stayed in this house too long, I'm going to find a new place, a penthouse somewhere," and for a few days she would rush around, looking at terraced apartments, at set-in bathtubs and sunken living rooms. She had even made payments of a month's rent! And then, always, she decided not to move. In a way, Beatrice understood that her mother wished nothing altered in her life, she was too passionately content with the pattern she had made. Usually, just as she

decided to take another place, she found an idea for a new story exploding.

"That settles it this time," she would say. "It's almost a sign, isn't it, that I ought not to try to move away from here."

Everything was familiar, except the quality of the silence in which Agatha sat, her animation, her vivacity transmuted into this kind of haggard age.

"Have you been working too hard?" asked Beatrice, gently. "What are you doing now?" Agatha wrote serials for the women's magazines, usually on the Cinderella theme, the variations being in the background; in the latest one the heroine had been a Florida cracker instead of a shopgirl in New York, but she always got her man. Agatha had worked harder since the depression; by turning out twice as many, she kept her yearly income about where it had been in the golden years.

"I haven't worked for weeks. I can't write a word."

"Why not take a real vacation, then, instead of worrying? You know by this time your doldrums never last forever." Beatrice leaned forward persuasively, keeping all impatience from her voice. For at least twenty-five years Agatha had had this recurrent fear that she was written out; perhaps it was a writer's disease. "Pack your bags and drive down to some nice place like Tryon. Minnie can take care of Humbert for a few weeks. Do him good to get along without you."

"That," said Agatha, bleakly, "is just what he thinks." She beat her fist against the desk, and rocked a little in her chair, her face distorted for a moment. "I've never talked to you—much—about him. You—you never accepted him. But I've got to talk now."

Aha, thought Beatrice, has Humbert gone too far at last? She must guard her words. Her affection for Agatha and her dislike of Humbert twisted together into a real duplicity, a double feeling, wry delight more than distress. Humbert had taken everything from Agatha, money, position, pleasure, and in return had given her—well, what? His superficial charm, his superficial love-making. He was a year or two younger than Agatha, and he magnified that difference into all of a decade. He ridiculed Agatha's writing, although he accepted easily the degree of comfortable living it afforded him. "Don't ask me to read it," he would say, "I prefer not to realize how sentimental you really are!" He was a contact man with a large downtown insurance firm, and when he married Agatha, his prospects were excellent. Tall, with boldly handsome features which had settled into an irritating complacency, with a nice wit and a manner both audacious and genial, he seemed hallmarked for success. Perhaps if Agatha hadn't made things so easy for him— He complained that the firm played politics, that he wouldn't lower himself to the tactics used by younger men to gouge ahead of him. He worked on commis-

sion, and Beatrice suspected that what he earned no longer even paid for the suits he ordered from a Bond Street tailor. But if he had had ambition or pride he would never have accepted Agatha's madly generous arrangement. After all, he had been almost forty when they married, and if a man is going places he is well on his way by forty. He was just bone-lazy and self-indulgent. But if Agatha enjoyed keeping him, that was her own affair. As long as she enjoyed it.

"A year ago I thought I'd have to tell you things," Agatha was saying, and Beatrice saw beads of sweat shine on her upper lip, saw her temples glisten. "Before we took that trip to Florida. That was the first time. I'd been jealous before, women are such fools, and Humbert's attractive, that way, even if you never admitted it. You can't help being jealous if you love a man and you know you're growing older. But he always laughed me out of it, and I—Oh, God, I thought he loved me! Last spring, no, it was January, when the bills came in. You know how careless I am about bills, quite often I just pay them without checking them over. This one seemed so large, I didn't remember buying much at that shop. A fur bolero. I hadn't bought it, I wrote them, I had to go down, the saleswoman remembered Humbert's buying it." Agatha's voice ran on quickly, monotonously, like a worn, scratched record played too fast. "He counted on my carelessness, you see. He'd been going out one or two evenings a week,

he said he was trying to get ahead, there were men he could see only at night, but he fussed so getting dressed I should have known. I followed him. A little chippy, a platinum blonde, a John Powers' model, he'd met her when he tagged the advertising man one day instead of seeing to his own work. He even borrowed my car to pick her up, and I had to follow him in a taxi." A long shudder moved Agatha's body, and she rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth, her flesh rejecting the bitterness she tried to swallow.

"Then you took him South," said Beatrice. "Did you even tell him you knew?"

"Yes. He cried." Agatha's mouth quivered, tears stood in her eyes, and she lifted her hands in an instinctively tender, cradling gesture, as if again she held his head against her soft, deep breast. "He cried, and I believed him. A man has a hard time, accepting age. They have change of life as much as a woman does. Lots of them lose their heads. She made him feel grand, she flattered him. He said I didn't, I knew he was a failure. He said if I could forgive him, we'd go away together. Another honeymoon, he called it. You know, Bee, the terrible thing is that he's destroyed all the past, too. None of it's any good. When I remember—just a year ago—it's as if the skin were being burned off my body, I am so humiliated."

"Darling, you mustn't feel that way! You've done nothing to be ashamed of. Can't you just feel boiling

angry?" Beatrice felt her own anger quicken her heartbeat, roar in her ears, anger and the painful shock of standing too near the misery of another person, that person her mother. There was something which violated their whole relationship in having to understand this misery, something almost incestuous. "What's he doing now?" she asked, harshly. "Has he got another girl?" She wasn't surprised, she had always thought Humbert incapable of real fidelity; but she had expected him to be discreet enough not to endanger his soft berth.

"No. That would be bad enough. This is worse. It's the same girl. After he promised never to see her again. I'm through. The reason I'm telling you is this. I know now what a fool I am. I'm trying to protect myself. I've got to fix things so he can't get around me again. I thought your knowing would be a bar against myself. You've never liked him. But you couldn't be glad it's turned out this way, could you?" She stared at Beatrice, bewildered, not knowing why she asked that.

"Agatha, dear, I think it's horrible that anyone could treat you that way! You know that." Beatrice had flushed, she spoke hastily; had her mother's pain made her too shrewd? She was usually the least suspicious of people, projecting upon everyone her own candid and friendly attitude. "I'm glad only that you won't be put upon any longer. I'm glad you told me. I'll back you

up. He's not worth this suffering! What are you going to do?"

"Reno. I've planned it all out. If I make him a settlement, he will have to agree not to contest the divorce. It won't make any scandal, that way. He can't live on what he earns, I don't know what he'll do. But I can't work, now, and I have to, to live. I haven't saved much. It wasn't his fault the investments went bad, I didn't tell you about that, did I? I'll close this apartment, I couldn't stay here. I can move around, there are good hotels everywhere, that ought to be good for my writing, don't you think?" She sat very still, her shoulders hunched forward, as if grief stood before her, laying heavy hands upon her, crumpling her into a small and aging woman, as if grief laid its cold mouth on hers and drew out of her all breath of vitality, of eagerness, of love. "I shall be so lonely," she said, at last. "He has taken the past and all the future. But I shall not be so humiliated."

"You are being both brave and wise," said Beatrice. Suppose she said, Reno, how would it be if I went with you? Julian would not suffer like this, he no longer had any love for her. Agatha still loved Humbert, she was humiliated because she loved him, and he had shown her at last the quality of the man she loved. For an instant Beatrice was frightened; was that what she would do to Julian, show him the quality of the woman he had once loved? Oh, it wasn't comparable, she was

not like Humbert! She would break her relationship honestly, openly, if—or she would not see Sheppard any more.

"I am a fool," said Agatha, wearily. "But now that I have told you, perhaps I—" She stopped, her head lifting, startled, as the door of the apartment swung open. Beatrice watched her, marveling at the change which swept over her, as if she opened a petcock of a secret reservoir and flooded her veins with fresh blood. She sat erect, her eyes were dark and brilliant, her mouth lost its grimness, even her skin had a different tone, smoothed over the forehead and cheekbones. "Tell Leslie I wish she'd drop in," she said, her voice alive again. "Tell her I want to ask her a lot of questions. I'm putting a girl just her age in a story, and she can help."

"She'll love that," said Beatrice, knowing that Humbert must have stopped there in the hall, listening. "I'll tell her. I must get along now."

"Hello, Humbert. You *are* back early."

"The man I wanted to see was out." Humbert stood at the door, and Beatrice said "Good evening," as she rose and picked up her coat. She was annoyed that her knees quivered, she didn't look at Humbert. "Don't let me drive you away," he said, blandly, "I've a headache. I'm going straight to bed." He closed his door loudly.

"Well," said Agatha, rising, walking with Beatrice

to the end of the hall. "I've given you a nice evening."

"Don't you weaken!" Beatrice kissed her mother. "Keep me posted."

Agatha looked back at Humbert's closed door. "I say to myself," she said, very low, "that it's the way men are, women have to put up with it. It's like walking on quicksand. But they aren't all so perfidious. Julian isn't. He's incorruptible. You think you've had a hard time, and you have, of course. But his character hasn't changed. Just his disposition, because he's unhappy."

Beatrice laid her hand on the door knob, her fingers gripped it, anger flickered in her, sparks struck off from the guilt she did not wish to feel. "What difference does it make what you call it? He's like a stranger. Why, I wish he would have a love affair! That would be something to fight."

Agatha looked at her daughter, her eyes gravely attentive. "See here, Bee, I should think Julian had enough to fight without your wanting to fight, too."

Beatrice stiffened; her anger was antagonism, now, finding the channel it had worn in her youth, when, needing to separate herself from Agatha, to grow out of childhood into an individual, she had resisted all advice, all suggestions. "I mean I can't cope with him, I'm just—well, baffled—no matter what I try to do. You know how he won't talk with you any more. Multiply that by hundreds! You couldn't go on forever offering yourself and being rejected!" Suddenly she was

contrite, seeing Agatha shrink, her eyes tragic. "I'm sorry, darling! I didn't intend to talk about my troubles, you've more than enough of your own."

"There are some things you have to stand up to," said Agatha, slowly. "You've got my weakness, Bee. We both like to be admired, and petted, and have everything just fine. But we don't have the same technique. I go on pretending long after I know, and you walk away." Her posture was suddenly alert at a faint creak of a door. Beatrice was not sure, she thought Humbert's door moved inward, so cautiously that only a slight change in the gleam of light across the white panels suggested movement. "Drop in again, soon," said Agatha, lightly. "I'll have more of the story ready to tell you. Good night."

Beatrice walked home slowly. Discomfort like this was a physical sensation; she felt like an effigy of herself, suspended from a tree, a street lamp, a rope about her neck, her feet clear of the ground, swinging halfway around, halfway back. Humbert had opened his door a crack, to stand there in the darkness, to eavesdrop. He had picked up some clue, then, that Agatha had found him out again, he wanted to make sure. If he hadn't interrupted, what else would Agatha have said? What have I walked away from, thought Beatrice. Her mind moved busily, repudiating her mother's comment, showing her selected fragments of the past few years, the way she had tried to conceal her fright when

Julian's trouble began, the way she had tried to sound cheerful and courageous long after he had grown so cold, so bitter. Her mother didn't know about Sheppard, when she said *walk away* she hadn't really meant *leave* Julian. I'd like to know what I've ever walked away from! When Mother married Humbert, I did go away, to school, to college, but I should think the way he's turned out proves I was right about him. Perfidious. She stopped, needing all energy for her thought. Sheppard—oh, no, he wasn't like Humbert. He didn't pretend to be moral and faithful and all that, he was completely open about his code, he was just sophisticated, disillusioned. He knew passion didn't last, and he said so. Humbert was a hypocrite. Julian was incorruptible. Sheppard would find the very word amusing. But you couldn't call him perfidious, could you? He called himself a realist. Beatrice went on more quickly down the Amsterdam Avenue hill, remembering things Sheppard had said. "You don't believe the things you say you live by, you have just accepted them from your narrow environment. At heart you're the same kind of pleasure-lover that I am, a most charming hedonist. Your capacity for pleasure is endless, it has never been plumbed." Subversive words. The effigy that was herself swung away from them, oscillated back. If she was that kind of person— Oh, which are you, she wondered, the things you make yourself do from duty or convention, or the things you wish to do?

Or did the two come together, and in the long run you did the things you basically desired? Sheppard said not unless you freed yourself from notions other people had thrust upon you which you had never examined.

The hall light burned in the apartment, the doors of Julian's room and of Leslie's were shut. Beatrice snapped off the hall light for a moment, and stood in the darkness. No pencil of light under either door. What did Julian do, Julian who used always to read late into the night, who said he disliked too much sleep, it made him logy, time for sleep when you were dead. She listened. She could hear from the avenue the thunder of great trucks rolling into the city with provisions for another day, a thunder that rattled the windows, but there was no sound within the walls. In the darkness she took a step toward Julian's door. Suppose she went in there, took his hands in hers, held them against her breasts, said, Julian, help me, I am frightened. Love me, you can love me if you cannot see me, why has that gone with the light? What would he say? She was swinging again, that helpless effigy. When he had come back from the hospital the last time, he had insisted on separate rooms. That was when they moved to this apartment. He had said he wasn't sleeping well, he wanted to be alone, she had thought at first it was because he wished no one to see his clumsy, inept movements as he practiced such simple things as untying shoe laces, or finding clean linen in the drawers.

Only later had she thought it was because he did not want her near him. "Leave me alone, will you? Your pity is like a poison!" What should she have said to that? That she had no pity? She could not go to him again. Without light, he had descended to the aphotic region, she could not live without some sun.

She snapped on the hall light again, and walked on to the living room. Leslie often left books and papers scattered about, it was easier to set things in order at night. I could get him one of those small radios they make now, without an aerial, to have beside his bed, she thought. He could turn it on at night. I'll ask how much they cost. For once Leslie had put away her books. The room was pleasant, reflecting in the furnishings the good years of their marriage. The end of the divan toward the window was faded; blue wasn't a safe color. But for the most part things still looked well. Beatrice saw a crumpled paper on the floor, fallen short of the waste basket at which it had been aimed. She picked it up and smoothed it out, thinking perhaps to read a rough draft of the theme Leslie had written. It was typed, a queer jumble of letters, the margins uneven. Beatrice laid it on the table, under the lamp, and studied it.

Niwus thr tine dor all food nentp cone tu
thr aod pf thr paty noe ys thr tibe doe akk gppd

What on earth—Leslie could type, all schoolchildren did their papers that way nowadays. Now is the time

for all good men. Julian! She could see him, his shoulders hunched, his thin hands with their strong knuckles feeling slowly for the keys. Suddenly she was crying, tears hot against her lids, her throat swelling with its ache. Leslie must have helped him, telling him where the letters were along the keyboard. It was the first motion he had made toward any kind of release from his bondage. Or was it the first? If she had learned of this by accident— She turned out the light, and folding the paper, carried it with her to her own room, and placed it in a drawer of her desk.

2

THE crosstown bus rolled through the walled channel where Seventy-ninth Street cuts through the Park, and came out on the West Side. The chatter and giggles of the girls homeward bound from high school ebbed for a moment as Leslie buttoned her coat and reached for the briefcase tucked between her feet.

"Aw, Les, come on over to Broadway, we're all going to have a coke at the drugstore. Come on, Les!" Dark, lustrous-eyed, noisy, they were all looking at her; they lived on West End Avenue, most of them. Rebecca, Naomi, Helen, Sarah. They had Anglicized names, many of them, but their ebullience and warmth had suffered no change. They liked Leslie for her difference. You have the loveliest color hair, they would say, you're so reserved and quiet. Leslie liked them for her difference; they made her more conscious of herself, so that she spoke slowly, in a lower tone than was quite natural, she felt herself dignified, refined.

"I can't," she said. "I really can't, not possibly. I'm helping my father, he's working on an article. He—he

has trouble with his eyes." She was brave, allowing them just a glimpse of a tragic life which she met gallantly. "I read it back to him, you see, after he writes it on the typewriter. I don't know what it's about, it's awfully deep."

"I bet you do so know!" Miriam Snyder, on the seat with Leslie, squeezed Leslie's hand. "Anyone as smart as you!"

"Wasn't that awful today, when Miss Knack called on me, and I wasn't even listening!"

"She does it on purpose, she watches till she sees a dreamy look in one of us eyes, and then she jumps, old crab."

Leslie rose, swaying with the jounce of the bus, reaching over Miriam for the bell rope. "Good-by all," she said, scrambling toward the door, and they called, "By, Les, Abyssinia, look, meet me tomorrow under the clock. Les, we're going to tune in for your mother, we're all going to Babe's!"

Leslie's cheeks burned, she didn't have to answer as the door jerked open, she could hurry out to the street. Of course they all said they just loved to listen, they thought she was wonderful, but Leslie hated to have them. That awful question box, they'd think Mother was talking about herself and Leslie. How to win your child's confidence. Problem children. Brr! It embarrassed Leslie almost to death. Of course, Mother had to make money somehow, but having a radio pro-

gram kept her so sort of excited all the time, especially lately. She was making lots of money now, she had three sponsors, of course she wasn't as popular as Martha Deane yet, but Father said that was because she had an eastern accent, and Martha Deane didn't. The Amsterdam Avenue bus curvetted in to the curb, and Leslie climbed aboard. The bus driver didn't look at her as he pressed the treadle to bang the door shut, but an elderly man, past whose knees she had to brush to reach a vacant seat, gave her a look of appraisal not entirely grandfatherly. I'm growing up, thought Leslie, fiercely, wearing her ingenuous what-a-nice-little-girl-on-her-way-from-school expression. The last time she had gone to see Agatha (that was another embarrassing thing, having to call your grandmother Agatha all the time! It must be a relief to have an ordinary family where your mother and grandmother just'stayed home.)—Anyway, that time Humbert had put his arm around her, Agatha was in the other room, and had said, "You are growing into a young lady, aren't you? Nice little figger you're getting," and he had kissed her, and his chin rasped her cheek. She'd fixed him. She'd said, "Yes, thank you, Grandfather," and he'd been just furious. He hadn't had time to say a word, because Agatha came in, and she looked at him with her nose very sharp.

Then Leslie forget her relatives, she leaned her chin against her hand, although her elbow kept slipping

off the window sill, and thought of phrases she had copied into her notebook that afternoon, phrases to use in a theme on MY IDEALS. Phrases about beauty and truth and self-control, lovely phrases, sonorous, rhythmic, vague, grand. "To thine own self be true, thou can'st not then be false to any man." Her elbow slipped suddenly and she banged her forehead against the glass. She sat up, looking about to see if anyone had noticed. No one had. They rattled past the Cathedral, and she hoped that Father would wish to hear the music there next Sunday. He hadn't been for three weeks, not since he made up his mind to learn how to typewrite. Leslie had put that idea in his head, there was a blind girl in school who could typewrite. She hadn't told Father about the girl. Of course the girl was really blind, and Father could see a little. But Leslie didn't like to watch the girl, her face listened so dreadfully all the time. Father wasn't like that, he managed his face. Pride in her father sang like a shout at dawn in Leslie. He never says a mumbling word!

Leslie popped out of the bus at One Hundred Twentieth, it wouldn't stop at her corner, and walked quickly, holding herself just under a run, down the hill, then up the side street. She frowned, remembering last night. Just as she and Father reached this corner, she had looked up, and there was Mother in front of the house with that man again, the taxi waiting. Leslie had said, "Let's go down another block, and up around

Morningside, it makes a nice curve," and by the time they reached the door, Mother had gone up to the apartment. A week ago the man had jumped into the cab as Leslie and her father approached, and Father had said, "Was that someone with your mother?" Leslie had almost lied. She had said, "No, she's waiting for us on the steps." Leslie supposed it was very pleasant to have someone bring you home in a taxi, but she didn't think Mother ought to let the same man do it every time she had her program, even if it was a man connected with the work and they talked over what Mother was to say. He'd got her one of the new sponsors, Mother explained. Leslie didn't like him. It had been too dark the first time, weeks ago, to see him plainly, but last night there was light enough, the days were lots longer now. He looked too sneering and bossy. Father wouldn't like him. Vague, formless, wordless, a flood of protective tenderness inundated Leslie, a need to shield her father from anything which would underline his handicap. She had been too young when disaster struck the family to understand its implications, and Beatrice had been careful not to worry her about Julian's resignation, their loss of economic security. She had been young enough to accept Julian's loss of sight as a matter of course; it was just one more thing in a complex world which was changing so rapidly that no one thing was more surprising or more distressing than another might be. At the time it was enough

for her to have Julian at home again, after his absence at the hospital. Here he was, her darling father, listening to her, answering her questions; they'd gone to Maine for the summer, Agatha lent them her house on the coast, and had a lovely time. Father had said by fall, after resting his eyes all summer, he'd be out of the woods. Of course Mother hadn't been so busy then, she'd had lots more time to do things for him.

There had been no definite moment at which Leslie realized that her father would live always in a world of shadows. She hadn't liked sleeping on the couch in the dining room in that awful little place where they lived one year, she had no place of her own, no door she could close upon intruders. She liked this apartment much better, although it wasn't as nice as Miriam's or Naomi's. She had her own room, Father had his, Mother had hers, and the living room really looked very nice, although Miriam's family had that grand straight-angled white-wood furniture. And Father did depend upon her a great deal, now.

William was at the entrance, warning two little girls, mere babies of nine or ten, they they could not come in the lobby with their roller skates on their feet. "You-all stay out on the sidewalks of New Yawk till you through skating!" The girls looked at Leslie, more impressed by her margin of maturity than by William, and skated away. "How you, Miss Leslie?" asked William as he walked to the elevator.

"Fine," said Leslie. "Did Patsy come today?"

"She come," said William, starting the car upward. "'At Miss Burnham come, your mother go out, Miss Burnham go out, your grandma come and go away, 'at's all."

My goodness, what did Agatha want, wondered Leslie, she never comes to see Father. Maybe she forgot Mother would be out.

"Here y'are." William clicked back the door.

Here she was, thought Leslie, walking down the hall. To your own self be true. She didn't really wish she could have gone with the girls, but she wished someone would say, Proud spirit, you do well, this is your duty, stern daughter of the voice of God. But was it duty, if you liked doing it? Duty was something disagreeable and hard, wasn't it, and she'd much rather be with Father than with the girls. She'd rather be both places. Anyway—she fitted the key into the lock and opened the door—if Father knew she even thought such a word! That would just be the end of her. "You understand, Leslie, if there's anything else you have the slightest desire to do, you must say so. I won't impose on you. Oh, I suppose I do impose on you. I mean you've got to be honest about it." She had found a good answer for that. She'd told Father how most of the girls at school didn't even see their fathers or talk to them, except just at dinner time, perhaps, and they compared notes on the best way to get money out of

their old men and the whopping stories they made up so their fathers wouldn't know the things they did. Father had said one of his queer things that Leslie had to ponder before she understood. "Are you presuming to suggest to me that the law of compensation still operates, even for me?" But his hand had enclasped hers comfortably, had burrowed with it into the pocket of his overcoat, and they had walked along briskly in the cold evening.

Leslie listened. Father was typing so hard he hadn't heard her come in. She left her school bag and her coat in her own room, glancing about intently for any signs of intrusion. The key to the drawer of her desk was just where she had left it, at the bottom of the box in which she kept her handkerchiefs. She didn't exactly think anyone—meaning Mother—would go prying about, but in that locked drawer she had things written down which were pieces of her living heart, she would have died rather than have anyone read them.

Pansy was ironing, thump, thump. The clothes rack had all its bars hung with folded garments, pink, white, you can't tell what anything is, pants, shirts, anything, thought Leslie, they're very modest, folded up. "Did you wash my sweater, Pansy?"

Pansy jumped, swung around, holding the iron like a weapon. "Land Sakes, you scairt me! How you get in so still? Yassum, I washed it. It's all spread out on a towel in your ma's room, drying."

"Did you stretch it out? It's my favorite sweater, and if you shrunk it one bit—"

"I d'nt shrunk it, I been washing sweaters 'fore you was born." She set down the iron, and darted toward the refrigerator. "You wait, I got a glass of milk, your ma says you drink a glass every day—"

"No, thank you," said Leslie, firmly. "I don't want it. Don't you get it, Pansy! I won't touch it." It was simply awful, the way Mother kept trying to make her eat all the time. She hated milk, anyway, and she certainly did not want to be fat, the way some of the girls were.

"Is that you, Leslie?" Her father's voice came from the dining room, and making a face at Pansy, Leslie went on, answering, "Yes, it's me."

Julian sat at the dining table, the typewriter before him, a box with manuscript paper at his left, the cover of the box at the right, a few typed sheets in that.

"Hello," he said, "you're nice and early today."

"How you doing?" Leslie walked around the table, she laid an arm around his shoulder and bent down, her cheek brushing his for an instant. "That looks pretty good. Why, Father! It's page twenty! My goodness, you've done an awful lot today."

"You see, I had it all in my head. I just had to find a way to get it out. The hardest thing is remembering the shape of the sentences I've set down, before I write the next one. But I'm getting good, Leslie. I can

remember almost a page now, I can see it, here," he tapped his forehead, "and actually read it to myself. Next I'll practice on two pages." He stretched his long back, straightening his shoulders; his hand moved along Leslie's arm to her throat, his fingers touched her ear, her brow, her hair, a delicate, inquiring touch. Then he spread his hands over the typewriter keys. "You know, I'm going to finish it tomorrow. Burnham had a little extra time today, she corrected five pages. You think you really will have time enough to copy it?"

"Sure I will. I can type awfully fast, except for some of your biggest words. I'll charge you top rates, too!"

"See how straight my margin is!" Julian seized the edge of the box, the edge of the cover, he slid them along the table and banged them back against the machine. "God, Leslie, it's like breathing again! Even if it's no good, if no one wants it, I—why, I feel as if I were at work again." He lifted his face toward Leslie, the pallor transmuted into a luminous triumph; even his eyes, behind the dark glasses, seemed more brilliant, seeing at last one kind of light. "And you did it. You bullied me like the devil, you know." He laughed, and Leslie caught her breath in a deep sigh, her delight expanding until it fairly ached in her breast. "When I get a book done, I'll write a dedication. To my daughter, without whose bullying this book would never have been written."

"Father! You wouldn't say that in a book! Why, I'd simply die!"

"You'll no doubt have a chance to live a long, long time. A book, did I say? Leslie, did anyone ever point out to you that hope is a weed? It shoots up in the most unlikely corner, no soil, no water, overnight it reaches the sky, Jack and his beanstalk, and then, having no roots, it is a withered stalk, letting you down again." He stood up, his abrupt movement knocking to the floor the box cover with the typed sheets.

Leslie knelt to gather the scattered papers. "There you go again," she said. "You said you wouldn't. You've got twenty pages done, haven't you?" She stood up, her face pink. "I don't expect you've been out of the house all day, have you? I need a walk, too. You get your things, and I'll put all this away." She clattered the typewriter into its case, not looking at her father, and after a moment he went slowly out of the room. She followed him along the hall, arm crooked around the box and cover, typewriter banging her knee. She set the typewriter beside the dresser, and opened the middle drawer. Her father had opened his closet door, and felt slowly along the rod on which hung a few coats. Leslie lifted from the drawer, under the neat piles of shirts, the large envelope on which she had printed JULIAN DOWNING. She hummed softly as she took out the pages, and added those from the box. "See how fat it feels!" She ran across to her

father and pinned his thumb and finger over the pages. "And my goodness, but you have improved! These last pages have scarcely any mistakes." She replaced the envelope, sliding it out of sight, settling the shirts carefully over it. "Want your gloves?" She found them in the right-hand corner of the top drawer. There was a stark neatness about everything in Father's room, a reduction of the contents to orderly necessity, handkerchiefs to the left of this drawer, then a space, then two pairs of gloves. On top of the dresser, square in the middle, the case with his military brushes. The bed, the low chair by the window, the little radio on the table beside the bed which Mother had bought last week. Leslie didn't know whether he turned it on at night or not. He had said, "You needn't have done that, Beatrice, you need your money for so many things." Even Pansy had learned that she must not move one thing from the precise spot in which Father had placed it. That was the only thing that made him angry, if he couldn't put his hand on what he wished. There had been some dreadful times, like the time Pansy moved the bottles on his shelf in the bathroom cabinet, and he burned his throat. Mother had cried. She said, "If you would only ask me!" and Father simply screamed at her, "Must I have help even to breathe? All I ask of anyone is to let me alone, let my things alone." Leslie shivered a little, closed the draw-

ers sharply, thrust the gloves into her father's hand, and hurried for her coat and hat.

She knew just how Father felt. Being sick, or not seeing very well, gave people a sort of upper hand over you. Of course if you were sick enough, you didn't mind, you had to be taken care of. Like a baby. But if you weren't sick—Leslie jerked on her hat, shook on her coat—you did want to be let alone! You didn't want anyone watching you, even when you were doing simple things, not secrets at all. You didn't want anyone trying to figure out what you were thinking. Perhaps Mother didn't understand that; she always liked to have people around, she liked being taken care of, Leslie was sure. Father had always taken care of her, until—Leslie's thought broke off, a clean break. Her affection for her father had drawn her slightly out of the self-absorption of adolescence, into the beginning of a more mature perception of him, but aside from that she had little curiosity about adult affairs, being insulated in the necessary nonconductive egoism of youth. She had, after all, matters of such moment in her own development that she could not, without the loss of energy she needed for her own drive forward, give much attention to her mother. And Agatha stood at a still greater distance from the periphery of Leslie's active inner life.

As Leslie and her father walked toward the river, Leslie reported on her day in school. Her hand lay in his bent arm, and the slightest pressure said stop here

a moment, or here's a step down, or here we go around a corner. They walked together very well, now that her legs had grown longer and Julian's stride had been cut down by a degree of caution. Julian now knew by name many of the girls in Leslie's classes. "How's the little Czech?" he would ask, or, "Has Anna heard any more about her brother?" For Leslie had a curious casual-intimate knowledge of the succession of European crises in terms more like small-town gossip than newspaper headlines. Anna's brother had been smuggled across the border, and was now in Holland, waiting arrangements for a visa and a boat. She hadn't heard about her father. She thought he might have died in the concentration camp.

"I don't understand about it," Leslie would say. "Anna and Marja and Rachel—they're just people, like me. I mean, they're different, of course, but they're nice girls. Their folks must be like that, too. I don't understand what they're fighting about. I think they ought to stop it."

"Maybe you can, you—and Anna's brother."

"Why, Father, I never saw Anna's brother? Oh—you mean—" She stopped, holding his words, turning them. He meant the future, she saw that. "But I'll be too busy to bother about—oh, you know, peace and things." She giggled, knowing some absurdity in her remark.

"This school isn't such a bad place, is it?"

Leslie knew what he meant by that, too. Mother had thought it was dreadful, to take her out of the private school for girls, and at first Leslie had been confused and almost frightened by the rushing crowds, the anonymity she felt in such a multitude. She had to work harder to stand out a little, and now she liked it.

"It's all right," she said. "Sometimes it's just swell. And the science work is much better." She hugged his arm tight as they started down the steps at One Hundred Twentieth Street into the Park. "You know, if you hadn't started that article, I might not have known what I wanted to be. And here I'm almost through school! Of course, I don't know whether to be a doctor, or just a researcher, but I can decide that later. And anyway, I can major in all those things." She swung a little on his arm, she took a skipping step, she saw herself in a stiff white jacket bending over a microscope, she saw her father sitting beside her, his finger tips together, his hands rocking a little as they did when he thought hard, he was saying, the results of that experiment are magnificent, the light in the great laboratory reflected from his glasses, was it a place where she had seen him when she was a little girl?

"And anyway, there's plenty of time." Julian lifted his head, he walked more easily now they had reached the long level plaza. "Tell me what the evening's like, Leslie."

She told him, the gray of the river, with the up-tide pushing little ruffles against the northerly breeze; the orange band over the New Jersey headlands; the dull orange light reflected in the high windows of apartment houses above them, along the Drive; a setter running in russet arcs, while the owner watched lest a guard appear with a summons.

"The day feels longer," said Julian. "Did you ever smell the difference between daylight and night? You ought to try. I never knew sunlight had odor, before. I'll be as good as a dog, give me time. I begin to detect the odors of moods. Not quite, but almost. Now Agatha came in this afternoon."

Leslie remembered, William had spoken of that.

"She wanted to see your mother, she'd forgotten what day it was. I am sure she had an odor of great agitation. Maybe it was just her voice."

"Dogs can tell when people are afraid of them," said Leslie. "Is that smell? My goodness, Father, it would be terrible if you could smell out everything I was thinking."

"I'm not that good yet."

"Do you believe in mental telepathy, Father?" Leslie was thinking about the palmist some of the girls visited. They had tried to persuade Leslie to go, and she had said scornfully that all those people were just frauds. But some of the things they said the palmist told them were hard to explain.

"Well," said Father, "not exactly. Five years ago I should have laughed at the question." He slackened his pace, his face, turned toward the river, reflected in its austere planes the last of the glow from the fading band of color. "Now I don't know. Thinking may be a kind of interatomic vibration, only we don't have a sensitive enough receiving set. I don't know whether I'm more sensitive or just more suspicious than I used to be. Or just that I've had so little else to think about."

"Can you tell what I'm thinking now?"

Julian laughed, and laid his left hand over on hers. "Don't worry, Leslie! Your mind takes such swoops, how could I tell what's in it now? I pick up a few clues to how you feel, that's all. Anyone does that about the people he lives with—and cares for."

Leslie gave a sigh. "Maybe," she said, slowly, "when you're old, I mean when you're quite grown-up, you wouldn't mind so much. You'd know then what you believed in, and what kind of person you wanted to be, and you'd be it. I mean you'd know what your ideals were, and you wouldn't keep slipping back and forgetting how you meant to be." She was silent, and radiance walked ahead of her, shining-winged, beauty, truth, discipline, shod in gold and silver-tongued, the good, the unknowable, the Leslie Downing that might be, and behind her, crawling in the dust, close to her heels, the snake of shame, coiling, narrow and fanged head poised

and waving, the snake of guilt, oh, what guilt, racial guilt, or Eve's guilt, the failure ever quite to reach that radiant figure, temper, despair, envy, quick jealousy, sly intolerance, the mark left across wet grass where the snake undulated at her heels. "I mean you get mixed up, and you're ashamed, and that's bad enough, but if anybody knew, then you'd simply die."

Julian withdrew his hand, his muscles contracted so that his arm pinned Leslie's fingers against the hard wall of ribs, and she looked at him quickly, confused lest she had said too much, had betrayed more of herself than she meant. Oh, he couldn't suddenly turn into a parent, like Mother, and say, "Just what have you been doing to be ashamed of?" They had reached the steps which led to the small paved deck, enclosed with a low wall, where they often sat when the day was mild enough, and Julian turned, stubbing a toe against the first step, crossing to the wall. He sat down, his body thin and erect against the gray moving water, and the steady drone of cars on the highway below was loud. Leslie sat beside him; her hands felt cold, and she plunged them into her pockets. Two men walked past, glancing at them, and Leslie turned her face toward Julian. They would say, the two men, as they went on, that must be father and daughter, you can see the resemblance. Wasn't Father going to say *anything?*

"I had forgotten," he said, when finally he spoke, "that it began so early. You're fourteen, aren't you?"

"Almost fifteen, Father. What begins?"

"The struggle."

"When you were fifteen, did you—were you—"

"Let's see. When I was fifteen—I wanted to grow up fast and go to war, it had just started, the World War. Then it ended, and I wanted to be a scientist. I thought I'd find truth on a glass slide under a microscope. I was pretty busy, I didn't worry much about myself."

"Miriam, you know one of my friends, says I'm too introspective. Do you think I am?" Leslie trembled a little, she peered at her father's face, the glasses hid his eyes, his mouth was firm, not smiling; there was something special about the moment, something he might tell her.

"I don't know." He laid his hands on the edge of the wall, one each side of his knees. "The spirit must beg its daily bread. Don't be too hard on yourself. That's as bad as being too pleased with yourself. When do you expect to be grown-up, so that you give yourself no more trouble?"

Was he laughing at her? "Oh, I don't know." Leslie shrugged. "Maybe twenty."

"When you're twenty you're so busy living you don't stop to think at all. When you're forty, you've forgotten how you came by the code by which you live, and you've worked out a technique for explaining why you act as you wish to act. Maybe when you're seventy—"

"Don't you ever get things really settled?"

"How can you, when you continue to make discoveries?" He rose, crooking his arm for Leslie's hand. "You're shivering, it's too cold to sit here, that north wind has a bite."

"I'm not cold, I'm thinking." She checked his step when they reached the edge of the deck, they descended slowly, and then started homeward. The Park was darker now, and deserted; the lights along the plaza were round, pale moons. When I'm twenty, thought Leslie, I'll be so busy living. Oh, I'll always stop to think! Living—the word was a vague excitement. When I'm forty—but that was more remote than the one star which hung overhead, bright enough to pierce the city veil over the sky. It wasn't a star at all, there were two, one red, one white, the lights on an aeroplane swinging off toward the New Jersey landing field.

"If I finish that article tomorrow," said Julian, "when can you start copying it?"

Leslie's hand jerked at his arm, and he slowed a moment. Even Father did that, jumping suddenly from something important, tremendous, right into his own thoughts. "It's all right," said Leslie. "I didn't mean to stop you. I can start right off. I've got the carbon paper and everything."

"Burnham's going to give me an extra hour tomorrow, to finish checking it."

"Does she read it much better than I do?"

Julian laughed, his elbow pressed Leslie's hand against his ribs. "Not a bit! She lacks your expression, but she's more familiar with some of the technical words. It just saves time."

"I'm getting so I know the words!" They had reached the flight of stone steps which led to the upper Drive, and climbed slowly. Julian hated it so when he stumbled. "I'd like it to be just ours."

"Ah, but we need Burnham for the semicolons!"

Leslie giggled, her resentment at Miss Burnham's intrusion curling away in a wisp. Punctuation was funny, but as Father said, "So it's your weakness, too! Think of inheriting a way with semicolons!" Of course she didn't like Miss Burnham. Who could? The way she said, "Well, how's the little girl today?" as if Leslie were about five! And the smug, possessive air she had about Father, as if no one else except Burnham did anything for him. She was to Leslie an outsider who had learned too much about what went on within the walls of home. Not that she ever said a word about Mother, and they were very polite to each other when they met. Obscurely Leslie recognized Miss Burnham as a simple, downright person with neat and rigid judgments, and Leslie didn't wish her passing one of those judgments on any member of the family, even if Mother was away a great deal, and Pansy wasn't too reliable.

They waited at the curb for the traffic light to

change, and Julian said, his voice still humorous, "Anyway, Leslie, a secretary's an abstraction, that doesn't mean the secret isn't just ours."

"And when it's done, we'll take it to the post office together, won't we? How long would it be before you could hear?"

"Weeks, probably." They crossed the Drive and swung briskly up the cross street, something sanguine in the rhythm of their step. "I'm going right ahead with the next chapter. You're quite sure—" he turned his head toward Leslie, in the twilight his face had a quiet, listening look—"that your mother hasn't an inkling?"

"Not an ink," said Leslie. "She's been terribly busy —fan mail and programs and everything— The other night we left a sheet on the table, you know, when we picked things up, and I thought she'd seen it, but I scrabbled it up with my books and she never noticed."

"If it gets across," said Julian, "then I'll talk about it."

"If!" cried Leslie. "Pooh!"

"There'd never be any money in it," went on Julian, in his dry, thinking-aloud tone. "That's always been true of my activities. The living I earned was accidental. Yet I get as excited about this book as if it would rescue me from my state of genteel pauperism. I have no wares people would pay for. I might take a tin cup and a stick, and a tray of perpetual pencils and shoe-

laces. Tap-tap, rattle, rattle. A quarter in the cup, to shame people into dropping only pennies. But the hours are bad, they say you have to wait for after-theater crowds, and night clubs."

"I think it's very sordid to think about nothing but money," said Leslie, firmly. Through her mind in a blur of irritation moved images of city beggars, the blind negro, a boy leading him, coins chinking in his cup; the man without legs, who bumped along on a wheeled board; the cripple with a sharp, white face and a mongrel puppy on a leash, who sat in sheltered corners on the sidewalk, and Miriam said, "He's probably got a swell car and a chauffeur waiting to pick him up tonight, they say they all make scads of money." Father was just talking, of course, but back of his words lay a shadow. What cast the shadow existed in the world of adults, it was not yet fully real to Leslie, she did not wish to see what shape the shadow took. Time enough later, when she had settled more urgent matters, to cast an eye at problems which concerned her elders.

"Sordid!" Father coughed out the word.

"Well, I mean all the people who do wonderful things don't care if they starve in garrets, now, do they? Poets and painters and everybody like that."

"They wouldn't like to see their families starve, would they?"

"Oh, well!" Leslie was practical. "Mother's making an awful lot."

They had reached Amsterdam Avenue, and Leslie searched the shadowed slope of the block in which they lived. No sign of Mother there tonight.

"Good providers, your mother—and Agatha."

"I'm going to have a new spring coat," said Leslie. "We're going downtown Saturday to buy it. My old one looks awfully funny, I've grown taller." She spoke uncertainly, with a quick undertone of apology.

"I don't mean to crab," said Julian, and stepped forward impatiently. A car swung around the corner on the changing light, the brakes squealed, and Leslie, with a startled, "O-oh!" dragged her father to a run out of its path, across the avenue. Her hand, clenched over its tremor, pummeled his arm.

"You must be more careful!" she cried.

"I'm sorry." Julian was irritated. "I can make out a thing as big as a car, I just wasn't looking that way. Why, you're shaking!"

"I hate being jumped at."

"Me too." Julian touched her fist. "I'm really careful." He turned his face toward the cleft of sky as they climbed the hill. "It's dull tonight, isn't it?"

"It's sort of smoky," said Leslie. "With a little glow at the end over Morningside." She squinted her eyes almost shut; was that the way it looked to Father? No, that made the lighted apartment windows small,

bright patches. "Pretty soon it will be still light at dinner time, won't it?"

"One more spring," said Julian.

"I think spring's wonderful," Leslie sighed. "It makes you feel sad, it's so wonderful." She sighed again, savoring the nebulous melancholy—oh, wild birds flying, oh, aching heart, oh, roses scented underneath the crescent moon; a rhythm of longing and of growth which caught secretly the old rhythm of the earth. Then they had reached the apartment lobby, and William said no, Mrs. Downing hadn't come in yet, and her mother had come again but she'd gone.

"She didn' go upstairs," said William. "She jump out of a taxi and say, 'Who home? Is Mrs. Downing home?' and when I say no'm, ain't nobody home 'cepting Pansy, she run and jump back into her taxi."

"That's funny," said Leslie, as she and Julian stepped into the elevator. "She always drives her own car, she doesn't like taxis."

"Perhaps she's going somewhere, you know, on a train—or a boat—or an airplane—or—how else can you go places?"

"Snowshoes," said Leslie. "Bicycles. Roller skates."

"Or a zipper," said Julian, gravely. "My favorite method of travel, such neatness and dispatch, a zipp and there you are!"

"Astride or belly-bump?" Leslie tried to keep the

giggle out of her voice. William rolled his eyes at them as he stopped at the sixth floor.

"I prefer to stand, bracing myself with both hands."

Leslie had to laugh then, seeing Father like a surfboard rider, zipping across the world, and William's guffaw followed them along the hall. It was an old game they had played together when Leslie was little, the trick was to see who could stay solemn longer, capping the other's nonsense. Leslie had forgotten how she used to laugh until her side ached. They were a little awkward, self-conscious, trying it again; the first time, a week or so ago, Father had actually caught her. She had said, "Why, you couldn't possibly have done that," and then the expression around his mouth had stopped her, and she could have cried! They hadn't said a word about it; Leslie couldn't say, it's so long since you wanted to be silly. It wasn't a game she could originate; her own imagination moved in a narrow circle of seriousness and intensity about herself. But the next time Father ventured an absurdity, she bit off her literal answer, and met him on the old ground. Something warm and lovely about nonsense. You'd die of embarrassment if someone overheard you, oh, not William, but someone like Mother. Silliness had to be a secret, too.

Leslie pressed the button at the door, her laughter ending in a contented sigh. "I left my key in my school bag," she said. "I'm always afraid I'll lose it. One of

the girls said her mother lost a key once, and a burglar found it and ransacked the whole apartment."

"How did he know what the key fitted?"

"I don't know." Leslie pushed the button again. "He couldn't just go around trying it all over New York, could he? Where is that Pansy?" For an instant a shadow touched her, the mood of a bad dream she had dreamed, oh, not often, but more than once, in which she stood outside this door, some door, and no one would come to open it for her, a dreadful mood of despair because she was lost and alone and never could get inside again.

The door rattled and flew open, and Pansy, dust cap askew, skittered ahead of them to the kitchen, chattering as she went. "All them bells ringing to once, door bell, phone bell, back door bell, ain't but one of me running everywhere to once." She clattered covers on the pots. "The Lord save them beans from burning theyselves up."

"Who 'phoned?" Leslie raised her voice above Pansy's racket.

"Your mother. She ain' coming home to dinner, she say you go ahead have your dinners."

Leslie glanced toward her father; he had stopped at the door of his room, listening.

"Where's Mother going?"

"She tole me some name I never heard, I don't know what it was."

"You ought to make an effort to get the names right," said Leslie, in a good imitation of Mother's manner. Then she went quickly along the hall to her own room, to escape whatever impertinence Pansy was muttering. Pansy was all right, she did lots of things for Leslie, but she wouldn't realize that Leslie was really growing up. That was the trouble with people who had known you when you were quite small. If Mother was going out to dinner all the time, Pansy would have to act more respectful. This must be a different kind of dinner tonight, for she hadn't come home to change into her grand new evening dress. Leslie's face grew warm, thinking of that dress, sheer black chiffon, yards of it billowing in the skirt, no back at all and not much front in the waist, Mother's skin so dazzling—she didn't look in the least like a mother. Leslie hadn't meant to say a word, but Mother had revolved slowly, had said, "Don't you like it? My first evening dress for a hundred years!" and Leslie had blurted out, "It shows too much skin."

"What a little prig you are!" Mother had exclaimed, and Leslie had cried. "Don't spoil my evening," Mother had said, and given Leslie a hug that turned into a little shake. "Look, Leslie, there's a jacket goes with it, I'll wear that, is that better?"

She had a new evening cape, too, of dull white wool, which fell in soft cloud folds about her, and before she left she had gone quickly on her silver sandals to the

living room where Father sat listening to the radio. "Good night, Julian," she had said. "I'll probably be late, it's one of these dinners with speakers, you know."

"Have a good time," Father had said, not lifting his head.

Mother stood there a moment, her hands jerked under the long cape, she was wishing Father could see her! But he can't, thought Leslie, fiercely, he can't. Go on and leave him alone! When Mother had gone, Father had said, "What color is the new dress?" and at Leslie's noncommittal "Black," had added, "Of course. Black. Sets her off well." After a moment of silence, he had turned to the radio, twisting at the volume dial so that the music boomed out. "At least I no longer have to go to the damned dinners," he said, loudly, to the music, to Leslie, in a way an announcement to the world at large. But tonight was different, they'd have a peaceful dinner with none of that Cinderella-ish feeling you got when you ate early, like children, while Mother filled the apartment with the small sounds and faint, delicious scents of her gay preparation for the evening.

They were finishing dinner when the doorbell sounded the three quick rings of Agatha's signal. "Oh, goodness," said Leslie, "I should think she'd telephone!" She had been pretending she was the gracious mistress of the house, do have a little more of this prune whip, and Pansy, bring Mr. Downing his coffee

now, please. Agatha wasn't a bit like an ordinary grandmother, but she had a disconcerting way—it seemed to belong to relatives—of having decided years ago just what you were, and never seeing your present role. Pansy admitted her. "No'm, she ain't home yet."

"Not yet?" Agatha's voice snapped. "Doesn't she even eat at home any more?"

"She do, yessum, except when she don't."

Agatha's heels were sharp and quick along the hall. She stopped at the doorway, kicking aside the folds of hyacinth blue velvet which showed under her mink coat. (Humbert likes to have me dress for dinner, she would say. He thinks I look feminine and helpless then!) She's put on too much rouge and lipstick, thought Leslie, as she said, "Good evening, Greggy. Won't you have coffee with us?"

"No, thank you." Agatha drew her fingers over her forehead, back over her smooth hair. (Almost the color of mink, thought Leslie.) "I didn't intend to interrupt dinner. I thought you'd be through."

"We haven't hurried," said Leslie. "We've been sitting here talking." (Did that sound boastful? You needn't think we mind Mother's staying away!)

"Where is Beatrice? I mean, will she be late?"

"We don't know," said Julian. "She telephoned, but Pansy didn't get the name."

"I don't think she'll be late," said Leslie, impor-

tantly. "She didn't come home to dress, you see. She'd have to dress if it was a late dinner."

"Would you mind—" Agatha was looking at Julian, her lips parted as if she had run all the way to their door and couldn't breathe—"if I waited a little while—"

"Of course not." Julian rose, his hand defining the location of the table as he went toward the door. "You make me seem a boor, but I hadn't had time to ask you. There's a Wagner program on WQXR I was going to listen to. Want to hear it?"

"Anything." Agatha still blocked the doorway, looking very small as Father stood near her, his hand brushing her fur sleeve, his head inclined, his eyebrows almost meeting. "Just let me stick around a while—"

Leslie recalled her father's phrase, an odor of agitation. Greggy did look worked up about something. Anyway she had broken into the lovely evening Leslie had planned, in which she read to Father for hours and hours, something very dull that he wanted to hear, and then had to sit up past midnight toiling over her own books. "If you'll excuse me," she said, in her most formal tone, "I have an enormous amount of work to prepare."

"You can bring it in the living room," said Father. "You don't mind the music."

"No, thank you." Maybe he didn't want a tête-à-tête

with Greggy, but he'd urged her to stay! "I really must concentrate."

"Don't work too hard." Greggy smiled at her, standing aside from the doorway, and Leslie made a little grimace, intended to suggest resigned toil.

She lingered a moment just within her own room, not intentionally eavesdropping, but it would be nice if Greggy should say, "Isn't her devotion charming, Julian!" or something like that. Pansy darted along the hall with her tray to collect the last of the dishes, and no one said anything. Then Father turned on the radio, smack in the middle of the Fire Music, tum-de-de, dee, de dee, tum-de-de, dee, de dee, tum-di-de dee—Leslie snapped on the study lamp on her desk, and emptied her school bag.

Agatha stood at the window of the living room, hands clenched, listening to the music, the noble conflict there, the thin spiraling notes climbing against the somber chords, a projection into sound of her own turmoil. Julian tuned it down a little, and said, "How does Leslie look to you? As if she did work too hard?"

Agatha turned; Julian had seated himself beside the radio cabinet, leaning forward a trifle, his long hands on his knees, shoulders drooping. "No," she said. "She's looking well. Not the least scrawny or leggy, the way some girls do at her age." She unbent her tight fingers and slipped off the coat, dropping it on an end

of the divan. If she meant to stay here with Julian, she had to move ahead of her distraction, she had to pretend—

"It's an intense age," said Julian.

"What age isn't?" Agatha moved about the room, straightening books on the low shelves, spreading down a corner of one of the small oriental rugs. "You're looking much better, yourself." She stopped near his chair, sliding silver bracelets along her arm under the full velvet sleeve. His face was different. He had lost that harassed, absorbed expression which seemed so incongruous, so uncharacteristic with the strong bones of jaw and forehead, he looked—she tried to find the word—more integrated.

"I'm fine, thank you. Listen!" He lifted one hand, as the music mounted to its close, with its insistent, reiterated, triumphant phrase. Then the station announcement, they were listening to an all-Wagner program, recorded, the next number would be the Liebestod, with Kirsten Flagstad—

"Must we listen?" asked Agatha. "It's so noisy—"

Julian snapped off the dial. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's just a habit I've fallen into, evenings."

Not that! (Humbert, beside her, his face catching a little light from the stage, his shoulder hard against hers, his hand enclosing hers, while the music lifted their own love to its pitch of passion and loss and infinite anguished beauty.) "I'll run along," she spoke

sharply, moving toward her coat, "and you can have your concert. I have a headache, that's all."

"Don't go, Agatha." Julian settled back in his chair. "Beatrice will be here soon, surely."

Agatha hesitated; she couldn't go back to that empty apartment, it was crowded with the words she and Humbert had hurled at each other, they would coil about her like snakes, choking her to madness. She sank down on the divan, her face turned away from Julian, as if she feared he might somehow see the way she couldn't, for the moment, smooth it out. Suppose she told Julian—she had to talk to someone! They had been friends, once, although she had always been a little in awe of him, as if he might some day find her silly rather than charming. Since the trouble with his eyes, he had seemed almost to dislike her, and she had felt embarrassed—perhaps because of Beatrice. She'd tried, without being an interfering nuisance, to warn Bee. It was true, what she'd told her about Julian. He was incorruptible. She looked at him, at the sensitive firm mouth, at the lined, thin face, at the inscrutability of the thick, dark glasses. If Bee was such a fool she didn't know the value of that quality in a man—

"Are you working on a new serial?" asked Julian.

"No." Agatha's voice was harsh. "I've mislaid whatever I wrote with. I go through all the motions, and nothing comes out." She had tried, she was bruised and beaten with her trying. She would say, I will not think

of Humbert once I close my study door. She would sit there staring at the blank paper, blank, wordless, empty, she would think, I must work, I must work, she would hear herself saying it aloud. Work!—Like nothing so much as grinding at the starter in a frozen car, over and over, weaker, weaker—her battery had run down all right, her blood was no better than congealed oil.

"You've driven yourself pretty hard," Julian was saying. "You probably need a good rest." He had a politely defensive air, as much as to say, if something's wrong, it's not my concern.

Nor was it, of course. Agatha managed a brittle laugh. "But a rest doesn't pay any bills." Five thousand advance on the serial she hadn't started, and her agent, nice old Clark, trying to frighten her into work. "My God, Agatha, if you've spent the money—you've got to deliver the goods! You never fell down before, you want to ruin your market? Come down and we'll thrash out a plot." She'd cried right there into the telephone.

"Well," said Julian, impatiently, "there's Humbert. After all—"

Agatha began to laugh, she couldn't help it, the laughter was like the flapping of brittle, frightened wings all about her, was she making that noise? A hand closed hard over her shoulder, drew her forward, slid down her arm to her wrist. "Stop it, Agatha! What—" It was Julian, of course, crouching over her awkwardly,

fumbling with his free hand for a place beside her on the divan, seating himself there cautiously, then feeling for her other hand, pinning them under his firm strong fingers. She shivered against him, biting her lips over the sobbing that swelled in her throat; he was solid and human, his hands were kind, his voice was peremptory and kind, asking, "Do you want something? Water? Or something stronger?"

"No. I'm sorry. I'm—I'm all right now." She wedged her shoulder under his, her hands were quiet. "I didn't mean to come apart. I had a bad afternoon. I don't know what I'm to do."

"That," said Julian, slowly, "is a damned hard way to feel."

"Yes. You know, I expect." Agatha opened her eyes. His coat sleeve was wrinkled, she thought angrily, Beatrice ought to see that his clothes are pressed! She could see, behind the flat neat whorl of his ear the end of the spectacle bow, wound with a bit of adhesive tape, and somehow that seemed too piteous, that his glasses hurt his ears, too! "Oh, Julian! Tell me what to do! I don't know where to turn—"

Julian moved away from her, releasing her hands, turning his face toward her. "If I can be of any use—it's been a long time since I was of any use to anyone." His tone had no bitterness, he merely stated a fact.

"Bee's impatient with me. She says why don't I go on to Reno, the way I said. She'd be glad to have me

throw Humbert out. She always hated him. I make up my mind, why should I care if it ruined him? Then I do something quite different, I don't know I'm going to, I just do it!" Perhaps the sleepless nights she had spent, the harried days, with their incessant weaving back and forth of barbed thoughts, with their feverish waves of feeling, the corrupt, disintegrating emotions of jealousy, suspicion, fear, self-abasement creating their own toxemia; perhaps those days and nights had broken down the barrier of reticence, the fine net through which the self sieves all its words, lest too much should be betrayed to the outsider. Agatha was scarcely aware of Julian; his near-blindness made a curtain of impersonality behind which he listened. There was no sequence in her talk; it followed the involute pattern of her misery, moving in linked and lapping circles about the axis of Humbert's treachery. He had been so beautiful when she first knew him! Why, they had loved each other more than twenty years. She'd thought it wasn't true that love wore out; instead it strengthened with use. He'd always felt superior to her, making sly fun of her work. She hadn't minded, she wanted to think him brilliant, wonderful! She knew her writing wasn't great, she'd meant at first to be a good writer, she did believe in her books, but maybe it was easy to fall into a rut if people liked what you wrote, and wasn't it something if you pleased people, quite aside from the money? But he'd known

she adored him, he'd counted on it. He thought she couldn't live without him, no matter what he did! Perhaps he was jealous of her success. He hadn't done much, himself. He was lazy, expecting everything to fall into his hands—because he was handsome, charming. He was afraid of growing old! He hated it. He thought he could run around with young girls, buying them with orchids and cocktails, feeling like a gay young blade, and she, fearing to lose him, would put up with it. When she'd threatened to leave him, to break everything coldly apart, he'd begged and promised. Nothing mattered except her! And she, like a fool, had listened and believed his lying— He knew if she left him he'd be ruined. He wasn't strong, late hours and liquor upset his stomach every time, he wouldn't have money enough to keep himself, she'd never asked him for a cent toward their living expenses, she'd like to know where orchids would come from then! He said none of them mattered except me. My God, what you'll believe when you want to! A month ago was the last time he swore—up and down—he'd stop. He mooned about the house—and I didn't notice— Then he went back. A friend saw him with her at the Marguery. I thought I'd save him anyway, I'd see the girl, I'd tell her to stop chasing him. That's what I did this afternoon.

Agatha's dry voice trailed into silence, her throat parched, her flesh shrinking as that hour rushed over

her like a wave of heat. The salon on the third floor of the shop, gray velvet carpets, satin divans, mirrors, soft lights, the attentive saleswomen, and the girl modeling evening dresses, her long, narrow body wearing satin like its own skin, her face empty, plucked-painted-tinted model's face, metallic bright hair in a crest of curls. Agatha had watched her slow undulations; she had waited until the saleswoman vanished into the stock room. Then she had said, hastily, "I'm Agatha Townsend, Mr. Flint's wife. If you don't let him alone, there's going to be trouble. Real trouble. Do you understand?"

The girl's stare had been blank; perhaps the fringe of lashes prevented real expression. She laid a hand on her hip, her flat stomach rippled under the satin. "You don't think *I've* been tracking *him,* do you?" she asked.

"I don't know. He's made a fool of himself—and of me—long enough. I've warned him, and I'm warning you. What do you want of him anyway, a girl like you? He's older than your father!"

The girl had edged away from Agatha, glancing toward the draperies that hid the entrance to the stock room. "I don't want anything of him," she said. "I've got a gentleman friend of my own, he's connected with the World's Fair, too. If somebody's always hanging around, you know, when I come out of the store, why,

I go have a cocktail with him. What's the harm in that?"

Agatha began to tremble, an agitation which started in the very center of her being, and threatened to shatter her. "If you don't care what happens—" Something had alarmed the girl; Agatha didn't know whether she had screamed, or whether her trembling set up a vibration which startled the girl. She had withdrawn hastily, forgetting her commercial glide, tripping over the long frock as she hurried toward the stock room.

"Good *night!*" she called over her shoulder. "I don't want him! Not if you feel that way!"

Agatha had not been sure she could walk, but her legs moved without buckling. As the ivory door of the elevator slid back, she heard the saleswoman, "But, Madam!"

She began to tremble again, remembering Humbert. She had walked along the side street, past the entrance marked Employees. Too early for him to stand there waiting. Oh, God, how could he? Tall, elegant in his carefully tailored clothes, a smirk on his face—how *could* he? She had taken a taxi home, she had stopped to see Beatrice, if only she could have talked with Bee, with anyone, before she had to face Humbert! She'd bathed and dressed, in this blue velvet. You should always wear that, Agatha, it's perfect for you! When had he said that? She'd thought he might be moody, if the girl turned him down. She had expected—what?

A repetition of the scenes they had played during the the past year, more than a year, scenes which had run almost to formula? Agatha would be gentle, grieved, persuasive. Maternal was the word. Humbert would be defensive, and then contrite, disarming in his apologies and promises. Had there been pretense about them, an attempt to keep the surface water clear? But tonight Humbert had come in early, about six, shouting her name, his face flaming with anger. What did she mean, treating him like a child? She was an insolent, possessive, jealous old woman! It was the first time they had quarreled, the first time they had thrust their hand into the layer of mud, of debris, which lies at the bottom of intimate knowledge of another, which must drop there and lie undisturbed deep beneath the clear flowing water of personal relationship. The clarity was gone now, moiled, defiled, they were wounded and besmeared with the words they had spoken.

"Are you still there?" asked Julian. His hand touched her knee, withdrew.

When had she stopped talking, how much had she said? Agatha wasn't sure, there was no order, no beginning, no end, to this ruinous tale. "We quarreled," she said. "We said terrible things." (You are a vain and selfish old woman, you feed on flattery, you think of nothing but your petty-penny-prestige, you want a lap dog! How do you dare interfere?) "I ranted, Julian. Like—like a common woman. And finally he

went raging out of the apartment. He said he'd never come back. I was frightened, I started after him— But he will come back. He hasn't any other place to go." She was silent again, and the future wound tight about her, choking her, an intolerable future identical with the present. "Julian! After all I've done for him—"

"Did you expect gratitude from a lover?" Julian's voice was dry.

"No!" cried Agatha. "No! Are you defending him, because you're a man? Why should he hate me because I tried to save him, save us? You'd think it was worse for me to see that girl than all his treachery to me."

"Sh!" warned Julian, turning his head, and along the hall moved the clip of heels. Pansy, dressed for the street in a bright green coat and lozenge of hat, came to the door.

"Good night, I'se going now," she said, "you tell Mis' Downing when she orders we're all outta soap flakes and potatoes." She shifted the paper-wrapped parcel under her elbow, and hitched her belt tighter. Her eyes rolled admiringly at the elegance of Agatha's velvet gown, her mink coat, and she scuttled away on her bird-stick legs.

"Bee ought to get a more competent housekeeper," said Agatha, irritably, "if she's going to spend all her time with the radio." Julian's question, and then the girl's interruption had startled her. She had said too

much, there was antagonism, not understanding, in Julian's silence.

"Soap flakes and potatoes," said Julian, slowly. "Pansy's all right. You forget how recently we have had even a Pansy."

Something in Julian's tone, almost a warning, halted the spiraling centripetal movement of Agatha's words, of the emotion-heavy thoughts which had pressed so easily into speech.

"I'm not, as you suggest, defending Humbert. It's odd, your telling me about him. I'd wondered lately—how he liked being kept."

"He liked it!" cried Agatha. "All these years he's liked it. Comfort, ease, all his money to spend on himself—"

"And you had the real money and the fame, the success, and Humbert, too. Humbert making a fool of himself over a girl—sex aberration of an aging male. Or Humbert showing he's quite a man, after all? I wonder." Julian moved his body suddenly, flinging one leg over the other, clenching his hands about one knee. "I'm not defending Humbert," he repeated. "But I have been curious. You see, Agatha, the situation here—" he moved one hand—"begins to draw a parallel."

"You mean Bee's working? You're jealous of that? But Humbert never minded! I told you, he made fun of my books."

"I've had black thoughts, low thoughts," said Julian. "They haven't included resentment against Beatrice for some success. But dependence is an intolerable state."

"You and Humbert are very different," said Agatha. She saw what Julian was doing! Twisting things so that she was to blame, implying that she had driven Humbert into this way of asserting his manhood. "He didn't feel dependent. He knew he made return enough. Why, he thought if one of us should be grateful, it was I, grateful to him for loving me! Poor little thing, how she loves me!" Agatha was angry now, at Humbert, at Julian, at men! "They all feel that way, supercilious, bestowers— Oh, you won't admit it!"

"You're angry now," said Julian, quietly, "because you're afraid."

"You see, you won't admit it!"

"What is this, a war with me?"

Agatha sank back against the divan, her hands dry and feverish as she pressed them together. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so upset I just say everything I think. Maybe I am afraid. Of course I am. Afraid of—" She checked herself. Julian had ceased to be impersonal audience, confessor behind a veil. He had interposed his own life, he was her daughter's husband, he was thinking more about Beatrice than about her. "It just didn't seem fair to credit Humbert with your own attitudes," she said, with a flash of her occasional per-

ception. "Just because you're having a time of it—"

"I was trying to figure out why Humbert was cutting didoes," said Julian. He sat more erect, wariness in the angle of his head. What I'm having is my affair, leave me out of this. "You had asked me what to do—You don't really want anyone to tell you."

"I expect I don't want to be told it's my fault." Agatha rose slowly, lifting herself against the dull down-pressing weariness. "I might as well go home. I talk too much. I am a ridiculous fool, to care so much —at my age. At any age. I don't want to see Bee. She'd just say, 'Leave him. You don't have to put up with it.' " Agatha pulled on her coat, she wrapped it close around herself, shivering, seeing herself a shriveling, diminishing, solitary old woman.

"Are you going?" Julian moved one hand along the divan, where Agatha had been sitting. "I suppose Beatrice *would* say that. She doesn't like unpleasantness."

"Who does?" Agatha looked down at him, at the somber planes of his face, at the thin, long fingers, and suddenly, as if the intensity of her own emotional turmoil had burned off the insulation in which the self incases itself against intrusion, leaving her exposed, she was aware of him. She knew why she had, these past years, felt constrained with him, why she had avoided him. His tragedy, his loss, was too apparent, she could see no solution. Easier, then, to avoid him. And Bea-

trice, in the same house with him—soft, charming Beatrice— "You always spoiled her," said Agatha, abruptly. "When you married, I thought, this is perfect, you'll make the most of her delightful qualities, you have strength for her weakness. She had no struggle—you had prestige, position, friends— Your work satisfied you, it was amusing to humor her, to be gay with her. When you were first sick, when you were in the hospital, I was amazed at Beatrice. She wasn't frightened, she didn't complain, you remember?"

"It was still a temporary affliction," said Julian. "That is, we thought it temporary. You can stand almost anything if you think it will end presently. But when you know it's permanent—"

"You could hold her if you wanted to! You've shut yourself up like a tomb, you've pushed her away!"

"Suppose I have! What then? Do you think she wants a blind man, a useless, helpless cripple? Cling to her skirts and beg for pity?"

"But you aren't pitiable. You don't need to ask for pity. There are other things to ask of a woman. You can't ask too much of her, in love. It's when a man asks nothing, wishing nothing, that's the unendurable—" Agatha stopped; as Julian thrust himself to his feet, she stepped back from the abrupt gesture of his hands.

"I assure you Beatrice finds it most satisfactory that

I wish nothing. She's engrossed in this new work, she's in a fine state of elation."

"Oh, her head's turned a little," said Agatha, impatiently. "She thinks it's wonderful. I know how that is. It won't last. It's your business to hang on to her, I say. You're deliberately cutting her loose, you'll ruin her."

"You're a little mad tonight, Agatha. You're punch-drunk, do you know it? Are you crying?" He groped toward her, his hand moved along her arm to her shoulder, and Agatha tipped back her head, swallowing against the tears that ached in her throat, tears springing from misery which was more comprehensive than her own personal trouble, a misery which had stretched to include them all. "Here, we'll go down with you and put you in a cab." He pushed her gently toward the door, his hand firm, his voice tolerant. "We'll get Leslie—"

"Wait a minute." Agatha found a handkerchief, dabbed it against her lids. "I'm sorry," she said. "No, I'm not. It's all true."

Julian touched her hand in warning, and Leslie's door clicked open.

"You going, Greggy? I was coming in, but I heard your voices going at such a rate I thought I wouldn't!"

"Get your coat," said Julian, "and we'll go find a taxi for Greggy."

Agatha's head swam as the elevator dropped. Leslie

gave a great yawn, and laughed, "Good *night,* I am sleepy!"

"That's a good way to be," said Julian.

"Not right in the middle of economics and French. I had to hold my eyelids open." Leslie laid her head against Julian's shoulder in exaggerated drowsiness, but Agatha caught the glint of blue eyes under the fair lashes.

Was it curiosity that shone there? She wouldn't have eavesdropped, surely. She's too busy dramatizing herself, thought Agatha, to give a side glance in my direction. I'm too old to interest her. I'm supposed to be settled, finished, stationary as a statue. She'd be shocked —oh, not deeply. It wouldn't seem proper. Perhaps Julian felt that way, too. Disconcerted. Agatha turned away from them, facing the door, gathering folds of velvet skirt in one cold hand. If only she could tie a string, a tourniquet, about the part of her that thought, numbing it, cutting off all flow of blood.

"You want to wait here?" asked Julian, as they stepped into the hall, Leslie steering him around the chair which the night man had set near the elevator so that the bell would wake him from his naps. "We can pick up a taxi on Amsterdam, they never hang around this street."

"I'll walk down with you."

"Oh, Greggy, you're too dressed up!" Leslie pointed at Agatha's silver sandals. "You'd be ruined!"

"I don't want to wait here, I don't like the smell of this lobby." Agatha moved hastily toward the outer doors.

"Summer's coming," said Julian, "and they'll leave the doors open. Then you can smell hot asphalt and burnt gasoline instead of cabbage and onions."

Agatha pushed at the iron handle, Leslie said, quickly, "Greggy, let Father—" and Julian's hand made a groping arc, touched Agatha's, edged off her fingers. As Agatha went around him, his somewhat awkward pose, as if he wasn't quite sure how to stand aside for her, was another line underscoring the situation. The child's too much aware of him, thought Agatha, it's not right at her age, Beatrice ought not to allow it!

Someone had stepped aside to let them pass. Agatha, reaching for more folds of her long velvet skirt, did not glance up, but clipped her heels sharply down the steps. Behind Leslie cried out, "Why, *Mother!* My goodness, didn't you know us?"

"You burst out so fast, how could I?" Beatrice laughed, her voice had an odd timbre, she spoke quickly, tossing off her words. "Come on back, Mother, don't run off just as I come home! Have you been here long? Do come back, I have so much to tell you!"

"I can't," said Agatha, crossly. In the light from the imitation carriage lamps each side of the entrance Beatrice looked very fine, done up in a new black suit

Agatha hadn't seen, gardenias fragrant in the lapel, her skin, the gardenias, the collar of her blouse all clear and smoothly white, an overintensity, a reminiscent excitement in her movements, in her voice. "I'm going straight home." Her irritation was partly maternal. She had never tried to dominate her daughter, she had released her early (admit it, because of Humbert), but occasionally she felt a strong impulse to shake her, to say, "Listen to me! I'm your mother, after all!" And tonight there was this bloom over Beatrice, a surface brilliance, as if the evening had polished away every scratch, every rough place, every hint of any connection with Julian or Leslie or even Agatha.

"I'm sorry I was out." Beatrice walked beside her mother, cajoling her. "I haven't seen you for days. And I've wanted to. You look lovely—a little tired. Have you been visiting with Julian? You know, it's marvelous the way one thing leads to another—"

"What kind of canary have you been swallowing tonight?"

"A syndicated canary." Beatrice laughed again. "Did you ever run into a Mr. Scott, who handles features for syndicating? He has hundreds of papers on his lists, simply hundreds. That's where I've been, having dinner with him. Sheppard Blair arranged it. They want me to try a weekly letter for women, with a question box. Dorothy Dix, only very modern. We were trying to think of a good title, you know, a voice from

the air or something. I said I couldn't write, and they said just put things down the way I talk. Mr. Scott had listened to my half hour— If it got across there'd be good money in it. Nothing to what you make, of course, but still— It would hook up with the radio work. Sheppard says it's all getting your name known, so people don't have to think, they know what it stands for, like Socony—gas, or Campbell—soup, or Einstein —whatever he is. It's—well it's exciting when things begin to roll your way. Even if you know what you're doing isn't important. It's such fun!"

Fun? Agatha knew that mood, more than mood, a state of your whole being. She could recapture it outside herself, like a reflection in a mirror. Elation, in every sense a lift beyond the ordinary self, an overcharging of every power, an illusion, heady and strong, that the wave which lifted you was a force you had created; not vanity, nor egoism in the usual meaning, but the self, which moved uncertainly in an indifferent world, gaining, however briefly, the illusion of fulfillment, of achievement, of mastery.

"It's fun while it lasts," said Agatha. They had reached the Avenue. Agatha glanced back, Julian and Leslie came more slowly down the hill. "But you need someone to come home to when you slump." Beatrice started a protesting, "Mother, must you—" and stopped as Leslie said, "We'll walk up to the next corner, there's always a taxi there. You wait here." She

marched Julian past them, a brisk possessiveness in the way her step matched his, her hand lay in his crooked arm. "Must I what?" asked Agatha. No use saying anything; she could see resistance in the way Beatrice held her head, chin drawn in, eyebrows lifted.

"I thought you at least would be pleased. After all you've had, I thought you'd know how nice it is, instead of hanging crepe! Julian resents it, but I didn't think you would."

"I don't resent it!" (But did she? Was this urge to warn Beatrice, to point out her danger, to deflate her mood, a pure, unselfish impulse? Or did the force behind it rise obscurely from a kind of professional jealousy? She was slipping, she was growing older, outmoded, younger people, even her own daughter, climbing over her shoulders—doing new work, things she'd never tried. Oh, she couldn't be that ignoble! She didn't care about her work. She had been so belittled that she had no faith left in any of her impulses.) "At least, I hope I don't resent it. Why are you so touchy? All I meant to say was that those two—" she pointed along the street—"are the real center of your life, and you're flying off on tangents. It's never been any good to try to advise you."

"Someone has to earn money. I want to give Leslie as much as you gave me. Clothes, college— I can't sit at home the way you did, and get paid for anything! I'm not running around to amuse myself. I'm trying

to build up this radio work—and you imply I'm neglecting my family."

"You know what I meant. That's why you're cross."

"Suppose I'd come home tonight, given up the chance to meet Mr. Scott, what would have happened? Leslie would have done her schoolwork, Julian would have played his radio, they wouldn't have known I was there!"

"Whose fault is that?"

"You did just what you wished." Beatrice's voice had lost its resonance, it gave her words the bitter shrillness of a weapon seized for quick defense. "When you wanted Humbert, you didn't care what anyone else thought or wanted!"

Agatha took a step nearer Beatrice, staring at her face, stubborn, pale, the full mouth set rebelliously, the eyes very dark in the diffused light of the Avenue. "Why, Beatrice Townsend," she said, "some man's been making love to you!"

"You weren't through with love when you were my age, were you? You aren't even yet." With a quick movement she had her arm about Agatha's waist, she kissed her, an impetuous kiss. "Don't look like that, darling! Forgive me! I didn't mean to say anything, anything! I'm trying to be good and dutiful, honestly I am. Don't scold me! Look, here's the taxi. Shall I drive home with you?"

The cab drew up at the corner, Leslie stepped out, reaching a hand back to Julian.

"No," said Agatha. "I don't want anybody."

She settled herself in a corner, Leslie efficiently directed the driver, she did not glance out at the three as the cab swung in a circle and headed down the street. It wasn't fair of Bee to say that, she thought, but she was too tired for anger. Perhaps she hadn't been a good mother, perhaps she had been too much in love with Humbert, and this was a punishment. I can't help her, I can't even help myself. She closed her eyes, and had a curious fancy, floating against her eyelids as free of volition as a dream, that they were like fish, all of them, turning and twisting against a great net stretched across the stream. Beyond the net and through the net flowed swift water, clear, sweet, where they were meant to swim freely. They could not escape the net, there must be ways of escape, diving deep beneath it, rounding its ends, but they turned and twisted in the tangled strands. And the strands, stronger than silk, than catgut, than wire, woven, knotted, crossing, recrossing, unbreakable, were their own follies, their madnesses, their weaknesses, their despairs, their futile, hidden impulses. All of them, Julian, Beatrice, Humbert, Agatha. Only Leslie, slender, silver, darting minnow, might escape, moving through the meshes, darting back to find one of them.

Agatha let herself quietly into the apartment and

closed the door. Minnie had gone to bed; on the carved Italian chest in the hall lay Humbert's light coat and gray hat. She looked at them with numb indifference, and went slowly down the hall. Humbert's door was open, the hall light shining across his bed, across his unguarded, sleeping face. Agatha entered, one soft, will-less step after another, until she looked down at him. He moved, throwing an arm above his head, the blue silk pajama sleeve sliding back from the wrist. He would not wake, she could stand there and look at him, this strange man, his eyelids a little puffy, the relaxed lines about his mouth sagging in sleep. He has changed, she thought. It is queer to look at him as if I did not know him. There was a shadow along his chin; he had not shaved since morning, he had been too angry, she knew just how that would feel against her cheek, harsh and lovely. She sat down on the edge of the bed, lifting her hand slowly, to lay just a finger-tip against his chin. He stirred, and dropped his arm across her knees, drawing her closer, curling his body drowsily about hers, but he did not wake. Agatha thought, there's something in love which your mind doesn't touch, which change doesn't touch. Not passion; that is the torch you light to find your way into the secret cave of love. As he sleeps here, what he has done, what he has said, all falls away from him, none of it matters, he is quick and warm and breathing. All that I love in him is here. I have not loved him for his

loyalty, nor for his strength, nor for his wisdom. I have loved him because in ways I do not understand he was the bread and water which my spirit sought, the air it breathed. Something in him fitted into my needs like the one key in all the world, turning softly in the wards, releasing me from loneliness, from the narrow cell in which the self waits for the executioner. Not his flesh, his body, the touch of his hand, the shape of his skull, the way the eyes turned under the brows, I have loved those, but they were only part. I am not wise enough to know— But deep under surface change and surface irritations there would be in Humbert this quality, this essential tone of personality which was her need in love.

I have been frantic, she thought, trying to hold him. If I should go away, if I could have strength enough to go away, would he remember that he loved me? She stood up, and he sighed a little in his sleep. She watched a moment; if only he would wake, would say, forgive me, Agatha— Oh, fool! she told herself, with your sentimental daydreams. She moved quickly away, not looking back, turning out the hall light, closing herself into her own room. Tomorrow I will go away, she said.

*

3

"GOOD-BY, everybody. Remember, if you have any problems, write to me, care of this station. Thanks for listening!" Beatrice sat motionless, her eyes still following the busy second-hand on the wall clock of the studio, jerking off the last minute of the half hour, while the voice of the announcer followed hers. "You have been listening to Beatrice Downing in her Woman's Page of the Air. Tune in again—" A second of silence, and then she was cut off from the world, she was set back into the space of a room, the control man grinned at her, the women in the goldfish bowl leaned forward, rose, fussing with coats and gloves. Beatrice picked up the sheets of paper from the table, rustling them, she went quickly toward the door, smiling at the faces behind the great window. (Make them like you, jolly them a bit, then they'll go home and talk about you. Not as many as yesterday, but the rain was enough to keep suburban housewives home.) Someone on the telephone, no, take it right here, Mrs. Downing, oh, thank you, so glad you liked it, delightful business of

catching names, of being cordial, simple, one woma. another, yes, do come in again if you enjoy it, ju. write in for a ticket. Good-by, good-by, sorry I have to run along, I promised to look in at this cocktail party, it's for an author or books or something. Pleasant to float away trailing their admiration, to know they envied her, that they thought of her rushing about from one gay event to another, part of the exciting New York life they touched only by proxy.

In the taxi she examined her face in a small mirror, arranging the veil, smoothing an eyebrow, settling the fur scarf about her throat. She didn't look tired, for all she had worked hours today, dictating letters, planning next week's programs, going over notes her secretary had made. That was a good idea, telling a story each day about what some woman had done. Not huge things, but comfortable achievement not too far outside ordinary reach, like raising goats or making hooked rugs.

Her gardenias were still fresh. She glanced at them, their petals intricate and perfect in their modeling. Each morning when she entered her office she found the square white florist's box on her desk. Sheppard had said, "That costume's just the thing, black and white, studied simplicity. I'll see you get a fresh gardenia every morning for a while. Get yourself some decent suits, and stick to satin for the blouses." She had gone to the shop he suggested, and she hoped no one ever

nd out what she'd paid. "It's worth it," Sheppard nsisted. "You've worn God-awful clothes so long you don't know the difference. Look at yourself! See how it points up every curve, breast, thigh, that nice line of your back, feminine, not too innocent. It will photograph, too." Part of the build-up of her personality for the public. Sheppard had been grand, the way he'd worked on her career, quite as if she were a regular client. Devising ways to get her picture into the Sunday papers, on the radio page; to get small paragraphs about her program into print in surprising places. Every step she had taken ahead seemed connected with him. "Well, I had to make myself indispensable, didn't I?" That was his reply, when she said, you're doing too much—

She knew what he meant, for all the tempo of her days left little time for thinking. Her delight in her small successes was a form of intoxication, in which problems ceased to exist, and she ran from one hour to the next without fatigue and without reflection. "You must keep in circulation," Sheppard said. "Get your face known, your voice known, it's like a snowball rolling down hill, this build-up." Dinners for causes, for refugee artists, luncheons with an editor, with a client of Sheppard's, a man who wished to launch a new line of cosmetics (something might still come of that), opening nights at the theater—she'd had an actress as guest star one afternoon—cocktail parties—and not

often, an hour with Sheppard, an hour in which they discussed Beatrice Downing, what she might try next, what on the whole had been most successful to date, what qualities got over on the air, what was lost. "Sentimental hooey, of course. Your vitality carries it. You sound innocent and full of zest, just the way the dull housewives who tune in wish they felt. The mike doesn't pick up that minor note of the woman unsatisfied."

"But I am satisfied! I'm having a wonderful time!"

"It's a nice, new game for you." Sheppard would stare at her under heavy eyebrows, and after a moment go on to some detail of the program.

Somehow, during the past two months, her decision to see Sheppard no more had come to seem a childish, awkward notion, unrelated to her present gay, swift self, or to Sheppard as advisor, as directing critic. Anxiety, scruples, apprehension for the future—how had she time for those? But she was restless if he did not telephone, or perhaps drop in at her office for a moment; she was disappointed if at these afternoon or evening affairs she did not see him, his square head thrust forward a trifle, his crest of gray hair conspicuous among sleek or bald heads, his face bored and contemptuous until he saw her, when his eyes held her across the crowd, making a moment of intimacy.

The cab stopped for a light, the windshield wipers rocked in a little frenzy, clearing half-moons on the rain and fog-dimmed glass. Men and women tilted um-

brellas against the rain, scurried across the Avenue, umbrellas mushroomed and jostled along the sidewalks, hiding the bright shop windows. Beatrice could feel herself hurrying with them, diving into a subway entrance, she could smell the dank, wet odors of the station, the car, wool, leather, fatigue, enough to be weary at the end of the day, to be swung homeward, lurching, jammed, too much to have the rain to flee from, to have it waiting to drench you as you ran along the last glistening blocks to your own door. She drew on white gloves slowly, as the cab moved forward again, she caught the heavy sweetness of the gardenias, she would be late again tonight, she'd told Pansy not to wait. It was difficult to fit that early dinner hour into her days, but of course Leslie made a later hour impossible.

She sighed, thinking of Leslie. Of course any child took for granted whatever his parents did for him, modern children especially. Beatrice had spoken of that in her program not long ago, and letters from mothers still came. Leslie thanked her for the various things Beatrice sent home for her, flying into a shop when she really hadn't time, selecting a dress, a gay handkerchief, silk pajamas with her initials on the pocket, but she was quite likely to say, "The girls aren't wearing anything like that," or, "Oh, Mother, that's much too young for me!" Twice Beatrice had taken Leslie shopping with her, and the child was so stubborn about what she liked and didn't like that Beatrice was worn out

trying to hide her exasperation. Leslie was as self-absorbed and as approachable as a little porcupine. Beatrice had said, "Wouldn't you like to come down to the studio and watch a broadcast? You might even go on the air, I can say 'I have my daughter here today,' and you could say hello everybody, or something." Certainly any normal girl would have been thrilled, she could have told her friends about it later. But Leslie had said she couldn't possibly, she was terribly busy afternoons. She takes her cue from Julian. Not that Julian talked to her; Beatrice added that hastily. Although that night just before Agatha started on her trip (to gather material, she had said, but Beatrice suspected she was just trying out her resolution to leave Humbert)—that night Julian must have said something to Agatha, she had been so critical, so unresponsive. Well, it would be nice if one of them gave her a scrap of the appreciation that all these strangers offered.

The taxi swung in toward the curb, waiting a moment for the cab which blocked the hotel entrance. Beatrice handed the driver a bill; his thanks as she waved off his proffered change, the costumed deference of the doorman as he held the door wide for her, the palms and distant swing music and movement in the hotel lobby all drew her into the present moment, a delightful moment, full of superficial evidences of lei-

sure, luxury, rendezvous, pleasure. No rain, no weariness here.

The white letters on the bulletin board located the party in the West Ballroom. "Turn to your left," said the elevator man, and Beatrice turned, with several other women, aware of the quick, appraising glances, ah, so you're one of us, who are you, do you recognize me? She said, with a slightly ingenuous smile, "It sounds like a good party, doesn't it?" One of the others, a portly woman in green velvet weighted with costume jewelry, earrings dangling under waves of ink-black hair, replied, "Max always has mobs! He asks simply everyone." Her companion, who was wriggling out of her muskrat coat (you checked coats at the cloakroom unless you wore mink or silver fox), her hard, dissatisfied mouth painted to match the disk of purplish hat, said, "Will you tell me why he throws this party? Her last book was a dud, a flop, she's just written out, if the reviewers only wrote their columns when they were good and mellow with Max's liquor, I'd understand the use of having it flow. But they don't. If you ask me, I think they use their hangovers for their working hours." They stopped to check the muskrat coat, and Beatrice moved along the wide corridor toward the wide room under the high and decorated ceiling of which rolled the chatter and smoke and clatter of this battle of the egos, as Sheppard called these affairs. "You watch them," he had said. "Insatiable.

If a writer makes good money, then he wants to be literary. If he has a literary reputation, then he wants money. There are no birds in last year's best seller, and the has-been is as bitter as the never-been. But they'll treat you all right, you aren't a rival, you might even give them a spot on your broadcast. It's the fickleness in the American spirit that ails them. A terrific uncertainty, impermanence about success. Up today, down tomorrow, no real reason. That's why we have to work like the devil now you're on the way up."

But it was fun, being jostled along the receiving line, the guest of honor, in orchids, giving her a harried smile, turning to the next arrival, listening a moment to an English lady novelist who told with the spurious vivacity of the platform about the book she was writing on her impressions of America, so changed, so matured since her lecture trip of five years previous; being cornered by a young man with a square, flushed face, who said, "What, no cocktail? Beauty in distress!" He whistled, and a waiter, his expression more concentrated and serious than that of any guest, edged his tray successfully toward them. Over cocktails, her first and decidedly not the young man's first, he launched a story, rambling and endless, but impassioned, about a play he had written, more original than *Our Town,* and more realistic than *Tobacco Road,* producers were all *canard,* no *cafarde,* damn it, what was the word? Beatrice smiled softly, she looked about the room, she

knew that face, that profile, she listened to the voices, the laughter, meaningless words, phrases overlapping, a mosaic of sound, a bright kaleidescope of words with no meaning, just the effect of shifting bright sound. The young man gave his startling whistle again, and as another waiter stopped, Beatrice slid around him, rounded a bland, bulky man and escaped the playwright. She moved slowly through the crowd, grouped in twos and threes, through the vivacious, impressive, witty talk, past the restless, seeking eyes, who else is here, whom should I see, be seen by?

"Mrs. Downing!" A hand waved, a young man backed away from a pink flowered toque on white curled hair, a young man with aquiline features and a bronzed face (southern trip under a sun lamp) and seized Beatrice's hand. "Hello. Nice to see you. Is Sheppard here?" Phil Russell, just launching his new publishing house, one of Sheppard's clients. His narrow, sleek head moved restlessly, he spoke out of a corner of his mouth, "Let's get away from here, she's got a book she wants me to take, a fantasy about little fishes, migod."

Beatrice laughed, she hadn't seen Sheppard, was he coming? Russell appraised her shrewdly, flatteringly, his small gray shallow eyes touching her flowers, saying, you and Sheppard, you don't fool me.

"What are you doing here? You're a menace to book sellers, you and your radio hours, who reads any more?

They ought to throw you out. Anybody you'd like to meet? Have you had any food? Max has the most marvelous caviar, come along."

He's being gallant because of Sheppard, thought Beatrice, but the knowledge didn't lessen her enjoyment of the next hour. Russell introduced her (and most of the people she had any curiosity about found their way to this side room with the long bar and the elaborate food) as a public enemy, he achieved what seemed brilliance by talking incessantly, among them they built up a picture of the future in which Beatrice went once a year to visit the poorhouse in which all surviving publishers and writers (those who hadn't jumped out of twentieth-floor windows) were housed; by the year two thousand reading would be forbidden, the radio and television companies being in control, books would all be burned, a bootlegging industry—booklegging, you mean—would arise—they'd develop a race of good little nitwits, all the naughty words would vanish, think of the board of censors, sex would disappear—

"I must disappear, right now." Beatrice had glanced at her wrist watch, eluding Phil Russell's attempt to cover it with his wiry fingers, its pointing hands pricked her accusingly, however did it get to be that late? She had to wait a few moments, crossing the large room. A press photographer had set up his camera, there was a determined eddying among the guests to get within

its range, the silver bulb flashed, the guest of honor, her orchids, her publisher, were snapped, the photographer changed the film pack, the publisher busily collected a new group (his own list, all of them, noted Beatrice). Well, she wasn't famous enough—yet—to be the center of the picture, like Mrs. Roosevelt or Dorothy Thompson, but she'd had a good time.

As Beatrice crossed the lobby on the main floor she saw Sheppard, standing at the top of the steps which led to the revolving doors, saw him with a quick lift of her head, a tautening of her body. He might have come earlier! He was talking with a woman, a softly round, fair female in a scarlet dress under a short fur jacket, a red hat like an inverted flower pot perched on her shining fair hair, her face—now, who was she, Beatrice had seen her somewhere—not quite young under the skillful make-up. Sheppard had sent a quick glance at Beatrice, his heavy eyebrows lifting, and then had not looked again. The woman raised her muff to her chin and opened her blue eyes wide at him. Sheppard laughed, and stroked the finger she crooked in the buttonhole of his lapel. Beatrice walked slowly past them, down the steps; did Sheppard think she would wait until he finished with his charmer? The attendant whirled the door for her, and the starter, his rain-cape glistening, whistled for a cab. Sheppard's hand closed hard about her arm.

"What's the idea, giving me the bum's rush?" he asked. "You know who that is, don't you? May Callender. She's rehearsing. She says the play is lousy, she wants me to try some advance stuff for her before it opens. I don't want to, she's got the damnedest temper. I handled her a couple of years back. What you running out on this party so early for? Come have a drink with me."

"You're too late, darling." Beatrice slid into the taxi, leaning away from his grasp. "Really, I'm on my way."

"But I've some news."

A horn blared, the starter said, "If you don't mind, sir, you're holding up the line." Sheppard glared at him, and flung himself beside Beatrice. "There are times," he said, "when I'd like to choke you. See, like this." He set his thumb and middle finger about her wrist, tightening the vise until Beatrice felt the small bones slide together. "I'd say to the Judge, 'Your Honor, she was one of those soft, stubborn women, you know?' and he'd nod, 'I know,' and the jury would say, 'Extreme provocation,' and set me free." He released his clutch, and Beatrice flexed her hand, smiling a little.

"What's the news?" she asked. "You haven't heard from Scott, about the articles?"

"No." He was restless, flinging one leg over the other, bracing himself with an arm along the seat,

behind her head. "Is that all you think of now, when you see me?"

"It's your fault if I do—" Beatrice laid her hands together, her pulses giving a quick whirr, like the note of a clock before it strikes— "You've been so grand about it—"

"And you haven't wondered why I was as patient and calm as an elephant? You haven't even been curious?"

"I shouldn't call you patient, ever," Beatrice said, lightly. (What had she thought, that he would temporize forever, that he would be content—)

"I'm not, but I'm discreet, sometimes." His voice mocked her, and went on, urgently. "But no longer. The previous Mrs. Blair got her decree today. She sent me a cute little wire congratulating herself. Cruelty and desertion. But she had a detective trailing me, she would have liked a co-respondent, I didn't fancy you in that role, it would have interfered with too many things. You know what I want, don't you? How about it, Beatrice, how about it?"

The cab moved slowly in the rain-snarled traffic, lights, splintered, refracted, intensified by strokes of rain, by reflections in drenched surfaces, flashed against the windows, picked out for an instant the interior of the cab, Sheppard's hand, heavy-knuckled, flattened on his knee, his face, the upper lip drawn back slightly from square teeth, the eyes strained, searching her out.

I have waited too long, thought Beatrice, as something whirled dizzily within her, something fugitive, trying to gather its forces for escape. She had known, all these weeks, that she moved in a dream of suspended reality, postponed decision, oh, keep it that way, she wouldn't wake, she was a child, running through the dark—

"I can't make love to you properly here in public," said Sheppard. "I dislike entertaining taxi drivers, anyway. I've been considering what you better do. I suppose your husband wouldn't agree to collusion. That's the quickest way, but rather messy. A fellow I know fixes up a Mexican divorce, all you have to do is fly down, you wouldn't break into your work much."

Your husband—that was Julian. Oh, no, no! "Can't we stay—as we are?" She was babbling, her words froth at the edge of a whirlpool of fear. "We've had such fun—"

"Now don't revert." Sheppard drew his arm from behind her shoulders and sat forward, balanced, aggressive. "You've got rid of most of your damned notions. Do you think I'm going to let us suffer from a couple of unrequited passions, just because you hate to make a move? I can arrange most of it for you. Of course, if we didn't get married—but no, marriage is the thing, it's simpler, much more convenient, you know, landlords, social engagements— When you've been in and out of it as often as I have, you won't take

it so hard." He ducked his head a trifle toward her. "Fun? My God, Beatrice—" He picked up her hand and held it to his mouth, moving his lips softly over the palm, to the wrist. "You're no fish, you're a woman," he said. "Why do you shiver like that?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid—of you, of myself— It's so cold here, the rain is so unhappy. Let me go home, Sheppard, now. Please."

"Have you told him anything about us?"

"No."

"Will you, tonight?"

Would she? You haven't loved me for a long time, Julian, it can't matter to you that I am going away, that I am deserting you and my daughter—

"Or just move out, leaving a note on the pillow."

"He couldn't see it." Beatrice jerked at her fur scarf, holding it close under her chin. Was she cold, immersed in scorn for herself, or was she feverish with longing? She should be brittle, smart, hard, to please this man beside her, he had no patience with such a mood, he wanted her the gay, bright figure he had helped create. "It shouldn't be so hard," she said.

"Growing pains," said Sheppard. "You're just finding out what you're like. You aren't a drab little self-sacrificing female, you're a woman with her own life. You need the stimulus of people, you need flattery, fame, love. That means me. Have you any notion how you've changed? You were prim and tense and uncer-

tain, and now—your very walk is different, you are lovely, and—very desirable."

"Should I go 'round the Park again?" The driver did not turn his head, he shot his question back from the corner of his mouth, halting the taxi at the exit. Cars ahead of them trailed ribbons of light along the sleek black pavement.

"No," Beatrice spoke hastily. "I must get home." She gave the address, flinging it out like a bar between herself and Sheppard. "I must have a little time," she added, "I haven't thought what I should do. You—you should have given me more warning."

"Oh, time! You've had too much time. The wonder is you've stuck it as long as you have. What are you afraid of? Do you want me to carry you off tonight?" His face was close to her shoulder, his voice dropped into a low, half-mocking threat.

"That might be nice—tonight." Beatrice leaned away from him, looking out at the deserted sidewalks, the shabby apartment buildings, at the long lines of rain whipped on the east wind past the lights in windows. "It wouldn't be so good tomorrow. It's only fair, isn't it, to clear things up first?" What was she afraid of? It was true, what Sheppard said, that she had changed. From what, into what? Was she afraid of looking too closely at that change? Afraid of facing Julian— You run away from things, her mother had said. She hadn't run, she had drifted, and now she

dreaded this necessity which was upon her, of taking her bearings. Since she could justify her action to herself, why should she feel this twisting dismay which split her into two selves, one dark, shameful, the figure of Julian or Leslie or even her own mother would make of her. "I'm going to be terribly disapproved of," she said, "and I hate that."

"Not by me," said Sheppard, lazily.

"You're no help," cried out Beatrice, turning from the somber street, "you think it's nothing for a woman—"

He swayed toward her as the taxi skidded a little, swinging around a truck, and set his mouth on hers, sensuous, hard, curiously impersonal, silencing her, until she pushed against his breast, struggling to free her mouth, to breathe again.

"Does that help?" He laid a hand on her knee, his shoulder pressed hers. "I'm mad about you, Beatrice."

"Yes?" This was what she wanted, wasn't it, this stirring of the senses, passion, living again? Why should she think, in a sharp convulsive moment, I do not know this man, he is cruel and harsh, I am nothing more to him than the next woman he desires, what will become of me? It was only that she was not yet free of Julian. She beat away the unbidden recollections of Julian as her lover, she thought, I was only a romantic child then, I am older now, I know— What if Sheppard has had many women, and I am another, I can

hold him, I can make him love me more than that—

The taxi slowed, the driver said, still sardonically, out of a corner of his mouth, "Here's the number, you want it?"

"Do you?" In the light which the driver snapped on over the meter, Sheppard was staring at her deliberately. "Well, make it the last time. I suppose like all women you wouldn't pass up the thrill of a final scene. But you'll have to move out. You can't get a divorce while you're living with your husband. Look, there's a good hotel just across from my apartment. I'll drop in tonight and ask about rooms for you. You can entertain there—"

"Not tonight!" Beatrice sat forward, her smile coaxed him, soft, a little tremulous. (Oh, leave me some pretense that I have still a decision to make, pretend that it isn't settled, that it wasn't settled a hundred years ago, be less confident, less sure!) "Telephone me in the morning. Don't get out in the rain, I'll make a dash for it."

"Where's the doorman?" Sheppard leaned across her, holding the door ajar. "How do they expect you to get in on a night like this?"

"He's running the elevator." Beatrice laughed, brushing her fingers over his knuckles. "They expect you to arrive on foot under your own umbrella. You wouldn't know about that, would you? You weren't ever a poor boy, were you?" This was the tone with

which to leave him, he had been bored by her seriousness, he must never find her dull!

"I'll tell you the story of my life some day. Here, I'm getting out." He thrust himself past her knees, held her arm as they ducked across the walk, up the steps, into the shelter of the small, deserted lobby. "I'll call you, about eleven?" Drops of rain glistened in his thick gray crest, his face bent near hers, triumphant, possessive. Behind them the cables of the descending elevator rattled, and with a quick shrug Sheppard said "Good night," and strode through the door. It swung shut before he reached the cab, and Beatrice turned to the mirror between the bracket lights.

Her face looked back at her, the eyes large and brilliant under dark lashes, the mouth smudged. Cocktails or kisses? She dabbed at it with a handkerchief. Julian wouldn't see it, she must be calm and matter of fact, not emotional at all. I'll pay for Leslie's schools and college, it will be better for her, she can see me whenever she wishes. The elevator had stopped at some floor, the hall was quiet. What was the story of Sheppard's life? She had never wondered about him, he seemed without roots or beginnings, he was the present, the city, the new life she was choosing, hard, bright, demanding. She could not imagine him as a child, he must always have existed as he now was.

The janitor, in shirt sleeves, was running the elevator. He nodded at Beatrice, and started the car

upward. "Is the night man sick?" asked Beatrice. No, he'd gone to the corner for coffee and sandwiches. Coal dust grimed the shirt where it clung to his shoulders, and deepened the lines across the back of his neck. In a hotel an elevator shot swiftly skyward, and the boys had narrow, dapper hips under their braided monkey jackets. What did such things matter? She should think of Julian—

She stared a moment at the mottled, imitation graining painted on the apartment door before she fitted the key into the lock and turned it. The apartment seemed very quiet, without the usual radio music, and the living room, at the end of the hall, was unlighted. A night like this, surely they wouldn't be crazy enough to go for a walk! Beatrice let the door slam shut, and the kitchen door swung open a crack, with Pansy, already in bright green hat, her eyes showing a rim of white, in cautious inspection.

"Oh, it's you, Mis' Downing!" She finished her wriggle into her coat. "I d'nt know *who* it was!" She smiled ingratiatingly. "I d'nt know you was coming home this early. You had your dinner?"

"No, I haven't." The kitchen behind Pansy was in order, stove and shelves cleared, only Pansy's nightly paper-wrapped package on the table. Leslie's door was shut. "Aren't you through early? Where is everyone?"

"It's most nine, Mis' Downing." Pansy diddled from

one heel to the other. "You want I should fix you something on a tray?"

"It's just past eight," said Beatrice, with irritation. What an impossible situation, when even the maid frowned on her if she didn't come home promptly, like a child! "You certainly must have rushed, to be through."

"That clock, she's slow," said Pansy. "I promised my aunt in Brooklyn, she's sick, iffen I got through in time, I'd come see her."

"By all means, go. I don't want you. Where are Mr. Downing and Miss Leslie?"

Pansy's wide nostrils expanded, scenting disapproval. "They went to a concert, an' Miss Burnham, she went, too, she was here for dinner. Miss Leslie got the tickets, she thought you'd be home to go. I ain't seen Mr. Downing so stirred up since I been working here." She jerked off her coat, and began to dart about the kitchen, rattling down a tray, slapping on silver and dishes. "Miss Leslie tried to get you, she called up the broadcast office, didn't you get her message? She called up again, and when they said you'd gone, then she 'phoned Miss Burnham. Drinking toasts and all. In my cooking sherry."

"I didn't get any message," said Beatrice. She heard, in Pansy's tone, a tacit reproach, probably Leslie, having—and that was surprising—set her heart on including her mother in some kind of celebration, had shown

her disappointment like the child she was at times. "What was it about? Did Leslie get a prize in school or something?" Beatrice held her voice calm and steady, she felt as if, walking briskly along toward a determined end, she had stepped into space, landing upright but jarred. Or was she like an actress who steps from the wings, expecting spotlight, attention, and finds a dark and empty stage?

"I dunno, Mis' Downing. Nobody tole me nothing." Pansy made a sharp angle of her body as she peered into the refrigerator. "You want cold steak or eggs or what?"

"I don't care. Make me some tea and a sandwich. I've got to work tonight."

Beatrice walked with dignity to her own room, she unpinned the gardenias, the outer petals had brown smudges, fingerprints. She thought, if Leslie's message had been delivered, and I had come home—without seeing Sheppard— She would certainly complain at the studio, it was inexcusable of them to neglect her messages! Her anger against them, anonymous offenders, was pleasant, relieving for a moment the curious baffled shock she felt. Of course it was all right to invite Miss Burnham if there was a third ticket, Julian seemed to feel more at ease with her than with most people. But to dinner! She could hear Pansy's voice in the kitchen, a persistent low monologue addressed to

dishes and to food, no doubt concerned with Beatrice and her lateness and her lack of consideration.

Several letters lay on her table. She read them, standing. A request for an autograph, a request for a donation, her mother's writing on the next envelope, a Virginia postmark.

"I've had a good month alone," she wrote. "It's a good thing, going off by yourself. You ought to try it sometime. I never did before. I'm heading home now, and I've wired Humbert to meet me. I see now how to work things out. I hope everything is well with you. I'm eager to see you as soon as I reach town. Love, Agatha."

Pansy scuffed past the door, bearing the tray. I'll change after I've eaten, thought Beatrice. I'm light-headed, I'm so empty.

Nothing but a dead cocktail and a canape since noon, what wonder she felt forlorn! She bade Pansy a dignified good night, no, she wished nothing more, she carried the tray from the dining room to a small coffee table in front of the divan, found the morning paper, which she hadn't had time to read, and seated herself. Anyone could see how impossible the situation was! Even Pansy turning sulky just because she was late. She might be dining with Sheppard in that French restaurant— She spread the paper on her knees, and looked at headlines as she drank tea and bit into the sandwich. Another plane crash, colored gas masks for

children, public opinion turning against Chamberlain, plans for the King and Queen to view the Quintuplets, Hitler would not have his speech broadcast— She tossed the paper aside. I don't know what it's all about, she thought, I haven't that kind of mind. When Sheppard said that, he pleased her. "You are essentially female, you know only the personal aspect." Saying it to herself was less satisfactory, it left a doubt, perhaps she should try to be—well, better informed. She had given Leslie some money for the Spanish orphan her class in school had adopted. She pushed the table away from her knees, and leaned back against the divan, listening to the emptiness of the apartment. Emptiness was never really still, it had too many sounds, stealthy feet outside the door, water dripping somewhere, a dry click-click almost like a cricket, even voices, a hum of them beneath her feet, across the court. Agatha might like being alone, she didn't, she shrank into a diminished point of listening.

They might have waited for me, she thought, and then frowned. That wasn't reasonable, was it, when she had come home practically to say good-by? Still, it would have been something to remember—a last celebration. She used to wait for Julian, no matter how late he was, working in his laboratory. Why should she remember that tonight? That apartment in Claremont, they'd lived there ten years. Leslie would be asleep, Julian would scrub his hands with that sharp-smelling

antiseptic soap, he'd tiptoe in to look at the child, he'd say, "I had no idea it was so late, you're an angel not to blow me up!" The maid would have gone home then, too, what was her name, Nora, Mrs. Nora Murphy, a nice elderly Irish woman who could be trusted with Leslie when Beatrice went places. She would have left the dinner in the oven, and Beatrice would set it out. Then she and Julian would sit opposite each other at the round table, with its shining silver (Agatha's wedding present) and delicate spode china, sometimes for hours. Julian said he liked artichokes, they gave him an excuse for dawdling. She would tell him where she had been that day, what she had done. He was proud because the older faculty wives liked her, asked her to pour at their tea parties, to receive at receptions, because the older faculty husbands spoke of her as "that charming young Mrs. Downing." She hadn't thought those parties dull, she was helping Julian's career. They must really have been pretty stuffy. Queer how quickly she'd dropped out of that life. She'd refused invitations at first, when Julian was in the hospital. And Julian had refused to see anyone. They'd moved to that dreadful little apartment, she'd had her own work to do, she wasn't a bit clever at domestic things— She'd been terribly lonely, and Julian had changed. I know it was hard for him, she cried out against a shadowy accusation, but wasn't it hard for me, too? I just wasn't the right woman.

Then she had decided that she would stifle in loneliness and misery unless she did something. She'd talked with her mother about trying to write, and Agatha had said, "It would take a long time, I think you wouldn't hold yourself to it, you are too impatient of discipline." Beatrice had explained hastily, it wasn't a matter of patience or discipline, she had to do something at once, she couldn't wait, they had no money, no hope, no future! She had tried several jobs, secretarial, hostess, they were pretty awful, and then one day Agatha came to see her in the downtown restaurant where she was ushering luckier women to their seats. Her agent had told her of a radio opening, a small spot, he'd thought Agatha might be interested. "They want a sort of informal letter to women, your own letters are amusing, you might do, they'll give you an audition for your voice." And here she was.

Beatrice stood up, sliding out around the table. She should be thinking through things, planning what she would say, instead of drifting sentimentally into the past. But it was difficult to think, her mind seemed to have its own will, to go skittering over the surface of her life like a water-skipper. It would be much easier to talk things out. She carried the tray to the kitchen, she listened a moment, was that a mouse, gnawing in a cupboard? Slowly she went back along the hall. She might try to work a little, but her notes were all at the office, she had her scripts for next week practically

ready. She'd had to have an office, there was no room here for a secretary to work, people dropped in who would never come way out here, she talked more freely, dictating answers to fan mail, planning her programs. Here, even with a door closed, she would have been conscious always of Julian, the chance that he might overhear would have destroyed her confidence, would have altered what she said into a kind of twaddle.

She stopped at the door of his room, the hall light showed its austere orderliness, it was like a room in which no one lived, bare of personal hints, the narrow bed with white counterpane, the small table beside it with no lamp—he had broken the last one, catching his foot in the cord—the dresser with two brushes exactly in the center, and nothing else, no pictures, nothing carelessly dropped to show that someone had been there, the straight chair set square against the wall next the window. Beatrice lifted her hand toward the light button near the door; she could push it and flood the room with brilliance from the powerful overhead light, but she would find no more of Julian if she did. When he was alone here, mornings after Leslie had gone to school, and she had gone downtown, before Pansy came, or Miss Burnham, did he stand here at the door, with his head lifted, and that listening look on his face, did he hear these small, inexplicable sounds in the walls, in the building outside the apartment, in the streets around the building? What did he do? She

had tried to be friendly about his learning to typewrite. She had said, "Wouldn't you like a new typewriter, if you're learning to use it? Agatha just gave that old one to Leslie for a plaything."

"Lord, no!" he had said, and his startled, almost angry look made an intruder of her, so that she couldn't ask him a single question, couldn't say she thought it fine that he was taking up something. "My hands are just finding their way around this one," he had added. "Don't rob me of it in a mistaken spasm of generosity."

Beatrice let her hand drop from the light, and went on to the closed door of Leslie's room. Curious how the child always kept that door shut. Julian left no trace of himself, but Leslie acted as if she feared someone might discover tremendous secrets. Beatrice turned the handle softly, and went in. If Leslie had come home with a reason for celebration, a prize, a medal, whatever it was—not just a high record, she always had that—she might have left it on her desk. Certainly Beatrice, as her mother, had a right to some interest, it wasn't curiosity, her entering wasn't trespass. What she really sought, although this she would have denied, was the release from solitude, however slight, which some small discovery about Julian or Leslie would afford her.

She turned on the desk light on Leslie's study table, and glanced about the room before she sat down. Like Julian's in its orderliness, for Leslie had his precision.

She adored shoe trees and chintz-covered boxes with partitions for stockings and on her dressing table her Dresden toilet articles were ranged just so, and behind them the row of tiny figures, animals and birds, the ivory elephant in the middle because he was the largest, the two crystal cats, one at each end, because they were the smallest. Unlike Julian's room, however, in its record of the girl. She kept as she grew older a loyalty to whatever she had cared for, her dolls sat in a row on a shelf of the low white bookcase, a Madonna with Child hung next to a Japanese print, an Ikegami, two deer exquisitely poised in morning light, and a framed photograph of her class at school sat on the bookcase, a row of faces like a string of beads. Beatrice looked down at the desk, its blotter true with the table edge, a row of books between book ends toeing the blotter, the little tray with pencils and eraser straight against them. Only the school bag, unopened, on the desk chair, suggested that Leslie might have rushed in, too excited to unstrap the bag and set away its contents. Beatrice fingered the strap, and then pushed the portfolio to the floor. She wouldn't go prying through Leslie's books and papers as some mothers might. But as she sat down at the desk her sleeve caught the corner of the leather pad which held the blotter, sliding it askew on the smooth surface of the desk, so that a triangle of white paper covered with Leslie's round, clear writing winked up at her. She looked at the words.

Oh heart of
naught
Strength
Th

Thumb and forefinger together, Beatrice drew the sheet slowly out. Just one of the poems Leslie was forever copying.

Oh heart of mine the struggle
naught availeth
Strength and a nobel heart our
only ~~goal~~ aim.
The weakness of the spirit quaileth
As crushed with sin we rise
~~to~~ ~~fight~~ ~~out~~ ~~again~~
to fight again.

Goal, soul, aim, again, why, the child had written it herself. Beatrice smiled, tucking the sheet under the blotter, adjusting the blotter carefully. A *nobel* heart. Something ridiculous and touching about the seriousness of youth. Or was it just the seriousness of Leslie? Concerned with souls and sin and other matters which after all could mean nothing to her more than words read in books. Presently she would begin to fall in love, and then she would stop worrying about her soul. Just the time, thought Beatrice wrily, when perhaps she should begin to worry. But all those religious feelings in adolescence were supposed to be the first stirrings of sex, weren't they, a tadpole stage when you went swimming around in vague mysteries, before you

stepped out on the solid earth? She looked down at her hands, white against the dark green blotter, fingers curled under, skin smooth over the small knuckles, the narrow wedding ring— Madam has the hands of a young girl, said the manicurist, so supple, so— She folded them together under the edge of the table. Leslie's hands were like Julian's, even her thumbs bent out from the palm like his.

Beatrice sighed. She had never been as serious as Leslie, not even at fourteen or fifteen. She had had a different sort of life—that was back in nineteen seventeen and eighteen, before Humbert appeared. Perhaps Agatha had spoiled her, and Agatha's friends. Simply devoted to her mother, of course they have only each other, isn't it beautiful? She pretended she didn't hear them, but the net her mind was casting into the dark pool of the past drew up an unexpected image of herself—how old was she at that time?—an evening when Agatha had gone out somewhere with friends, and Beatrice had resisted Minnie's attempts to get her to bed, until Minnie had stomped off to her own room, with, "Your mother can settle with you, you're a stubborn little girl!" Beatrice had arranged herself carefully on the divan, the glass of a framed water color made a good mirror; she had tried her head drooping against pillows, one hand trailing, she had tried an arm under her cheek, dark hair shaken forward. When she

heard voices at the door, and a key turning, she had pretended that she slept, weary little figure of vigil, waiting with pleasant anticipation for whispered comments, how darling of her to wait for you, how like you she grows, Agatha, how long her lashes are. But the voices moved into the kitchen, where Minnie had left a tray with sandwiches and sherry, Beatrice's arm prickled, and she shifted it cautiously. Then she must have fallen asleep, to be waked by a loud voice above her, "Well, look what's here!" Beatrice couldn't remember who the guests were, she remembered Agatha had said, "Why, Bee, you should be in bed!" and Beatrice had clung to her, whispering, "I had a dream, I was so worried about you, I thought something terrible had happened!" so that Agatha had comforted her, had let her sit close to her mother on the divan, nibbling at a sandwich.

No wonder, thought Beatrice, that when Humbert came along I couldn't stand him. He spoiled the whole picture. Her devotion to Agatha hadn't been play-acting, even if she had been, like all children, sometimes silly and self-conscious. Agatha had said, "It won't make any difference between us, how could it? All these years you've been growing up, I just wouldn't let myself fall in love—there've been one or two men I might—you were only two when your father died—I had to work pretty hard at first, earning enough for us to live on. I thought you needed me. But you'll be going away

soon, college, your own life. I couldn't expect to keep you always."

"I won't stay in the same house with him!" Beatrice had thought that threat would work, but Agatha had been bewitched. She had said, "Very well, you can go to school. You wanted to go last year, but you said you couldn't leave me. You made me quite uncomfortable, telling everyone that was why you couldn't go."

Wasn't I right to suspect him, look at the way he's behaved! Beatrice pushed the chair back from the table, she leaned an elbow on the blotter, chin in hand. Behind these recollections, a blurred dark mass in fog, stood something she did not wish to see more closely, a quiet threat, in a moment I will emerge, I will press against you, you will see the exact shape, color, texture, meaning of yourself. How had she started all this mulling over the past? Wondering what she had been like at Leslie's age? Not like Leslie. She'd spent the next three years at a finishing school in the South, she'd had a marvelous time, dancing, riding, flirting with the brothers of Southern girls whom she visited during holidays. Her soul—or her *nobel* heart—hadn't troubled her. Occasionally the girls would collect in her room at the Hall, the door stuffed to keep surreptitious cigarette smoke from drifting into the corridors; slim pajamaed legs stretched on chairs and bed and floor, they would discuss love and sex and men. Girls talked more about sex in those days, as if it had

just been discovered. Then that summer in New York which had started so dismally. She hadn't wished to go to college, but Agatha said, "I won't live forever, you ought to train yourself to make a living, there's not an earthly thing you can do now." Agatha and Humbert had gone abroad, Beatrice had moved into her old room in the apartment, she had enrolled in summer school for all the dreary college requirements which the Southern school had not provided, she remembered the forlorn resentment she had felt, a sticky little drudge, transfixed by the shafts of the murky July sun to tar-soft pavements and chalky classrooms, toiling at tasks she hated in order to go on for four years with further tasks she did not wish. She had been lonely, too, finding no companionship in the crowds of earnest, hurried schoolteachers. Then the wife of one of the professors wrote to her, wouldn't she spend a week end with them at their farm in Connecticut, Agatha had told them her daughter was alone in town. Thinking it could be no worse than another week end in New York, Beatrice had gone, and there was Julian. She had thought he was too old, too serious, but she played her prettiest role, innocence and charm and a touch of deference. They rode back to the city together, in the curious intimacy of a train seat, night running past the windows, strangers' heads above the backs of seats in front of them, the clatter of wheels and mutters of wood or steel as the coach swung along

like a wall around the sound of their own voices. Julian told her about his work, and she said, it must be wonderful to know what you wish to do. At the door of the apartment house he had said, I'm afraid I've bored you, running on like this, you shouldn't listen so well, and she had thought, he's really quite handsome. He had telephoned her—if she hadn't been so lonely, so lost— He had gathered all the loose ends of her life into his firm, strong hands, he had been like a man riding a strong, swift horse, sure of his destination, who had reached down where she wandered aimlessly, and swung her up to the saddle, his arm about her.

Beatrice stood up abruptly. What was the use of sitting here raking over dead ashes? It's the last time I'll do it, she thought. It's just that I'm alone here, that I have to tell Julian I am going away, that I am bringing out in the open something which happened a long time ago. For a moment, in a flash of prescience, as if that shape in the fog moved close enough to show a leering face, she thought, Julian will not be surprised, he will expect just this of me. But before she had more than that hint, the doorbell rang, startling her.

She signed for the telegram, she stood at the door until the messenger boy had darted into the waiting elevator, she let the door close slowly, reluctant to shut herself into the empty apartment. Perhaps Sheppard had wired her, Darling, be firm, or something silly— She tore open the yellow envelope.

Agatha seriously injured motor accident come at once in Barsdale hospital.

Humbert

Beatrice put out a hand against the wall to steady herself. She couldn't faint, alone here, her knees were paper, her head was light, her blood had rushed inward, had gathered heavily in the deep centers of her body in a sudden reversal of all physical processes. Oh, no! Not Agatha, it couldn't be, she never had accidents, she drove so carefully. Her ears roared as her blood, having assimilated the shock, rushed back to all its outposts.

She must go, of course, she must start at once, there was no one here to help her, Humbert should have said how seriously, he hadn't even sent an address, he must be at the hospital. If Julian were here, he would help her, but she couldn't reach him. She couldn't wait for him, she should start at once. Trains? She didn't know anything about them. She found the number and dialed it, she could see Agatha waiting for her at the gate there in the station, a bit of holly pinned on the chunky fur jacket she wore in those days, that must have been the last Christmas she came home, Agatha had been married in January. Had he said ten-two, or twenty-two? If she could find a taxi, she could make it. She ran back to Leslie's room, she must leave a note for them. She jerked open the table drawer, hunting for a scrap of paper, she stared down at a news-print picture of

herself, cut out and mounted on cardboard, "One of Radio's New Voices," in black letters above the smiling face. Leslie had kept it? She hadn't time for amazement. She wrote the note hastily. I will telephone in the morning, she finished. Love, Mother.

She couldn't find an umbrella, she couldn't find any gloves but the smudged white ones, was there money enough in her purse? As she passed the telephone, she hesitated. Sheppard. Could she call him? If he would meet her for a moment at the train, would see her off— Agatha wouldn't like it. If she was dying— If Beatrice didn't call him, wasn't that obscurely like a small propitiatory offering to a malevolent fate? As she waited for the elevator, she thought, he wouldn't have come if I had called, he would have said, "I'm sorry, darling, I have some guests here, I'll see you when you get back." He wouldn't ever be bothered with anyone's pain. What had he said, I don't give a damn about your past life, any more than you care what soil this gardenia grew in. Just you, today, that's all. French gardenias when petals tarnish. Oh, God, where was that elevator, didn't he know she had to make that train? She held her finger on the button, the door slid open, the night man said, " 'sat bell stuck?" and then for a few minutes her urgency pushed through her feet to hurry the car downwards, until she could run down the dark hill, toward the Avenue, heedless of the rain, no not heedless, grateful for it, it was like tears on

her face, tears she need not shed. A taxi cruising slowly stopped at her call, and she stumbled into it. Sure, he could make a ten-two easy, lots of time.

Just before midnight Beatrice walked through the door of the small hospital. No one in the waiting room, the wicker chairs ranged empty around the walls. The other doors shut grimly against intrusion, Doctor's Office at the right, at the end of the corridor a heavy fireproof sliding door. Was there some other entrance she should find? Or was it all a nightmare, this silence and emptiness, and if she screamed she would wake herself? Before she screamed, the heavy door swung open, and a young nurse came through, her head tipped back in a wide yawn. She poked her cap forward over her fair, curled hair, and then stiffened as she saw Beatrice.

"I'm Mrs. Townsend's daughter," said Beatrice. "Where is she? How—is she badly hurt? What happened?"

"Townsend? Oh, they haven't brought her down from the operating room yet."

"What are they doing to her? Tell me! How—where—"

"I really couldn't say, I'm on ward duty." The girl brushed past Beatrice, her blue skirts swishing along the wall, and laid a hand on the office door. "Your father's in here," she said. "He may be asleep, we had to give him a stiff dose to quiet him, he wasn't hurt

much, cut a little, but he couldn't stop telling how it happened. They're like that quite often, they have to go over and over it." She pushed the door ajar and peered in. "Oh, you *are* awake!" Her voice brightened. "Don't try to sit up yet. Here's someone to see you." She preceded Beatrice into the room, bending over the figure on the couch, concealing it from Beatrice. "You'll be all right now, your pulse is fine."

"My head hurts," came Humbert's drowsy voice. "Can't you do something so it won't hurt so much?"

"That's the bump you got." The nurse stood away from the couch, and Beatrice looked at Humbert, his hair in tufts above the neat white turban around his forehead, a crisscross of adhesive tape on one cheek, his eyelids heavy as he stared hazily at her.

"Humbert!" Beatrice moved quickly to stand beside him, her hands irresolute. "What's happened to Agatha? No one will tell me—"

"I'll see what I can find out." The nurse went away, her rubber soles slapping softly along the bare floor.

"Oh, you came. You got my telegram." Humbert pushed himself slowly up, one hand touched the bandage, he stared at his fingers as if he expected to find them dripping, there was a convulsive movement in his throat, above the loosened collar, his gray coat had dark stains of dried blood. "It was terrible! I thought she'd bleed to death before they came. I tied my necktie around her arm, here—" he laid a hand under his

armpit, thumb digging into his shoulder. "They're trying to save her arm, her poor arm. I was driving, I couldn't help it, it wasn't my fault, all that rain, no light on the truck, nothing. Just at the end of the bridge, you know, that sharp curve, under the edge of the rocks there. I was driving along slowly, all that rain, I didn't see the damned truck, no light, I swerved out—" His hands were raised, clutched, as if he swung the wheel, his eyes stared at darkness and rain, his mouth pulled away from his teeth. "I cleared it, but the rear wheels skidded—" One hand closed around Beatrice's wrist, shook her arm. "Oh, God, the way it goes on and on! It was a junk truck, piled with iron. Something raked the side off the car, dragged her out. I thought she'd bleed to death before they came. I thought—" He dropped back against the head of the couch, the back of his hand over his eyes. "Can't you find out what they're doing to her? Why do you stand there doing nothing? It wasn't my fault, I tell you. All that rain, no light—"

The nurse came back, bearing a glass. She slipped her arm under Humbert's shoulders, lifting him a little, she said, "Drink this, don't try to talk any more." Then, to Beatrice, "I think it would be better for your father if you didn't excite him, he's had a serious shock."

"He's not my father!" Beatrice pressed her knuckles against her mouth, she had not meant to shriek that

way. Humbert was lying back, eyes closed, a flicker of relief around his lips, as if he found in the nurse protection, partisanship against an old hostility.

"Step," he murmured.

"I must know about my mother. If you can't tell me, find me someone who can."

"I can't go into the operating room, Madam, I'm not allowed." The girl's smooth young face had the maddening imperviousness of small authority. "But I saw Edith, she's one of the night nurses, she came down for another can of ether, and she said the patient's heart was holding out well, it was a long job. Now if you just sit out here in the waiting room, your fa—*he* can rest, and I'll have the doctor see you as soon as he is through."

She turned on a table lamp, she straightened a pile of tattered magazines, and Beatrice walked past her to stand at one of the windows. Light from somewhere, an upper floor of the hospital, perhaps the operating room, shone on the wet black boughs of an elm tree across the street; the rain, sliding along the contours of the branches, gave them an effect of motion, they were charmed snakes, twisting, turning, held by the spell of the fakir Night.

"Is it still raining?" asked the nurse. "I said at supper I bet we'd have an emergency tonight. One night we had four fellows at once. One of them died right away, though."

Go away, go away, *go away!* Had she said it aloud, or only willed it? When, presently, Beatrice turned from the window, the nurse had gone. Her heart is holding out well. I must sit down quietly and wait. This is a waiting room. A room where time curls in the corner like a great cat, topaz eyes burning at you, no movement except that almost imperceptible vibration at the tip of its plumed tail, waiting, waiting for the moment to spring at your throat. Beatrice moved slowly to a chair and seated herself, knees together, hands folded over the edge of her purse. She heard her loneliness and fear like a whimper in her dry throat, she felt them like a dry wind against her eyes, under the eyelids. Agatha wouldn't want to die, she thought. Ah, but who would? What had Humbert said, "It wasn't my fault"? It was! He was driving, he had saved his own skin. She was furious, suddenly, at him, at the nurse who sided with him, helping him escape this dreadful imprisonment with time. She caught her breath sharply as the nurse appeared again in the doorway.

"Are you Mrs. Downing?" she asked. "I didn't know your name. You're wanted on the 'phone. You can take the call in the booth right here." She pointed to a door Beatrice had not seen, near the end of the corridor.

"Beatrice?" It was Julian, his voice low and distinct. "Is it all right to call you? The girl said you were just waiting—"

"Oh, yes, yes!" Beatrice leaned against the shelf, pressing the wood into her flesh.

"Are things very bad?"

"Terrible, Julian. No one will tell me anything, I haven't seen Mother, there's a horrible snip of nurse who runs the whole place, Julian, if she were dead, they'd have to tell me, wouldn't they? I'm so frightened."

"Steady, now," said Julian. "Where is Agatha? Why can't you see her?"

Beatrice told him, pressing her body hard against the shelf, holding the earpiece close to her ear, her words spilling in quick rushes, in the rhythm of sobbing, pausing for assurance that Julian listened, his firm yes, his brief inquiries. She told him everything, how Agatha had sent for Humbert to join her, why had they driven in such a storm, they could have waited somewhere, the telegram had come while she was at the apartment alone, they'd been working over Agatha for hours, sending for more ether, Humbert couldn't be talked to, he was suffering from shock, he'd told her a little about how it happened, Julian knew that bridge, the way it came at right angles to the road? She wanted to keep Julian there, to go on talking. There was in the recital an illusion of relief, as if the drama of the story overlay personal distress, there was, as always in such recitals, that curious shifting of emphasis, in which the narrator unconsciously becomes the center of the

drama, the disaster has befallen others, but he pleads for comfort, for recognition that he is at least enduring well. "It's dreadful, Julian, sitting here alone, unable to do anything—"

"Could I be of any use? I could manage to get out there—but I'm afraid I'd be more of a nuisance—"

"No, you mustn't try to come, alone, at night. There's nothing to do, but wait. It's helped, hearing you." She had forgotten, almost, that Julian could scarcely see— "Oh, Julian, how do people bear things?" She stared at the greenish wall behind the telephone, scratched over with penciled numbers, were those agonies, too, Rhinelander six thousand, your child is dead, your mother is dying—

"Listen, Beatrice, I won't go to bed. I'll sit here near the 'phone, and when you have any news, call me up. Or call me anyway, if you get too frightened. But Agatha isn't going to die. She's got too much vitality and courage. They're patching her up, that's all. I'd like to come out, but you'd have to tow me around. I can see to things here in town for you if you can't get back tomorrow—no, today, isn't it? Now mind, I'm sitting right here, you can reach me any second, stick out your chin!"

Beatrice pushed open the door of the telephone booth. The waiting room had less menace, Julian's voice had repeopled an empty world. She thought of him sitting at the small stand in the hall at home, wait-

ing, alert and quiet. She thought, he always comforted me—until the trouble was his own, and then, when I needed help— Something incongruous and confused in her thought that Julian should have sustained her against his own disaster, that he was at fault. But his voice had sounded like the old Julian, rallying her, comprehending her, easing her apprehension. He knows Agatha, he knows what she is to me, it's all part of our years together, and tonight there seems no future, only all the past.

The rain had stopped, the branches of the elm were quiet, and presently the light from that room above went out abruptly. For a moment there hung in the darkness a thin veining of light, the obverse of the black branches at which Beatrice had stared. Then that too vanished, and she turned into the room. The nurse padded along the corridor, and looked in at her, a new importance in her manner. "The doctor will see you," she said. "He's on his way down. In the office."

Humbert was sitting on the edge of the couch, his head braced between the palms of his hands. Beatrice looked away from him, she held herself so rigid that she swayed a little. The doctor came in, a chunky man with deliberate movements, a squarish, noncommittal face. He had, he explained, in a matter-of-fact tone, done all he could for the present. A nasty mess. He was technical about it, naming muscles, bones, type of wound. He wanted to get Ashley out from New York

for consultation later in the day. He hoped to save the arm, although its motivity was lost, nerves, muscles—Too early to ascertain internal injuries. He didn't advise seeing the patient yet, the post-ether condition you know, she wouldn't be conscious for hours, she would be under opiates for some time. "I suggest you go home and rest, nothing you can do here, later the patient will wish to see you, of course." He leaned across from his chair and placed a thumb on Humbert's wrist. "Perhaps you will do better to stay here. I'll have Miss Faunce show you a room." He rose. "As I must be back at eight in the morning, if you'll excuse me—"

"But what am I to do?" Beatrice was crying, she couldn't help it, the tears were thick in her throat, they rolled down her cheeks. "She's my mother! Oh, let me see her! Please let me see her. I won't speak, I won't disturb her—"

"You couldn't disturb her," said the doctor, drily. "The thing for you to do is to keep yourself in good condition. She'll need you later. Where do you live? New York? Leave your telephone address, we'll keep you informed, we'll notify you when you can see your mother." His glance at Beatrice was armored and abstract, she was one of hordes of tearful women who implored him.

"I'll be here," said Humbert. "I'll let you know."

"Just one glimpse," begged Beatrice, "just to know she is alive!"

"You won't like it," said the doctor. "Miss Faunce! Show this woman to the door of the east room, she's not to enter. And put him to bed, you've got a vacant room on this floor, haven't you?" He gave a little tug to his coat, and moved slowly toward the outer door.

Beatrice stood at the door to which the nurse, with disapproval in her stiff, narrow shoulders, in the flounce of her skirt, had led her.

"Mrs. Downing insisted on seeing her mother," she had said in an undertone to the nurse who bent over the bed. "You can find your way back, can't you?" Then she had gone.

"Please close the door," said the second nurse, not turning. Beatrice stepped forward, into the dimness of the room. The warm air, heavy with the sweetish odor of ether, closed around her like thick fog, and through it came the strange sound of labored breathing, irregular, rough, fading to silence, beginning again, as if the body which made so light a mound under the white cover had forgotten the art of breathing, must relearn it. Out from the bed, too like the arm of a cross, extended a cylinder, swung on pulleys. Beatrice had a glimpse of sunken eyelids, above the cloth which the nurse held over Agatha's mouth. "You'd better go." The nurse straightened her wide, sturdy body, standing so that she concealed Agatha's head. She glanced at Beatrice, drops of sweat on her forehead and upper lip. "She's going to be sick again, if you aren't used to

it— These emergency cases are always sickest, you'd be surprised how seldom we get an accident with an empty stomach. She wouldn't want you to stay." She was chatty and firm, Beatrice had no will against her, it was true, even Agatha wouldn't want her to stay.

In the hallway Beatrice stopped, trying to clear her nostrils of the ether fumes, trying to clear her ears of the hoarse, intermittent breath struggle. It's like birth, in a way, she thought, that fight back into consciousness, consciousness trying to fight its way back into the flesh. She went uncertainly past closed, numbered doors; was this the way she had come? She found the heavy door which shut off the office wing, she pushed against it, no, you should pull it toward you. The office was empty, Humbert was being put to bed, lucky Humbert! I don't know what to do next, she thought, pitifully. Julian. She would call him. She searched her purse for coins, she laid them on the shelf, whimpering to herself as several of them slipped from her awkward fingers and clinked to the floor. "Here's your party," said the operator's voice, "please deposit twenty-five cents."

She gave a long sigh as Julian answered; he had been sitting there, as he had said, she was not utterly alone in a nightmare. "I've seen her, Julian. She's not conscious. I'll tell you when I see you. It's pretty awful. But what shall I do now?"

"There must be some kind of hotel in that town," said Julian. "Why not go there for the rest of the

night, get a little rest if you can. I could come out in the morning, if you like. If you'll tell me whom to call about your radio hour, I'll explain."

"Oh!" Beatrice shivered. "I had forgotten—" She could see the studio, the gray, sound-proof floor and walls, the table and the swinging arms of the microphones; she could see herself sitting there, a self as separate from the small, numb creature who sagged against the wall of the booth as any part of the broadcasting room. "I have to do it, don't I? I'm no use here. I could come back tomorrow. What day is it?"

"Saturday," said Julian. "Can't they get someone else to read your stuff? It's scarcely worth the strain, is it?"

"It may not seem important," cried Beatrice, and for a moment anger prickled through her numbness. "But it's a job, I promised to do it. I can't afford not to. Agatha may need money, she hasn't made any for months."

"Very well," said Julian, and his voice was different, as if he had drawn back from the telephone. "You'd better catch the next train to town, then, and get a little sleep. There's the milk train on that route, it must be nearly time for it."

"Will you please deposit another twenty cents?" interrupted the voice of the operator, "the three minutes is up."

"Never mind," said Julian, "that's all."

Beatrice walked the few blocks to the railroad station, hurrying past dark houses, shadowy driveways; ordinarily she would have been frightened, alone on strange streets, but now, in these thin hours of early morning nothing had reality, she moved like an awkward automaton with no energy left to feed any kind of emotion. It's not that I think my work's important, she told herself, but it isn't like teaching or anything of that sort, where somebody can take your place. If anyone took your place in work like mine, he'd keep it. Julian might see it won't be very easy— Laugh, clown, laugh! trying to be gay, animated, while all the time that dreadful breathing sounded inside her head, and she kept seeing that cylinder, outstretched, and her mind kept sidling away from furtive imaginings of mutilated flesh. Agatha's arms were so pretty, the tracery of veins inside the elbow, the delicate tapering into the round wrist. Not worth the strain, he had said. Oh, she shouldn't have been angry, even for only a moment! He had known it would be hard, he was trying to save her.

She must have slept a little on the slow train into the city, for she was confused when the conductor touched her shoulder. "Grand Central, lady."

The taxi took the same route over which she had driven with Sheppard only last evening. The road stretched black and empty ahead of them, pools of water at the road edges, in hollows of the sloping land,

were like glass on which someone has breathed, reflecting the flat, gray-white sky of dawn. Towers of tall buildings west of the Park glowed faintly at their tips, catching the first light. There was an austerity about the city, empty and quiet under the clear, colorless sky, as if it had rejected the human beings who scrabbled about its ways at other hours of day and night, had rid itself of them forever. The glimpse of a milkman, as the cab turned up Amsterdam Avenue, carrying a case of empty bottles to his truck, had comfort in it; he had escaped the spell, he expected people to wake and drink milk again. Sheppard would wake, he would reach for his telephone. You see I can't do anything now, don't you? We'll have to wait. It will be better for both of us not to meet now. Why was she sure of that? Sure that to be involved in tragedy would seem to Sheppard an error in taste, a piece of gaucherie, that he would resent distress as an interference, that he would in a way be jealous of emotion, however negative, which was not stirred by him? Why did she know this of Sheppard? That blurred shape which had threatened her as she had tried, earlier, to see herself at Leslie's age, at any age, had identity now, the fog of simulation thinned by shock. She knew how Sheppard felt because she, Beatrice, was like that. Deep inside, hidden under pretended tenderness, concern, sympathy. Sheppard made no pretense. Agatha had meant this, when she said, "You run away from things." Oh, no, no! She

wasn't like that, not utterly selfish. She hadn't run from Agatha, tonight. Not yet, there had been time for nothing beyond the first shock. And Julian, what of him? But the cab was stopping, she had to stumble out, to find money for the driver.

The apartment door was ajar, Julian must have listened for the elevator. He stood just inside, his head bent, one hand outstretched. Beatrice touched his hand, and his fingers enclosed hers, drawing her into the house. "Poor child," he said, his face close to hers, as if he tried to substitute some other sense for sight. "You must be exhausted." He laid his free hand on her shoulder. "I tried to think what I could get for you—I can wake Leslie if you'd like something hot to drink. Don't try to tell me everything now, wait till you've rested."

Beatrice looked at him, his face with its lines deepened by the hours he had waited for her, his shoulders a trifle stooped under the shabby bathrobe; she thought, I have no right to fling myself into his arms and cry, to beg for comfort. "Don't be too kind," she said, and her effort to speak calmly tainted her words with brashness. "I don't want to come apart." He withdrew his hands and stepped back, jerking up his head. "I really don't wish anything, except a bed to lie down on. There's not much to tell—she's badly mangled— You must be tired, too, sitting up all night. I'll go straight to bed."

"They do marvelous things in surgery now," said Julian. "Don't be too anxious about your mother. I wish I could help you. My handicap seems to prevent even minor usefulness." He spoke with formality, the deep warmth of his first words gone. "I can telephone the hospital in the morning for you. Shut your door and sleep as long as you can. I'll see that no one disturbs you."

"Good night," said Beatrice. "Good morning, isn't it?" Her voice quavered, and suddenly she was trembling violently, a marionette with hysteria pulling the wires, with hysteria crying out through her lips. "You are so hard! You hate me, don't you? You stand there, disapproving, hard. You were angry because I said I must come back, you think I should have stayed there, near Agatha. For a little while you were friendly again, you were human again! Do you think it was easy to come back, all alone?" Her voice spiraled higher. "I wasn't running away. That's what you think, it's not true!"

Julian flung out his arm, he clipped it about her waist, pinning down her arms, he laid his hand firmly against her mouth. "Hush," he said. "Don't wake Leslie. You don't know what you're saying. Hush!" His body was hard against hers, his close clasp broke the trembling, she was crying, in spasmodic, indrawn sobs. "We must get you to bed," he said. "You can walk, can't you?" He touched the wall lightly with the hand which had

silenced her wild talk, and sustaining her in his rigid clasp, moved to the door of her room. "Turn on the light. I don't know my way around in here. Get your nightgown, I'll help you." His hands slid up her arms, deftly pushed back the jacket, peeled it down.

"I can do it," said Beatrice. "You needn't—"

"Don't talk. Get your clothes off." He moved forward, laying the jacket on a chair his foot struck, finding the bed, stripping back the white coverlet, hooking his fingers over the folded sheet, and pulling down blankets, squaring his hands to make sure the pillow was in place. Beatrice watched him, the sensitive seeking movement of his long, supple fingers. She couldn't stop the dry sobs although she set her teeth into her lower lip. "Hurry up." Julian stood up, listening. "You haven't started!" He came toward her, and Beatrice evaded his hands, slipping past him toward the door of the clothes closet. "I've got something the doctor gave me, it would keep you asleep."

Beatrice undressed with clumsy haste, she got herself across the floor, into bed, as Julian came back, a glass of water in one hand, the other hand held out to shield the glass from contact with a door, a wall. "Is this right?" He found the bed with his knees, and took from a pocket a small bottle. "I haven't had it for a long time. Where are you?" His voice sharpened.

Beatrice pushed herself up from the pillow. "Here," she said, faintly.

"What does it say on the label? Luminol? Veronal?"

"Yes."

"Here, take this glass, will you?"

Beatrice sat drooping, her hands holding the glass, as Julian tugged at the stopper. "You haven't taken any of them," she said. "The bottle's full."

"No. I had plenty of time to learn to sleep without them." He had the cork out. "Just one for you." He shook a tablet into the palm of his hand, and Beatrice took it obediently. A gasp, a final ripple of the sobbing, choked her, but she swallowed hard. "Have you a table here? Set the glass down, lie down yourself. I'll put out your light, where's the button? By the door?" She watched him again; he walked directly to the doorway, as quickly as this his muscles had learned the spaces, the directions, in this room. He stood in the doorway a moment, and then came back, more slowly, his hand out to find the chair. "I'll sit here," he said, as he placed the chair against the bed, "until you are asleep. Give me your hand." Along the edges of the drawn shades at the windows were narrow ribbons of light, it must be almost morning now. "Are you warm enough?" he asked; "Your hand is cold."

Had she answered him? Her hand moved in his, and then was still.

Several times through the morning she floated slowly through the deep waters of sleep almost to the surface, and then the sound which had roused her, a voice, a

telephone bell, was drawn under with her as a figment in a dream. Finally, reluctantly, she opened her eyes, knowing the weight of the day. Her wrist watch had stopped, she had forgotten to wind it. She must telephone the hospital at once. Her movements were quick and decisive, as she gathered up the garments she had dropped last night, no, this morning, as she tied the sash of a house coat (too gay, she thought, but it's all I have), as she brushed her hair. She had, in sleep, advanced beyond the first stage of shock, something had shored up her defences. She had an inkling of what had happened, she would see it more clearly in the coming days. Illness, accident, a crisis, a disaster, brings its own strength, for a time at least, so that ordinary people have a semblance of courage and tirelessness. That time when Leslie had pneumonia, the first months of Julian's trouble— But it brings this strength at the expense of normal values of life. The day's usual occupations become trivial, they lose all importance, you cannot remember why you thought it was so necessary to do this, to go there. You see that all this activity is important only when you ignore the threat of death. It is a camouflage cast across the essential quality of life, concealing its brevity, its inevitable conclusion, its fantastic lack of meaning. Disaster is an attack upon the weak, inadequate fortifications around the small place in which the individual feels himself secure, loved, significant. Out of the myriads of people on the earth,

past, present, to come, only a very few are part of the private life which concerns you so intensely. The threat of death to one of these few is the threat to the illusions by which you live, death itself is the crumbling of the ledge under your desperate fingers as you climb. This Beatrice saw, not clearly, rather as you guess at something by its quick shadow as it passes.

When she opened her door, Pansy leaped away from it, with a squawk.

"Land Sakes, Mis' Downing, you scairt me! I was listening and listening. Mr. Downing tole me to lissen if you want anything."

"What time is it?" asked Beatrice. Pansy was round-eyed, eager for drama. Almost two, Mr. Downing and Miss Leslie had gone out, he had to see a man, he'd called up the hospital twice, wasn't it awful, right last night while Mis' Downing was eating her sandwiches, all the time her poor mother— "Did he leave any word?" Beatrice broke into Pansy's monologue. Yes-sum, he'd lef' a letter, he wrote it himself, it was on the table. "Get me something to eat, anything. I haven't much time, I ought to get to the studio early."

She unfolded the note, a sheet of manuscript paper, typed, the margins uneven, capital letters out of line, a few words run together. She gazed at it before she read it, thinking, he must have gone on training himself, he must have spent hours. Then she read the message. He had talked with the doctor and with Humbert.

Agatha was resting, still under opiates, too early to know whether a further operation would be necessary, Humbert would meet her if she'd let him know which train. Her secretary had called, and Mr. Blair. "I am glad you slept as longasyou did," the note ended, the line slanting down the page, "I had an appointment but ill try togetbackbefore you leave. Leslie and I could come out tomorrow if you wish." And under his typed julian, a penciled line in Leslie's writing, "I'm *terribly* sorry, Mother, and lots of love, L."

She should call her secretary. And Sheppard. Sheppard wouldn't be back from lunch yet. He would be lunching at one of his special places, picked to suit his mood or his client. Perhaps that actress of yesterday sat across from him at a small table, waving her eyelashes. What had Julian said to him? She stopped at the dining room door; Pansy was scuttling about the table in a show of haste, slapping down silver and dishes. "Did you hear Mr. Downing at the telephone? He says several people called me."

"No'm." Pansy giggled. "I never lissen when Mr. Downing telephone. He hollers out, 'Pansy, shut that door! How you 'spect me hear anything with your infernal racket!' "

"I just wondered if he explained—about the accident."

"Ain't likely," said Pansy, on her way to the kitchen. "Mr. Downing don't talk much, he keeps things to his-

self." She vanished, and then poked her head into sight again, earrings jiggling. "You want mostly breakfast or lunch?"

"I don't care," said Beatrice. "Whatever's quickest." She dialed the number of her office, and as she waited for her secretary's answer, heard Pansy's mumble, "Quickest, quickest, land sakes ain't I running my heels off? Quickest, she say—" She pressed a hand over her left ear, and said, "Mary? Mrs. Downing speaking."

"Oh, Mrs. *Down*ing!" The girl's voice was shrill. "I thought I'd never get you. They wouldn't call you to the 'phone. Didn't you remember Mr. Loftus, the *Très Joli* man, was coming in? He waited and waited, and he got into a perfect state! He says your plug yesterday was half a minute short, you've got to make it up today, he went over the script, I did the best I could."

"Didn't Mr. Downing tell you?" The girl's crackle of exasperation was like the buzzing of a fly against glass, noisy and meaningless. "My mother was injured in a motor accident, I was at the hospital all night."

"No, he didn't tell me anything. I'm sorry." Hastily. "But what shall I say to Mr. Loftus? I have to call him the minute I hear from you."

"I'll be in at three."

"I did the best I could," repeated Mary, "but you know how he is! And when they're just trying our program for two weeks, it's terribly important—"

"Yes," said Beatrice. "I'll be there by three."

Half a minute, she thought. Mr. Loftus and Mary Timmer couldn't be worried about Agatha, their concern was with this half a minute. In rehearsal, she'd timed it carefully,—she must have speeded up, working for emphasis, what every woman must have for perfect grooming— With a six months' contract hanging on Mr. Loftus and how he liked her— She had thought yesterday had gone off especially well, she'd had that after-feeling of taking it all in high gear—and here was Loftus griping about half a minute!

Beatrice went quickly into the dining room and seated herself, her movements hasty, jerky. Like buckling yourself into a garment too tight, too constricting, this facing a task. You tied up some kind of superficial energy for it, breathing was hard, your heart hurt, your eyes burned, but the tightness, the tautness held you together, you moved quickly so that your profound preoccupation could not overtake you until you had completed the task.

She ate the food Pansy had set out for her, she dressed for the street, she packed an overnight bag. Julian hadn't come back, she couldn't wait for him, she was competent and swift without his aid. She left word with Pansy, "I'll call him this evening from the hospital," and had her hand lifted to turn the door knob when the bell rang. Beatrice jerked open the door, and poised, frowning, her momentum checked. "Miss Burn-

ham! I didn't know you came on Saturday. Mr. Downing's out, and I'm due at the office right now." Miss Burnham blocked the doorway, her round, full figure gay in blue and scarlet, scarlet feathers along the round disk of hat which turned up like a plate above her black bangs, her eyes soft black velvet under the thick fringed lashes. She *was* dressed up!

"Oh, I don't mind," she was saying. "This isn't one of my regular days. I just wanted to leave this. It's the galley proof on that article of Mr. Downing's." She thrust the large envelope into Beatrice's hand. "Isn't it splendid? You must be very happy."

"Happy?" Beatrice glanced at the envelope, choking off a repetition of the fatuous word, *happy*. M. D. Burnham, care of the Parkson-Limewell Laboratories.

"That's just an old envelope," said Miss Burnham. "I put the sheets in it to keep them clean. It was too bad you couldn't be here last night. I think the first day of good news is always special, don't you? But I won't keep you, you're in a hurry." She held a scarlet purse in both hands, shaking it a little, and her wide mouth smiled delightedly. "I told him, after I read the first article, I knew something would come of it, but I didn't dream it would be so splendid. Of course the fine thing is his own attitude. But just as soon as he got to work again, he lost that—well, it was a kind of suspiciousness, wasn't it, that made him want to avoid everybody?"

Miss Burnham paused, her face settling into round gravity, her eyes inquiring. Beatrice tried, her mind twisting and ducking, to find something to lead into further disclosure, without revealing her own ignorance. It was too humiliating to say to this girl, I don't know what you're talking about!

"I hope you don't mind my having said that." Miss Burnham tucked the purse under one arm; she tipped her head slightly, a puzzled contraction between her dark strokes of eyebrows. "Only I've worked with him so long. Well, I must be going."

"Wait, please!" The tautness with which Beatrice held herself snapped the thin wire of caution. "You don't understand. I was called out of town last night. My mother's seriously injured. I was there all night. When I woke, today, Mr. Downing had already gone. I haven't heard this splendid news."

"Oh, Mrs. Downing! I'm so sorry!" Miss Burnham's face cleared, her eyes lost their hardness—for a moment they had held a dark hint of scorn, of criticism—and softened into quick sympathy. "I *am* sorry. I thought you said you were on your way to the studio."

"I'm going to the hospital as soon as I broadcast. But I won't see Mr. Downing. You might tell me." (See, I'm carrying on, whatever you were thinking behind your smug little face isn't true!)

"It's too bad it had to happen now!" Color came on Miss Burnham's cheekbones. "I hope she'll be all

right. You know—I was afraid you weren't pleased. I think I should apologize. I didn't dream you hadn't heard, and I was trying to figure out why you weren't delighted, too. You know, I actually thought it was your work! I couldn't see any other reason. I thought you didn't want to leave New York. And here you didn't even know! I certainly apologize. Maybe he'd rather tell you, himself."

"But I won't see him!"

"It's this college in Ohio, you know, where the Journal is published, where he sent his articles. They've asked him to come out next year, a special appointment in science. He started the idea in what he wrote, but they'd been planning it, too, and when his articles came, he was just the man. Social technology, they call it, the relation of science to everything. He was to see the Dean today, that's where he is now. Last night he said, 'My God, Burnham, it means I'm not an incubus!' They wrote him the grandest letter! I hope he won't mind my telling you, but you need something to hang on to, don't you, if you're troubled about your mother? Why, last night I was quite cross at you, I thought you'd just gone to a party or something. It shows, doesn't it?" Her smile was ingenuous and relieved.

"It was very appropriate for you to help celebrate, you've helped Mr. Downing so much with his work." Beatrice heard a shrill note in her quick words, she thought, steady now, don't make a fool of yourself!

"So many things I couldn't do for him, and at the same time make a living. What will he do without you in Ohio? Or perhaps you're going out there, too."

"It's always possible to find a good secretary," said Miss Burnham. She turned quickly away. "I must go. I do hope your mother will be all right soon." She marched down the hall, her head so erect the flat hat seemed standing on its brim.

Beatrice stepped back into the apartment, letting the door swing to without latching. She laid the envelope on the hall table, and then, after an instant, picked it up and carried it to Julian's room. He could have told me last night, she thought. Over the telephone, when I came home. She placed the envelope against the brushes; he would find it there. No longer an incubus, he had said. Upon me, he meant. He's worked himself out of bondage. He didn't wish even to tell me the news. Why should that woman look upon her as a monster if she didn't shout with joy at the chance to leave New York, to leave her work? Of course I'm glad for Julian, I'm delighted, I'm— The best possible solution, wasn't it, that Julian should go, and she stay?

She stood before the hall mirror, her fingers shaking as she started to redraw her mouth. She held her hand out until the muscles of the arm tightened, she had for a moment, as she saw the reflection of her face, an illusion that the ground under her feet moved, that she

was carried inexorably onward, without volition, without aim. Stop it, she said. You've got these next hours to go through, then you've got Agatha— How can you think now?

4

AT THE END of the third week Agatha was driven home to the New York apartment, sitting on the rear seat of the heavy car between the nurse and Humbert. She had pushed herself toward this return with tremulous excitement, as if within the walls of her home she would find her identity waiting her, she would escape the ignominy of being nothing more than an organism the most private functions of which were known—not with any interest, rather with casual notice —to nurses and internes, an organism about which nothing mattered except blood count, pulse, bowel movements. But the gain which, in the hospital, had seemed strength, compared to the first days when only pain had told her she was still living, proved inadequate when compared to the amount necessary for motor rides and elevators, and she submitted willingly again to nurse and doctor. Beatrice came in every morning, Humbert sat beside her bed in the evening, they told her of inquiries from friends, the nurse brought in boxes of flowers, turning back the tissue paper to ex-

hibit the tulips and daffodils and roses, reading the small cards enclosed, but Agatha had, as yet, no need of any of them. The doctors said that her arm was healing amazingly fast. Agatha looked at it, the small coffin of slats which enclosed it set off at angle to her body, the puffy fingers—like sausages in color and shape —protruding at the end. Now that the pain was less, the arm might have belonged to someone else. She would think, I will move the thumb, the middle finger, and then watch. No movement, not even a twinge to show along what severed nerve the message was lost. "You're lucky to have it with you," said the nurse. "You'll get so you can move it some. Massage, electric treatments, later. You can't wear evening dress, but what's that?"

The stages of recovery from serious injury and illness parallel in a way the stages of life. The first is that of life in the womb. The spirit has withdrawn, the body is at its old work of gaining sustenance, relief, growth, and objects in the outer world have no more meaning than they had at the beginning of life, before they had as yet been encountered. Then there is the stage of childhood, when dependence and helplessness are natural, when tears of pleasure are easily provoked. The mature self may be a shadow in the corner of the room, hooded, a hand laid across its lips, waiting for the moment when it will slide back into the healing flesh, with its weight of thought, of foresight, of aware-

ness of the meaning of the human beings who move through the room. Agatha saw the shadow and thought, tomorrow I may let you in, today I am too tired.

The nurse, bringing in the breakfast tray, insisted that Agatha sit up in bed, that she try to feed herself, however awkwardly, with her left hand. Later, brushing out the long russet hair, braiding it, the nurse said, "Why don't you have it cut? You can let it grow again if you want to, after you've got your arm trained." Why didn't she? Agatha looked at Miss Weller, startled. The nurse had an imperturbable homely face, unhampered by imagination, she was solid, factual. She simplified everything she met by her neat common sense. Agatha couldn't say to her, "But Humbert likes it this way." There was something about Humbert she had, presently, to remember. "I could have a man come in, I saw a beauty shop just down the street. It would look nice, it's so heavy. You could surprise your husband."

Beatrice came in just then, pausing a moment with a delighted, "Darling! You're sitting up!" before she hurried to the side of the bed, bending to brush a kiss against Agatha's cheek. She dropped parcels, stripping off white gloves. "Look, I found freeshias for you this morning." She unrolled the green paper, the little golden horns swung on their fragile stems, the fragrance was like pale notes blown on the golden horns.

Her dark eyes were wary, inspecting Agatha, asking, are you better, do you care yet what I bring, what I say to you? "Perhaps you can find a vase for them, Miss Weller." (They like to get her out of the room, both Beatrice and Humbert, thought Agatha, with a childish canniness. They know she protects me against them, against their demands.)

"I'll speak to Minnie," said Miss Weller, calmly, drawing the brush over the strands of hair she was braiding.

"And aren't these a gorgeous color?" Beatrice pried open the white package, held up the globed triangle of purple hothouse grapes. "Don't you want one now?"

"I just had breakfast," said Agatha. "Thank you. You shouldn't bother to bring something every time you come."

"I like to guess what you might like."

"I don't want anything." Agatha laid her left hand over the smooth braid. "I think I'll have it cut," she said. "Miss Weller says it would look nice cut."

"Your lovely hair!"

"It would grow again, if she didn't like it." Miss Weller's tone warned Beatrice, don't argue with her, don't excite her, she's not up to that yet.

"You better ask Humbert." Beatrice cajoled her, her voice light.

"It's my hair."

"Of course, darling." Beatrice laid the grapes back

in the white paper, she glanced at Miss Weller, and then placed the package on the foot of the bed, beside the spray of flowers; she moved across to the dressing table, fingering the carved stopper of a crystal scent bottle, looking at her reflection in the mirror, drawing on her gloves. She was uneasy, eager to be off. Agatha could see the reflected face, the light exaggerated the pallor, emphasized the restless, drawn expression about the mouth. She thought, the child's unhappy, not about me, about something else. She looks older, harried. The elation, the overexcited drive of the winter were gone. "At my age you weren't through with love!" Beatrice had said, that night— That's it, thought Agatha. That was the first stage, gay, delightful, expanding—and now—I know that frazzled look, I too have worn it, I can feel the very way opposing impulses pull at her. She would like all the first play of love, the buoyancy of knowing herself desired, without paying for it. Her lover, whoever he is, has no doubt discovered this about her. If I asked her, she would only fend me off.

Agatha closed her eyes, shutting out her daughter's face, she closed her mind, shutting out her daughter's problem. I'm too tired, she thought. I wish they'd let me alone. Her shoulder ached where the weight of bandaged arm pulled at it. "Can I lie down now?" she asked, knowing her voice was piteous.

"Not yet," said Miss Weller, briskly. "I'm going to put you in a chair by the window, while I do your

bed properly. It doesn't hurt any more, it's just a difference in circulation. You'll get used to it. See, I'll put this stand next the chair to support the arm."

"Are you sure she's strong enough?" Beatrice swung around quickly, hands extended, to protect her mother against this martinet, but Miss Weller ignored her, diving into the closet for a warm dressing gown.

The space from bed to chair was a great hill up which Agatha struggled, her heart roaring in her ears. But Miss Weller's arm was a rod at her waist, and she reached the chair. Then she was afraid to sit down, the weight of the bandaged arm undid her balance, she would go crashing headlong, she couldn't endure being hurt any more. Miss Weller saw to that, too, moving dexterously to the right side, easing her into the wide armchair, and Beatrice smoothed down the blue dressing gown and laid a rug over her knees.

"I wish I could stay longer," Beatrice said, one finger poking her wrist watch into sight below the sleek black cuff. "I seem always to be rushing off."

"A job's a job," said Miss Weller, stepping back to strip blankets and sheets from the bed.

Agatha drew a long breath; her heart was quieter now. She wished Beatrice would go; she pulled at Agatha, she was already away, in motion, part of the restless, outer world, it got to be a nuisance, didn't it, having someone ill, it interfered with schedules, it deflected emotions. Well, if you only knew it, thought

Agatha, you're more irritating to me than I am to you, with your cheery, hearty way, and your concealed impatience to have all this over. Go away and leave me to this engrossing business of getting well again. Agatha let her eyelids close, she had a quick fantastic thought: perhaps the living annoyed the dead in just this way, weeping on their graves, interfering with what must be an adjustment more engrossing than this of convalescence.

"Don't let her get too tired, Miss Weller," urged Beatrice. "If there's anything I can do downtown, anything she wants, just call me."

"I'm not asleep," said Agatha.

"All right, darling." Beatrice's soft voice humored her, her gloved hand patted Agatha's. " 'By, have a good day."

Agatha opened her eyes. "Be a good girl," she said, slowly, the phrase rising dimly from the past. Beatrice lifted her head, a quick start of intercepted thought drawing her brows together, tightening her mouth. Then she laughed, "I thought you really meant it!" and went quickly away.

Agatha relaxed in the cushioned chair, watched idly the face of the apartment building across the street, where the morning sun pried a little way past the barrier of windows, rows of them, anonymous, revealing few hints of the lives behind them. A colored maid shook out a dust mop, a nurse with a baby in her arm

stood a moment at another window, at another a woman stretched her pink, naked body lazily and peered out at the day before she let the Venetian blind down. A window washer sat on one sill, brandishing his cloth, arching his back. Agatha had no interest in any of them, although their images lingered briefly when she closed her eyes. They made no demands upon her, she could drift into that marginal state of being, like that between sleep and waking, where time expanded and she dreamed a long dream in an instant, or time contracted until it seemed fixed always at now, and she was surprised to find that hours had passed. It was like dropping down through water to the still lake bottom, with smooth green stalks of water plants all about her, with their pointed leaves making patterned shadows over her.

Miss Weller spoke her name quietly, "Mrs. Townsend? You aren't asleep?" and Agatha opened her eyes. "Drink this, every drop." She held the glass of eggnog to Agatha's mouth, and Agatha, with a grimace of protest, drank. "Now," said Miss Weller, "we've nothing else to do, shall I go get the barber? It would give you something to think about. It's time you took an interest in something." She dabbed at Agatha's mouth with a Kleenex. "You've got a yellow mustache."

"I don't know." Agatha's lip trembled. Decision was too difficult, decision about anything.

"Better for your hair, too," said Miss Weller,

briskly. "Bound to come out after a set-to like yours." She slipped her arms into the sleeves of her plain blue coat and buttoned it over the crisp white uniform. "I can't stay here much longer, you know. Who's going to brush that mop? You have to think sensibly about the future." Then she was off, her rubber heels thudding softly as she hurried down the hall.

The future. That was tomorrow and next week and next year—and Humbert. I won't think about it. Not yet. She shifted a trifle in the chair and looked down at her right hand. Somewhere in the base of her spine the impulse began, it gathered strength, mounting through smooth and polished vertebrae, it had force enough to move a mountain, her left hand clenched, relaxed, and slowly the fingers of the right hand bent inward, meeting the puffy thumb, and opened again. She had done it. Her heart whirred under her breast. Presently, when she had rested, she would try again.

Miss Weller was back, with the hairdresser, Mr. Harry, a quick-moving, deft little man from Austria, a hint of army training in his carriage, his click of heels. Agatha knew him; he had washed her hair, admiring it. He was solicitous, he had not known Mrs. Townsend was ill. Could she sit in a straight chair, just a few minutes? He spread a sheet around her shoulders, he brushed out the braids. Agatha closed her eyes, listening to the zip of scissors' blades, to the quick, thoughtful intake of Mr. Harry's breath. "Iss

the best I can do here," he said, after a time. "Later, when you come to the shop— Would you care to look?"

"It looks like a spaniel!" cried Agatha, staring into the mirror he held for her. "And it's all gray on top."

"Spaniel?" Mr. Harry frowned. "Iss only that your hair is a little sick, too. When it feels strong, with you, it will not lie down so. You will come to the shop, perhaps a little rinse—" He whisked away the mirror, he stood in front of her, comb poised between his thumb and finger like a paintbrush, eyes squinted in appraisal. His face blurred, expanded, and was drowned in the tears which filled Agatha's eyes and fell.

"Here," said Miss Weller, "you've sat up too long." She waved Mr. Harry out of the room, she folded back the blankets, she convoyed Agatha to her bed. Then she bathed her eyes gently. "There!"

"I'm sorry." Agatha sniffled. "I didn't mean to be so silly. But I look so old. Forlorn."

"It's something if you care how you look. You take a nap now, and when you wake up we'll try some rouge. You'll see how smart you are."

Miss Weller took her relief hours in the late afternoon and evening, when Humbert was at home, to sit beside Agatha, and Minnie could bring in the dinner tray. She went off briskly to unrevealed private occupations, returning after ten to arrange her patient for the night. This afternoon Agatha heard her exchanging

restrained hostilities with Minnie about the dinner. Maybe I don't know all your diet rules, was Minnie's line, but I know more than you do about what Mrs. Townsend likes. Agatha smiled, listening. The nurse was an intruder, the accident itself was almost an impertinence on the part of providence or God or whatever Minnie blamed for it. Agatha moved her head on the pillow, feeling the emptiness at the base of her neck. Delilah, she thought. No, it wasn't Delilah, who had her hair cut, she had been the barber herself. I know why I let them do it, she thought. It's a sign. A sign of change. When Miss Weller came into the room, asking, "Is there anything before I go?" Agatha said yes, she thought she'd like to sit up in the big chair again. She felt better. "As long as I'm going to surprise my husband, I might as well do it thoroughly."

The transit was less difficult this time. Somewhere between morning and evening Agatha had gathered not strength so much as a small nucleus of energy. This journey was at her own desire. She wouldn't have a blanket over her knees. Instead, she wished her most frivolous mules, blue satin with silver heels, and a blue cushion for a footstool. And a long chiffon scarf—Miss Weller found it after a brief search—so arranged that its soft folds covered the bandaged arm and the pillow upon which it lay. Miss Weller held the mirror, and Agatha drew the comb through the two soft wings of hair. The ends flew up, following the comb, the dust

of gray at the crest did not show so much when she leaned back in the chair. "Now some lipstick." Agatha let her left hand drop to her lap. "You put it on for me." Miss Weller pursed her lips intently as she worked. "I'm not an expert at this," she said. "There, you look like a different woman." Agatha looked into the mirror. There was a deeper chiseling of eye sockets, the cheekbones had hollows beneath them, her face looked smaller, it had a defenseless, unguarded look, as if her lack of strength made her vulnerable, destroyed the mask.

"Perhaps I am a different woman," she said. "I haven't got all the pieces put together yet."

Miss Weller darted about the room, setting it in order. She was in a hurry, Agatha had delayed her; she clinked silver mirror and brushes on the glass of the dressing table, she spatted up pillows and whisked up blankets and spreads. "There!" She took a final whirl, saw nothing more to do. "I'll tell Minnie I'm off. If you get too tired, have Mr. Flint help you back to bed. But I'll be in by ten-thirty."

Agatha closed her eyes. Her heart was beating too fast again, sharing Miss Weller's rush. When she had rested a moment she would move her thumb and finger again. The slow gathering of force, the pressure of her will, were in a way a dress rehearsal. She was gathering up the pieces and putting them together. Much easier to stay helpless, will-less, to drift in that marginal

world. Just as, at first, she had thought it would be much easier to die. But she had not escaped that way, and now she could no longer escape by clinging to her weakness, her helplessness. The telephone in her study began its intermittent signal, and in her own good time, Minnie answered. Agatha could hear her telephone voice, loud, quick, with its hint of brogue. "Yis. Yis, Mr. Flint. The nurse just wint out. I'll tell her."

Minnie came to the doorway, heels thudding in her stiff, determined walk. She gave a startled cluck. "She never told me you were up!" She moved around the chair, and Agatha smiled up at her.

"It's a surprise," she said.

"May the Lord rush the day when you'll be up and around and we can be rid of her altogether. You'd look more natural if she hadn't cut off all your hair." Minnie shook her head, her face dark with disapproval.

Agatha made a disarming little gesture with her left hand. "Was that Mr. Flint on the 'phone?"

Minnie nodded. "It was him." Her expression changed in quick veering of emotion. "It's a shame, too, with you sitting up waiting for him. He said he would be home later, he had some business to see to." Her eyes were sharp with suspicion and defense of Agatha. Agatha, looking up at the woman, saw her own thought in Minnie's face. Has he begun again? Already? "He's been just like clockwork," said Minnie, hastily.

She's known all about things, thought Agatha, and

all the time I supposed no one knew. And now it doesn't matter. "You bring me my dinner," she said. "I have to practice feeding myself." She turned her head a little, and looked out at the sky, a clear primrose color between the sharp angles of apartment buildings, green-blue in the one patch she could see above the wire cages that topped the brick chimneys, above the squat water tank. The days were growing longer, spring had come in while she was ill, she had missed all the first delicate and subtle notes of its coming, she had lost the first of this spring.

Minnie wheeled the invalid table into place, and for the next half hour Agatha slipped again into a pleasant childishness, humoring Minnie in her brusque, tart dominance. She wasn't hungry, but Minnie bullied her: finish your bouillon, a little more chicken, now drink down the milk. Food created a mild kind of intoxication, as if her weakness burned it in a quick blaze. "I did pretty well tonight, didn't I?" asked Agatha, as Minnie rolled away the table.

"When she stays out of my kitchen and I plan what to get, your appetite'll come back."

"Be patient, Minnie." The cant of Minnie's angular shoulders as she stalked away with the tray was eloquent. Patient, they asked, with all I put up with? Poor Minnie, distrusting any hint of change—even a new rug, an altering of furniture in a room—she must have been alarmed. Perhaps even before the accident she

had worried, sniffing out the threat to her household. I've had an interim, thought Agatha. It's almost over. Across the way the windows of the apartment house jumped at her as lights went on, and she closed her eyes. Minnie came in, on tiptoe, thinking she slept, and lowered the blinds softly, turning on the shaded lamp beside the bed. Then Humbert came home. Agatha heard Minnie intercept him in the hall. "She's sleeping a little, resting herself after dinner, you have your dinner first."

"Suits me," said Humbert. "I'm dead."

He might come to the door, thought Agatha. Just to see— But it was pleasant to have him in the house, to hear, at intervals, the quality of his voice, not the words, just the deep masculine resonance. Agatha eased her shoulders cautiously, she shifted her feet, crossing her slim ankles, she rearranged the scarf over the right arm, hiding the fingers. Then she heard his low whistle right behind her, at the door.

"My God, look at her! She's up!" He swung into the room, his jauntiness pitched a trifle high, a what-ho-good-cheer-for-the-invalid with which the healthy try to conceal their awkward recognition that they are not of much use, that ordinary lines of communication are down. He bent to kiss her, and halted, his body curved forward like a question mark, his hands swinging out to keep his balance. "Why, Agatha!" he began.

"Don't jar the chair, please," said Agatha, and as

he jerked back, she laid her left hand on his sleeve. "Isn't that a new suit? I don't remember it." She smiled. "You look quite grand."

"Now I know you're getting better." He held his somewhat padded shoulders straight and drew in his waist. "I've worn this for days and you haven't seen it. It's not new; I got it while you were South." Rust colored tie to call attention to the fine threads of rust and blue in the gray cloth, crisp-edged perfection of tailoring and pressing.

"Do your socks match, too?"

"Of course." Humbert looked at her, one eyebrow lifted, creasing his forehead, giving his face a droll lack of symmetry. "You know, I think I like it." His hand darted forward, his fingers moved along the line of hair over the temple, caught the lobe of ear, pinched it gently. "You took a chance, but by Jove, it does make you look younger." He nodded, and turned with his quick, easy motion to find a chair. "I don't know whether it's just your hair, or your being out of that damned bed, but you don't seem half an invalid tonight. God, I'll be glad when you're around again." He placed the chair near hers and arranged himself, crossing his long legs, hooking his fingers around one knee. "Believe me, I'd rather be the injured party any day." His smile was beguiling, ingenuous, meant to suggest long days of wretchedness.

"Would you?" Agatha caught a little sigh at her

lips, and the fingers of her left hand folded over her thumb, tightly. Along his cheekbone was a line scar, like a misplaced wrinkle. As the smile left his face, the flesh sagged a trifle over the jawbones. He looked tired, he was trying to cajole her, but behind his effort lay uncertainty, perhaps in the way his eyes met hers and moved away between the folds of eyelids.

"*Would* I? You ought to try it sometime. Why, this is the first time for weeks you've even seen me when you looked at me!"

It's beginning, thought Agatha. All that was unfinished, unsettled between us, all those loose ends must be gathered up again. And Humbert is beginning, none too subtly, by pointing out that he has suffered, that my part has been easier than his. "Did you mind that so much?" she asked, in a tone so disarmingly quiet that Humbert, after an instant in which his eyes under lowered lids searched her face, tipped back his head and laughed.

"You are better, Aggie! Fishing! I'll bite. I minded it like hell. You know I did. Why, I haven't known what to do with myself. I'd come running home the minute the office closed, hanging around for a kind word, and you didn't know I was on earth! Tonight was the first time I was late. I'd have made it tonight if I'd known you were up." He hesitated. "It was the insurance adjuster. Everything's settled up about the accident. No use trying to sue that junk dealer. I

wouldn't bring it up tonight, but you have to sign a receipt. That is, I'll sign your name and you okay it with a cross. I hate reminding you—"

"It doesn't bother me," said Agatha. "I don't seem to remember much about the accident."

"That happens, they say." Humbert ran one hand lightly over his hair, a gesture which had become habitual since he had discovered the thinning spot at the crest of his head; something happened in his face, like the untying of a knot, his eyes were bold, the wariness gone. "The shock does it. Well, it's all coming out all right. The junk dealer tried to make trouble. He said he had a lantern tied on the end of his truck, lighted. They found the lantern, smashed, and the cop said the pieces were cold when he picked them up. You know—" he stretched lazily—"it was damned lucky my face got bunged up." He rubbed his nose, grinning at Agatha. "I thought I'd broken my nose, it bled so. If the cops had sniffed that cocktail, well, you know how they are! Liquor on his breath, he's to blame. As it is, I convinced them the lantern was out, maybe the rain put it out, the junk dealer's got his license suspended for negligence, we get the car repaired and hospital expenses. Pretty good, eh?" He laid his hand over her knee, in a quick, firm caress. "As long as you're coming through okay." He stroked back his hair again, his fingers nervous. "It was a hell of a nightmare for a while there, you somehow can't help feeling responsi-

ble, even for an unavoidable accident, can you?" His smile was ingratiating, he offered himself exposed for wounds if she chose to blame him. "I'll get that paper, it's in my briefcase. You can put your mark on it." He got quickly to his feet. "Then we'll forget it, eh?"

Agatha did not hear him as he left the room. She shut her eyes, turning her head a trifle toward her aching shoulder, and against her lids she saw that light, small, low, yellowish, like a single star washed from the sky by all the rain into the wet road ahead of them. Her throat contracted. Had she screamed? She had forgotten, she had wished never to remember, but now with a whirr it all unrolled before her, as if the word lantern had clicked the switch of a projector, and she must watch the film through to the end. She had sent for Humbert, she had waited at Philadelphia for him to drive home with her. He had come gaily, thinking she had forgiven him again, that she had discovered again she could not live without him, he was ready to humor her softness, to celebrate another reunion. She had been firm and cool and practical. She would make a bargain with him, she would no longer support him, she would stay with him—it was rather late for either of them to find a good companion for the years left to them—he could support her for a change, she'd thought things over carefully, she saw she'd been to blame in a way, he'd been too weak to accept as much as she'd given him. And finally, he must agree not to humiliate

her again by his silly chasing after girls, like an old man in his dotage. She had a certain position, she expected a certain amount of dignity from him.

"I've seen through at last, and this is the bargain I offer you," she had ended. She remembered, how pleased she had been that she had kept her voice so steady. "We can't go on as we have been. It's this—or nothing." She didn't know now just what she had expected from Humbert. Or did anyone always expect his own side of an affair to have the inevitable persuasiveness of truth and reality? He had listened in silence, with anger thickening his features into heavy disfiguring sullenness.

"You and your little ultimatums!" he had sneered at her. "Why should you think you can deliver ultimatums to me?" And then, "You know what I make, how could I run the house? I haven't a cent left as it is. You grind out your pretty yarns"—he had spun his fist round and round—"you think you're so damned superior—"

"You couldn't buy so many presents for other women," she had said.

The drive homeward from Philadelphia had no distinctness in her mind, it was like a section of film which slips too fast through the machine, so that the images run together in a streak of gray. She remembered only the dreadful silence which thickened between them in the small car, until it had seemed to her that they were

buried alive, the two of them, that they must whirl with the turning earth until they suffocated.

They had stopped at an inn in New Jersey hills, the rain splintering the lights above the entrance, and Humbert had said, "We might as well eat." She remembered the way her face had looked in the mirror of the ladies' room, she remembered Humbert's face across from her at the small table, his eyelids flushed, his mouth defiant. He must have stopped at the bar for a couple of quick ones, he stared at her, inviting comment, as he ordered another highball, another. She had said, as they went out to the car, "Shall I drive?" and he had laughed.

She heard him now, stepping briskly along the hall, and thought, I can say to him, "You were drunk, weren't you? I let you drive because I hoped you'd kill us both. I hoped you'd shoot over a cliff coming down that mountain." That was behind his wariness, his uneasiness. He wanted to find out whether she knew. Knew that he had done this to her. When he came in the door she would say, "I remember now. You were drunk. You might have killed me, you almost did." He would bluster, he would defend himself, she would be implacable, watching him crumble. He had reached the door when the telephone rang. For a moment Agatha could hear nothing but the shrill sound of the words she had meant to say, a sound thin and taut with hatred. Then she began to tremble, so that she sunk a little in

the chair, pressing her spine against its padded back, trying to keep the tremor from her injured arm.

"She's fine tonight." Humbert's voice rolled in, gay, exuberant. "She's sitting up, looking like a million dollars! We're having a grand time. Yes. Yes, I guess the worst is over. Jeez, it's about time. I was pretty near the end of my rope, I can tell you. What? No, I won't let her get tired. Now, Bee, you know that nurse wouldn't let her up if she wasn't strong enough. Well, it's given me a new lease on life, believe me. Yes, I'll tell her. 'By."

He whistled softly as he came back. "Beatrice thinks you're sitting up pretty late," he said, "she seems to think you're doing it just to cheer me up. It does, all right." He looked about for something on which to lay the thin slip of paper he carried, and found her mirror on the dressing table. "Just stick your cross there." Agatha held the pen awkwardly in her left hand, she made the strokes slowly. "And there." She could see her mouth in the bit of mirror below the paper, pursed like a child's. "Now we won't have to talk about that any more." He folded the papers into a wallet, and slid it into a pocket. He looked down at Agatha, his eyes wide with candor, his mouth smiling. "You're lucky, you know, that you passed out and don't remember. It took me days to get away from it. Of course I felt responsible, since I had the wheel. I couldn't bear having hurt you." He lifted her hand

and brushed the palm with his lips, watching her. "But it's going to be all right now."

This is a last reconnaissance, thought Agatha, to be quite sure— He has been troubled only lest someone should blame him. Curiously the thought did not disturb her; it seemed to be a quiet thought, removed from emotion. In the same detached way her mind went on: that candor, that childlike openness, is a light he can turn on to dazzle my eyes, to blind me to the shadows behind. It is superficial, a trick he has taught his face. I could strike out the light with a word.

"Would you like me to read to you a while?"

She did not know what he read. His voice went on and on, and she drifted, not quite asleep, but dragged by weariness just beneath the surface where words had any meaning. Humbert stopped, and Miss Weller spoke. For an instant before Agatha opened her eyes, she heard herself say, "It was my fault as much as his. I wanted to die, I wanted him to kill me. I have to make amends."

"What are you muttering there?" asked Miss Weller.

"Oh," said Agatha. "You're back."

"I came a little early," said Miss Weller, briskly. "I'm glad I did, if you're asleep you better be in your bed."

The preparations for the night roused her, so that when at last she was alone in the darkened, quiet room,

she could not sleep. She stared at the ceiling, latticed faintly with light through cracks in the blinds, and thought, New York is never really dark. A village, a country road have moments, hours, of utter darkness, when everyone sleeps. In the city perhaps there wasn't sleep enough to go around, people took turns at it, waiting their time, like tired men dropping on tumbled beds still warm from bodies of the shift which had just left them. I've used up my share; if I lie awake, perhaps someone will sleep more peacefully. Humbert, perhaps, relieved that no one blames him for the accident. I could have used it for a club. See what you've done!

Agatha's left hand moved to her throat, the fingers pushing at the cap of adhesive over the shoulder blade. It was queer that she hadn't blurted it out. She thought, wrily, of all the things she had blurted out to Humbert, in the past, before the accident. She remembered the torment which twisted her into accusations, but she remembered it as she might think yesterday I had a headache. It was part of love, that bitter, battering, feverish need to tear out what was ignoble, false, opposed to the secret image of love. She had hurled accusations at him as if words had the power to exorcise falseness, weakness; she had been so close to him that there was no room for reticence; she had fought to keep him as she had first seen and loved him. In a way that fight was an extension of passion, of the very love

struggle, a desire to hold the illusion that she possessed her lover completely, was possessed by him, that they had an identity, a closeness of which the closeness of the flesh was but a symbol.

She had been a romantic fool, hadn't she? But if she had kept, ah, longer than most women, the gaiety and delight of love, was it strange that she had resisted so bitterly the way in which Humbert had emerged from the romantic shadow where she wished to keep him? He was well out of it now, he stood in a stripped, bare place under light, removed from her, so that she saw him clearly, his look of candor, his uneasy drifting thoughts, his need to vindicate himself. And so, what next? She did not know. She only knew that there was a loneliness in this detachment. But loneliness was not, as she had always supposed, a void, an emptiness. It was instead a challenge, against which you gathered your forces slowly, slowly, strength growing as you tested it, endurance itself expanding into beauty. For a moment Agatha felt herself lifted into clarity, brilliance, where images, words, whirled together into understanding. In a way it was like the high moments in her writing, when suddenly barriers were gone and the demon spoke through her. If she could hold the moment, she would have the answer to the whole, weary puzzle of living. But it was gone at once, and her mind seemed darker for the momentary brilliance. She was too tired, to think, later, when she was

stronger— Her eyes closed, she felt sleep flowing past her, a wide, placid stream, if she could let herself down into its water, let them carry her softly, but she was caught in wreckage on the bank, pinned under a heavy log; if she could twist herself free, it was her arm which was caught. Cool and sweet the stream rose around her, floated her away.

Agatha sat again at the window. That morning the doctor had removed the cumbersome apparatus which protected the arm. "In a few days you won't even need a bandage," he said. "Move it all you can. It's your job, now, getting it useful again." She could pull her fingers toward the palm with only the briefest gap between the intention and the movement. The fingers were still too like sausages, below the cuff of the full gathered sleeve of the blue house gown, but at least the arm was concealed as arms should be, within the sleeve, and lying along the arm of the chair seemed again a minor part of her, instead of a kind of monster to which she was attached. "Tomorrow I shall put on a girdle," she said to Miss Weller. "I'm spreading too much." Miss Weller laughed. "It's your fault, too, the way you stuff me."

"Figgers are coming in style again." Miss Weller fastened her dark coat about her own spare waist. "Hips, nice soft deep bosoms. Men always liked them, anyway. Be glad you aren't scrawny. Your throat's like

a girl's. Not to speak of your legs. You're a treat after some of the cases I get."

Something very heartening in Miss Weller's comparative anatomy. "I don't want to get fat," said Agatha. "If that starts, at my age— But as soon as I get back to work— You know, sometimes I lose almost ten pounds finishing one book."

"Work? Don't talk about work. You've enough to do for a long time, collecting vitality enough to live." Miss Weller drew on neat fabric gloves and tucked a purse under one arm; the expression of her face was humorous and knowledgeable, her inspection of Agatha was that of a skilled mechanic who knows just what it will take to tune up the motor. "This is the first time you ever really stopped, isn't it? Maybe it was lucky you had an accident. I'll tell Minnie I'm off."

Now what, thought Agatha, did she mean by that? Had Miss Weller and the doctors among them some bit of gruesome knowledge about Agatha's future which they were withholding? They could scarcely, for all their X-rays and their blood counts, detect the past, could they? Or would despair show under the microscope, would it lie there among red and white corpuscles, a deadly bacillus, shaped like a leech, black and blind and blunt? Oh, Miss Weller had probably meant nothing more than a warning, be your age, take it easy. The first time you ever stopped. She had stopped, so far as work went, months ago. The accident had merely

given her a reason for ending her futile struggle to get back to work. Unless she turned out a serial pretty soon she'd be the original forgotten man! Her success had come in large part from her dependability, the regularity with which another "Agatha Townsend" appeared, each on the heels of the previous book, before the readers had shifted their careless devotion. Only the great could afford to be erratic, to publish at long intervals. Fame, reputation, was a snowball which melted unless you kept rolling it along, increasing its girth. Even Wilson Clarke, her agent, had given her up. "Don't worry about that advance," he'd said. "There are some things coming in, royalties, foreign sales, they'll make it up. Let me know when something clicks, will you?" They had no time, any of them, for—for a hen that laid no eggs!

Perhaps she could think of a story. She had nothing else to do, and she no longer drifted into sleep so much. She waited, hopefully, and it was for all the world like listening outside a door of a house she knew was empty, deserted. But she could turn away, indifferently, with none of that frantic beating at the barred door. I don't really care, she thought, and the momentary tension relaxed into a pleasant indifference. It wouldn't matter if she never wrote another word, except financially. Julian had said to her, that evening so long ago, that he wondered how Humbert liked being kept. She had worked out that plan she had offered Humbert, she

saw now, as a discipline; his bitterness about her ultimatum had been instinctive, against her motive. But now he was solicitous, tender, even buoyant. And if part of that attitude came from some feeling of guilt about the accident, did part of it, perhaps, rise from this picture of her as helpless, injured, dependent? Since their marriage, she had been helpless and dependent only in her love for him, and he had used that power to hurt her. Must she, because he was weak, make herself seem weaker to increase his stature? And how long, practically, would solicitude or tenderness endure?

She didn't know how long, exactly, she had been out of the running. She'd been South several weeks before the accident, those weeks and the weeks since melted together, a solid block of time without division into days. After all, you needed the artificial segments of time marked on calendars only for petty, practical affairs; by a certain day a piece of work must be done, an engagement met, a bill paid. Your personal life did not move like a neat inch-worm. Under the artificial checking off of surface time it kept its own rhythms.

The telephone bell rang, four times before Minnie broke its clatter. She'll show 'em she won't be rushed, thought Agatha. "*Hull*-o," said Minnie, and, "I don't know, I'll ask her."

"It's Mr. Downing," she said, standing at the door.

"He says do you feel like seeing him, and I says I don't know, I'll ask."

"Julian?" Agatha stiffened a little, a quick contraction of fiber. He would want something of her, if nothing else he would at least intrude into this narrow, close world, she would have to think about him and Beatrice and the child. They would break through the wall with which illness and weakness had enclosed her, they would say, "See, this has happened to me while you have been away."

"Of course," Agatha said, frowning at the hopeful gleam in Minnie's face. Minnie enjoyed the watchdog role. "Tell him I'll be glad to see him."

"It'll tax your strength," said Minnie.

"Tell him to come now, I'm alone here." As Minnie clumped along the hall, Agatha nodded. "I've got a lot of homework to catch up on, I might as well start."

"He'll be right up, he's at the drugstore corner." Minnie glanced sharply about the room, she ran a corner of her apron over the edge of the dressing table and rearranged the silver brushes. "You want anything?"

"No." She sat forward, smoothing down folds of the dull blue wool. "I look all right, don't I?"

"You'd look real natural, if you hadn't let her cut your hair," said Minnie.

"You make me sound like a corpse." Agatha laughed at Minnie's round, shocked eyes. "I feel much stronger

today. I won't have any excuse to keep a nurse. You won't mind helping me a little, just at first?"

"We'd get on much better without the likes of her," said Minnie, the creases in her face deepening. "My hands itch to get at that bed and make it properly."

"It's extravagant to have her." Agatha hesitated. If the wall was to be broken, she might as well have a hand herself. "Minnie, the money I left for the house when I went away—you must have used that up long ago. I've lost track—"

"Now don't you worry about money," said Minnie, earnestly. "Mr. Flint said you're not to be worried. Hisself is running the house now, and very serious he is, too, him as never before even counted the change in his pockets. You ought to see him follow me around and turn off electric lights and urging another pot roast. It's a fair treat." Minnie's face was droll and conspiring. We know what he's like, she said, you and I, let him try his hand and may it do him good.

Agatha leaned back in her chair, and laughed. Humbert, stalking Minnie about the house to turn off lights! She laughed again, laying her left hand against her arm lest she shake it, and Minnie, nodding at her, a corner of her mouth drawn up in a half grin, went down the hall to answer the doorbell.

There was something about Julian—what was it Beatrice had said, weeks ago? Lately she had not spoken of him. Agatha couldn't remember—Something

—no, she couldn't find it. One of the things Beatrice had said as she sat beside Agatha in the hospital, talking on and on, trying to divert her, to amuse her. Agatha had not listened. Pain stopped her ears with hot and pointed fingers, words had no meaning. Now, as she heard Julian's voice she thought, it must have been that way with him, too, and I was impatient, I said he was too absorbed in his own trouble. I even told him so.

"She's in her own room, right down here." Minnie came to the door with Julian. "Now you wait a minute, I'll get you a chair." She would have propped him against the door like a walking stick, oversolicitously, but Julian laughed at her.

"I can find one for myself," he said, stepping past her into the room. For a moment he stood, head bent a trifle, and Agatha cried out, "Why, Julian! They've changed your glasses! How fine you look!" In place of the heavy, opaque lens which had masked his face he wore a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. As Agatha spoke, he turned toward her, and she thought how natural he looks, there's no disfigurement even in the eye that's all blind, his face has its old alertness. He moved toward her, and she reached for his outstretched hand.

"It's less conspicuous, isn't it? And it's a few shades less dark." He gripped her hand, and dropped it. "I

still can't see enough to know how you really are. Are you up to a chat with me, really?"

"Of course, Julian. Sit down, there's a chair behind you. And tell me, is it better, your eye? It's—well, you look like yourself again!" An older self, she thought, sharp lines at the corners of the eyes, between the brows.

Julian told her, briefly. The doctors had concluded that they had arrested the progress of the disease in the right eye, for the present at least. It was safe for him to use it, so far as any use was still possible. He could get around with more sureness, although enough of the retina had been destroyed so that no lens could give him real vision. "Like looking through a piece of thin carbon paper," he said. "But it's a damned sight better than the nothing I feared. Now how about you?"

"I've begun to perk up," said Agatha. "Tomorrow I'm going to walk out to the living room. You know, I think I have the makings of a chronic invalid. It's such an effortless life."

"It would lack spice for you." Julian leaned back in his chair. "Your voice has still a hint of—fragility, weakness. But it's appealing, that way. You could get anything you asked for."

"I better make out a list right away, before I lose the chance."

"You might practice up on it, so you could turn it

on when needed, sort of Vox Humana stop, you know. Voice of the clinging vine."

"That's me," said Agatha. "Clinging vine. That was your advice, wasn't it, that last time we talked?"

"Was it?" Julian made a little deprecatory gesture. "I'm afraid I wasn't too sympathetic. I was still too deep in my own private wallow." He hesitated, a tentative, unspoken inquiry in his face, not curiosity, but a need to ascertain the point beyond which comment would be intrusion, to ascertain it since he could not watch her, in some subtle way. "This whole business has given Humbert a terrific jolt," he went on, slowly. "I saw him a few times out there at the hospital. I wanted to tell you—or would you rather we didn't talk about it?"

"In a way," said Agatha, "I've had a jolt too. But I'm not sure just what's happened to me."

"It's just this, Greggy. I suppose I want to tell you because it sort of backs me up." Julian's smile was humorous, with no hint of bitterness. "Humbert was shocked half out of his wits, because he'd never once thought of losing you, never thought of life in any way except just right here, with you going along as usual. If he wandered, he certainly expected always to come back. Perhaps it was his way of attracting attention to himself. But he expected to find you here, as much as he expected to see his own face in a mirror. He'd never anticipated any change—least of all death. You and

all this"—he waved a hand—"would just stay here."

"I suppose," said Agatha, and a reflective dryness altered the timber of her voice, "he needed me to give his wanderings any point. Perhaps you have to have someone to be unfaithful to!"

Julian laughed. "You've got it," he said. "Anyway, he was terrified."

"I wonder," said Agatha. Terrified lest he be blamed for the accident. She laid her left hand on her other arm, and eased it a little. "Anyway, I'm fine now, only I'm too lazy even to worry about things, or plan. But thanks, Julian, for the tip."

They were silent for a time. Agatha remembered, with a queer consternation, the kind of mad, weaving pressure which had driven her out to talk to Beatrice, to Julian, almost to anyone who would listen. She had thought she wished help, advice; hadn't she really been striking at Humbert, confessing her weakness, her inability to reach him? A vindication of herself, a destruction of him. Now the madness, the pressure was gone, and whatever had taken their place had no need to be talked about. When you get down to the level where your own soul grows you don't talk about it. Julian would understand that. Agatha looked at him, affection warm and sweet in her throat.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" she asked. "You look so much better. It's more than the new spectacles."

"Hasn't Beatrice told you?" Julian lifted his head sharply.

"She may have. I've been so dull. My mind was nothing but cotton batting. I'm sure she did!"

"I see," said Julian.

"We haven't talked about anything," said Agatha, in answer to the quick grimness about Julian's mouth. "Bee has just dashed in and tried to amuse me for a minute, and I've been a sunken log. I'm just coming up."

"Of course. It's just that I expect it to be shouted from all housetops, now that you're getting well. The news came the very day you were hurt. We none of us thought of much but you for a while there. But now you'd like to know, wouldn't you? It's good news. Greggy, I've got a job, of sorts." He straightened his body in the chair, his voice had resonance for all its quietness. "Editing, teaching. I'm even going to have a book."

Agatha listened while he told her about it, Leslie bullying him until he tackled the typewriter. "It was extraordinary how that mechanical thing did it. I'd been blocked, completely. I had no access to my own thoughts. But suddenly the fact that I could shut myself up, alone, the way I'd always worked, without the barrier of another person breathing down my neck in eagerness to help me—well, that fact did it. First I just went through the motions, and then suddenly I

could work! I stumbled along, I couldn't tell if it was any good, and one night I asked Leslie to read it back to me, what I had pecked out. God, Greggy, I began to breathe again right then!"

He went on, and Agatha thought, Ohio. That's why Beatrice hasn't spoken of it. A little college town. A campus with trees, and buildings that dated the growth of the college in a miscellany of architecture. Around the campus the town, a few tree-bordered streets, frame houses with porches and front lawns, a business block, a church, the newest building in town a gas station with red pumps, or perhaps a movie house. What would Beatrice do in such a place? Other women kept house and raised their families; they went to the President's reception, belonged to the Ladies' Aid Society and perhaps a literary club. But Beatrice! Even if Julian had had the chance earlier, before Beatrice had geared herself to this new pace— Would she have gone then, graciously? Would she have cared more for Julian's welfare than for her own small satisfactions? There were women who found their whole fulfillment in the men they loved, or weren't there, any more? Was that a man-made myth? The brilliance in Julian's face as he talked made her throat ache. He was integrated again, all his powers focussed and directed. He's worth more than the rest of us, thought Agatha; that's why not being able to use himself has been so dreadful for him. All this excitement which Beatrice

finds in her work, in her dashing about, is froth blown along the surface. Dismay like nervous fingers plucked at the edges of Agatha's perception of her daughter, raveling out long strands. She is not wise enough to love him, she is too soft, my poor, lost Beatrice!

"The Dean's to be in the city again next week," Julian was saying. "I've been working out a series of lectures. I couldn't accept until I was sure I had enough to offer. They're all right, I think."

"That's splendid, Julian." Agatha couldn't help the long sigh.

"But what?" asked Julian, quietly.

"It's so far away—from New York."

"So much the better."

"Why can't you do the same thing here?"

"No one has asked me to."

"But they didn't want you to resign, if they knew you were ready to work again, why can't you ask?"

"Why should I? Come on, Greggy, out with it."

"It would be hard for Beatrice—to give up her radio program—she—"

"I'm not asking her to. This makes a good break, reasonable, easy. I go, she stays. I've been a burden long enough. This ends it. We haven't discussed it yet. I had to be sure I could swing the job. I think she's afraid I may expect her to go. She doesn't want to, but she doesn't want to be blamed for not going. You know. I don't blame her. Too many thorns in our bed

of roses. That's why I'm glad it's Ohio, and I wouldn't lift a finger to make it any nearer. The only problem is Leslie. She assumes we're going to move out as a family, bag and baggage. I think she suspects, and is playing a game to make things come out as she thinks they should. I don't want her to feel bitter about her mother. If she went along with me, Leslie, I mean, she —how shall I put it?—she'd be steadily aware that Beatrice hadn't come, she'd have too much emphasis on what will be a shock anyway. Don't you see?"

Oh, Agatha could see! Faculty wives asking, "Where is your mother?" Leslie, with adolescent intensity, dramatizing her part in this broken pattern, the very brightness of her devotion to Julian increasing the shadow over Beatrice. But what did Beatrice expect?

"Wouldn't it be just as hard for the child if she stayed here?"

Julian frowned, startled. "I hadn't thought of her staying." He leaned forward, clasping his hands around a knee. "No. She's got to get clear away, into a new setting, where nothing reminds her of us. She ought to get away from me, anyway. I have made her life too somber, I have depended upon her too much. She's almost ready for college, one more year. She doesn't really need parents any more, does she? I've put it on the grounds of the school not being good enough out there. I've sent for catalogues of preparatory schools, and she won't even look at them. She's a stubborn little

colt. Maybe you'd talk with her, Greggy. I can't hit on the way to persuade her. I have a handicap. I'd like to keep her with me."

"Why not?" cried Agatha. "Why not?"

"It isn't fair."

"Oh, must you be so damned noble?"

Julian jerked erect in his chair, one hand, doubled into a fist, beat slowly against his knee.

"I didn't mean that exactly," Agatha's voice hurried, running past tears she would not shed. "But I feel so bad! After all, I care what happens to Beatrice, too. I think you ought to do something."

"Me?"

"Yes, you! Instead of just letting her go—"

Julian's hand moved forward, to rest on the arm of Agatha's chair. "Perhaps I shouldn't have troubled you," he said. "But I've been eager to talk with you. It's urgent, if Leslie is to get into a good school. I need some help there."

"You're just dodging what I said."

"There's nothing I can do for Beatrice except to get out of her way."

"You might make some allowance for the fact that you were pretty difficult. Why, you even scared me!"

"Allowance?" Julian withdrew his hand quickly, as if its presence so near Agatha might betray too much, and reticence deepened the lines about his mouth. "You

are mistaken, Agatha, if you think I blame her. The trouble is, you're a sentimentalist. You've written so many happy endings you think you can make one for this story, too. You know it's already ended."

"But you can't go off alone, you need—"

"I'm no longer a beggar." He got to his feet, his face turned toward the window, the late sunlight through the half drawn blinds throwing a bar across his firm mouth. "It's enough of a miracle that I can be independent, that I can go on, a little, with work that seems of some value. You see, Greggy, I've learned something. It's like this. We all start out with the most fantastic idea of what we deserve, what life ought to hand us. An impossible, preposterous dream of perfection, and anything less is an injustice, a cruel blow, and we go screaming out our bitterness and hate. Well, I've been—a sort of refugee, one of those men our world is too full of today, driven out, fleeing through the night, despoiled of everything to which I had thought I had a right, with fear at my heels. That teaches you your place in the cosmos, all right. You begin again, from the bottom, this time. Everything you gain is that much more than nothing, beginning with just the fact that you are still alive. You no longer find it so much less than the grasping dream you started with. Do I sound like a fool? I think I mean something." He bent his head toward her, and the bar of light glanced across

his glasses. "Nice talk for a convalescent, isn't it? I—I had to say it to someone, and you got it. You listen too well, Greggy."

Agatha had listened, behind his words was a sound like that of wind blowing between the stars, in it the sound of dry leaves driven through empty spaces, the sound of flight, of fear. "Oh, Julian! You're too young to know that!"

"Maybe you're too young to hear it." Julian smiled. "But I was afraid you might try to persuade Beatrice it was her duty to go with me. I wanted you to understand how intolerable that would be. You do see it's better for me to be off, don't you? And if Leslie comes around, will you talk her into school?" He was matter of fact now, dismissing his intensity.

"Yes," said Agatha, "at least, I'll try. She doesn't pay too much attention to a grandmother." She kept her voice steady, thinking, he needn't know he's almost made a refugee of me!

"It's hard to tell just what she pays attention to. She's very proud of you." Julian straightened his shoulders, and turned toward the door. "I'm grateful to you, Greggy. I hope I haven't tired you too much."

"Good-by, Julian," said Agatha, and listened to his feet, firm, if a little slow, as they went along the hall. She was tired. She wished Humbert would come home. Her thoughts blurred in her weariness. She had

touched the edge of this knowledge Julian had. Just the edge. And Beatrice—was she like a child, still clutching her dream, her fantastic, preposterous—what had Julian called it?—dream of perfection?

5

BEATRICE woke, the cry which had pressed up through layers of sleep swollen and dry in her throat, the air of the room turbid with the dream which had wakened her. She could not free herself at once from the dream. She still pushed herself with frantic, desperate haste, she was late for the studio hour, she tried to dress, as she drew on garments to cover herself they fell into rags, she had seized a coat, a man's coat, Julian's, she must run, run, she was climbing a long flight of iron stairs, stumbling on the coat, her naked feet bruised by the rough treads, she could never reach the studio, the stairs swung dizzily.

She drew a long breath, relaxing. It was only a dream, frightening, racking. The night air was cold at the roots of her hair, behind her ears, along her temples, where sweat had started. Only a dream, and in the morning she would not remember it. But that desperate haste, that whirling among grotesque obstacles made up a dream she had dreamed too often lately. She was driving herself too hard, she could not rest

even at night. No one realized the terrific pace she had to keep. She turned her body, her face down against an arm, trying to hold her mind still, to prevent its moving into the day ahead of her, into the days behind her. Had her anxiety about Agatha become an infiltrate, affecting her attitude toward everyone, toward everything she did? What was the fear which crept out from dark, muddy depths to torment her sleep? Agatha was almost well, she seemed if anything happier, more at ease than she had before the accident. It's just that I've been under a strain about everything; I won't think, I'll count to a million. A million. Did a million women listen to her broadcast? "Frankly," said Mr. Loftus, the *Très Joli* man, "I don't believe you pull 'em enough. You need suspense, something to make the wife and mother have to tune in to hear what happens next. Continuity. Suspense. I've been listening to some of these serials, strip-shows five days a week, maybe they've got it." He wouldn't give her the contract, not yet, he'd try another fortnight. "Work me up a month's scripts ahead." Beatrice had tried to explain why she couldn't: a column had to be fresh, to be any good; it was partly news, interesting guest speakers, real questions in the question box, day by day stuff. Loftus had shrugged that off. "If you was Walter Winchell, or Kate Smith, that'd be okay. I want to see what I buy."

"Just jazz up the *Très Joli* plugs," advised Shep-

pard. "Show him what you've got. Don't let him worry you. God himself doesn't know what'll be news a month from now." He'd suggested a stooge to feed her lines, for variety, and Hollister had come into the picture. Young, in his early twenties, a handsome, full-lipped face, a persuasive deep voice. He treated Beatrice with a deference which made her furious because it dated her, to him she was not a charming woman, she was merely a chance to get ahead. He had begun to steal time, ad-libbing, just a phrase or so, cleverly, enough to crowd her lines. But the fans liked him! And he had a contract. If only Sheppard would come back! Hollister was a protégé of his, he'd know how to deal with the boy's vanity, his effrontery. When Beatrice tried, saying lightly, "Now stick to the script today, Mr. Hollister! You throw me off my stride," Hollister's lifted eyebrows, his drawled, "Really? I thought just a note of spontaneity—" carried the implication that Beatrice was both dull and ravening in her conceit. They destroyed among them the high mood of the early weeks on the air, just when she most needed that mood for a refuge. If Sheppard had been in town—Sheppard as he had been during the first months, calling her after a broadcast, assuring her she was in fine form, suggesting a gay hour— But Sheppard was in California, and lucky for her he'd gone.

She hadn't even seen him before he left. He had called her at the studio, that nightmarish day after

Agatha was hurt. Beatrice had said, "Sheppard! Oh, I want so to see you!" She had told him about her mother. "I've got to rush back to the hospital, there's a train in half an hour. Could you come to the station? Just for a minute?"

Sheppard was taking the night plane to Chicago, they'd have dinner before he left. "You can get a later train."

"But you don't understand! She's terribly hurt, I just came in to do the program, I've got to get back, I promised!" He had been silent so long that she had said, "Sheppard? Are you there? Did you hear me?"

"I heard you," he had said. "Distinctly. You won't give me an hour."

"You might be a little human!" she had cried out, and he had said, "Human? That's just what I am. I'm sick of playing second fiddle. I'm tired of your domestic afflictions. Get over them, will you, before I come back?"

"You *are* a beast, aren't you?"

He had laughed. "That's better! You're more amusing angry than feeling so damned sorry for yourself." She had cut off his laugh, jamming the telephone into its cradle with unsteady haste. It was a pose on his part, she had thought, angrily. He fancied himself as a superman, with no feeling, no inclusion in his scheme of anything except the immediate satisfaction of an immediate desire. He was irritated because he hadn't

stripped her of whatever in her life, in her emotions, interfered with his desire for her. She wasn't sorry for herself! She had tried to keep her anger against him bright during the confused days that followed, a fire at which she could warm herself. But it was not a real fire, it was an imitation backlog made of red paper through which shone a light.

Was Sheppard part of this night-fear? He would come back presently. He had not written, but Sheppard never wrote; he wired or telephoned. She was glad he had not called her, she was glad that he had gone. She could postpone decision, she could say, till Agatha is better, I can think of nothing else. She turned again in bed, staring through the opened window at the gray wall of the court opposite. Agatha, at least, could not say that Beatrice had neglected her. Every moment she had free from work, she had devoted to her mother. Even Julian must have seen— Oh, you fool! She twisted her face against the pillow, eyelids burning. What had she hoped to prove to Julian? That she was tender, devoted, selfless? It was too late to prove anything to Julian. He had been kind enough about the practical difficulties around the accident, the trips to Barsdale, the delivering of messages—such things—and beyond that he had no thought of her at all. He was absorbed in his work, in his plans for next year, just as he had been in the old days. And Leslie—all children of that age were wrapped closely in them-

selves, Beatrice just imagined a queer, appraising look on her daughter's smooth, secretive young face. She had said, "When Agatha's better, and we have time, we must pick out a good school for you next year. The family has plenty of money now, you can go anywhere you like."

"I'd much rather be at home," Leslie had said, frowning.

Beatrice had hesitated a moment. Home. Julian in Ohio. Leslie's eyes moved quickly under the thick, fair lashes, searching her mother's face, hurrying away. "You'd love it at school, once you were there," Beatrice had said.

Beatrice sighed, sleep blew over her like a light breeze, scattering her thoughts, rustling them away, she no longer had any decision to make, she had no power for decision, she was carried along on a moving stairway, on an endless belt moving steadily forward, she was helpless. As she slept again, guilt, with bright rodent eyes, nibbled at the edges of her dreams.

She woke again to daylight and a voice pressing through the closed door in quick dramatic emphasis, the morning news-broadcast. Beatrice listened, she could not catch the words—weather, shoes for men and boys, the threat of war, the voice vibrated through wood and plaster with the same clipped excitement for all of them. Julian and Leslie were at breakfast, then; they turned the radio low, not to waken her and had

with their orange juice and coffee the further steps the world had taken toward disaster. Pansy came in now to prepare breakfast. Beatrice couldn't drag herself up at seven, sometimes she had just fallen asleep then. She tried to wake before Leslie started off to school.

As she went along the hall to the bathroom, she caught phrases from the staccato speech, something about the Czechs, a late bulletin. She stared at her reflection in the cabinet mirror. She had to get more sleep, she looked a wreck. What was there to worry her, anyway? Things were working out far more easily than she had hoped, Julian would go away, she didn't have to leave him, he was leaving her behind. She splashed hurriedly through her bath, Leslie would want the bathroom. Sheppard had said, "There's nothing left to believe in, the world's cracking up. What you call your conscience is a hangover from an age that's dead and gone. Grab what you can, sex, money, liquor. What else is good?" Absurd and quaint of her to go on having qualms, wasn't it, as if it mattered anywhere what she did? For it certainly was qualms that crept up on her at night, that fretted at her as she went dashing about. Perhaps if she went fast enough she'd shake them off. She hadn't had much fun these last weeks, just work and anxiety about Agatha. When Sheppard came back—

The radio had stopped. As Beatrice toweled herself briskly, she heard Leslie's voice, young, light, intense

about something, and Julian's laugh. I'm not a good mother, she thought. Maybe I haven't character enough even to be wicked. But there's one thing about having a child that Sheppard doesn't know. Even if there's nothing to believe in, you don't want your child to know it! You seem to have to go on pretending—strength and a noble heart—and noble spelled wrong!—our only aim. Leslie and her soul! Wouldn't it be better for your child if you said, look here, all those high thoughts are very fine, but you've got to be realistic about life sooner or later. Beatrice pulled on her bathrobe and jerked the cord about her waist. I never could do it, she thought. Leslie wouldn't listen to me, she'd close in tight around her own notions, her eyes would be blue and hard as glass.

It was queer, though, that when you were young and inexperienced, when you didn't really know anything, you labored to construct a code to live by, you had all these ideals; and when you were older, you just drifted along, with a few tag-ends left over. Perhaps sometime you had to cast up accounts again. I can't ask Agatha, thought Beatrice, as she opened the bathroom door, without telling her too much. I don't want to trouble her yet. (You mean you don't want to be talked to!) Leslie had pounced out of her room at the sound of the door, and Beatrice caught her wrist, holding it against the little tug Leslie gave.

"Hello, there," she said. "Good, you're wearing that

new sweater." Yellow, kitten soft, it threw faint gold lights across the delicate modeling of the round, young throat, of the slender arms. "It's nice on you."

"I like long sleeves better." Leslie tried to pull the little cap down to her elbow. "But my blue one's simply filthy. I've really got to rush, Mother."

"They're much prettier short," said Beatrice, releasing the wrist. "What's your rush? It isn't late."

"I've got a meet—" Leslie cut the word in two with a quick slam of the bathroom door.

Beatrice went on to her own room. If ever something I got that child was exactly right, she thought, I'd drop in my tracks. She began to dress with quick, irritated movements. You're too touchy, she told herself, you ought to be careful, exaggerating everything. Pansy was doing up Julian's room; Beatrice heard her shuffling about, talking to herself in little bursts of mumbled words as she shook up pillows, shoved a chair across the floor, shut a window.

"Your room's ready, Mist' Downing," Pansy sung out, and Beatrice heard Julian coming through the hall. She thought, he walks more briskly than he did, is it the new spectacles or an old assurance? Past her door, into his own room. After a moment the click of metal as he fitted paper into the typewriter and began a slow, irregular tapping.

It had seemed lately almost as if Julian could see her, when he turned his face toward her. The day he

had come home with the new glasses, she had exclaimed, awkwardly, "Why, Julian, you look just as you used to! You—can you see better?"

"Enough to get about without a guide," he had said. "The difference between night and twilight, a winter twilight, say." He had waited, an ironic remoteness in his face, and she had struggled against a horrid feeling of inadequacy, of ineptness, as if whatever she might say was, in advance, already wrong.

"That's much better, isn't it?" she had said.

"Oh, much."

She'd finish dressing after breakfast. She buttoned herself into a house coat, and stepped out into the path of Leslie, cheeks flushed with hurry, fingers busy with the straps of her bulging school bag as she came down the hall.

"'By, Mother."

"Is that coat warm enough, Leslie?"

"Oh, Heavens, yes! Everybody's wearing spring clothes. Why, it's almost summer." She gave another wrench, had the strap in its buckle, and a hand on the doorknob.

"Leslie, dear." Beatrice spoke quickly; she had an exasperated obscure need to catch this slippery, resistant young person who was after all her daughter, to coerce her into something! "You haven't been in to see Agatha. Even if you are so terribly busy, don't you think you might find a few minutes for her?"

Leslie peered around, her lower lip caught an instant between her teeth. "Why, Mother, Greggy hasn't wanted to see anybody, except you, of course. I did send her my love. I was going to stop there today or tomorrow, anyway. Father told me last night she was well enough now so I could see her. I didn't neglect her."

"I didn't say you did."

"You mean—"

"I didn't mean a thing, darling. Run along." Beatrice blew her a kiss. "Just drop in when you have time."

Leslie stared at her cloudily, her lips opened, closed, and suddenly she slipped through the door, shutting it firmly behind her. Beatrice went on to the dining room. So Julian had seen Agatha. A faint ripple of apprehension crossed her forehead. He had said nothing, nor had Agatha. Why shouldn't Julian go to see her? Ah, but why should they make a secret of his visit? Agatha had picked up amazingly fast this last week. She'd let the nurse go, and that was a relief. Beatrice didn't care for that hard, efficient type of woman, always trying to put mere relatives in their place. The little Swedish masseuse who came in every morning had a much nicer personality. "I always listen to you, Mrs. Downing, unless I'm out on a job," she had said. "Sometimes, if I have a lady at my own place —I work at home, too, it's cheaper that way—I turn

on the radio, too, if she thinks she'd like it. I never thought I'd meet you!"

"I should think the slaps you give would drown out anything except Hitler," Agatha had said, smiling at Beatrice with a droll quirk, and Beatrice had answered the smile with, "It's pleasant to find someone who approves of me!" But the masseuse had cried out, "That one! I would not listen to him!" She went on with an account of a letter from her brother in Stockholm, and Agatha, listening to her, gave no sign that she had heard Beatrice.

She's had it all her life, thought Beatrice, sulkily, as she settled herself at the table and lifted the glass of orange juice. Admiration, fan mail, money. I don't see why she should blame me for liking it, especially— Pansy came in with hot coffee and toast, and was Mis' Downing gonna be home for lunch? Well, for dinner? Beatrice thought so. "I may be late. I don't get anything done in the morning, now that I stop at my mother's." A loophole, left for what? She drank the coffee quickly, she couldn't eat. Any day now Sheppard's voice might jump at her over the wire, Hello, darling! The interim was over, stand up and face things, stand up, stand up for Jesus! Well, I'll talk to Agatha. I'll say, what you don't know is that everything's settled, Julian doesn't even want me to go with him, he hasn't mentioned it, when I tried to congratulate him, after he left the news for Burnham to tell

me, all he said was, "It is rather a surprise, isn't it?" I'll talk to Julian. I'll say, isn't it about time we had a frank discussion? She got to her feet, the folds of the long house coat dragging about her ankles, holding her back. She could feel her feet moving along the hall, feel her hand lifted to knock at his door. If she did, she would be upset all day. Morning was no time for such emotional strain! Anxiety, unrest already had affected her program. That was why Loftus wasn't more enthusiastic! She laid her fist against her mouth hard, and her long sigh was resolution escaping. Then her eyes widened, as Julian opened his door and came slowly to the door of the dining room.

"Beatrice?" he asked, and then caught her silhouetted against the window. "I thought you hadn't gone." He had a queer expression, deprecatory, almost amused.

"Good morning," said Beatrice, and dropped her hand against her breast, where her heart raced.

"Are you walking over to Agatha's this morning?"

"Yes. It's—it's the only chance I have for a breath of air." It's coming, thought Beatrice. He's talked it over with Agatha, he thinks it's necessary to tell me—

"I know you're pressed for time, but—" again that wry smile. "I'm in sort of a spot. I have to have a new suit. Leslie says I'm too shabby—I went around to that tailor I used to have. It's on the way to Greggy's. I can't see his damned suitings. He said, 'Where's the

wife? She used to pick 'em out for you pretty good.' I thought first I'd ask Humbert to go in, but he'd pick me out a hound's tooth or something. It's not very important, but—"

Beatrice pressed her hands against the table, a tremor back of her knees.

"Of course, Julian. I'll be glad to." Too much force behind her words, giving them a false heartiness. She went on hastily. "Is it the same tailor?" (It was she who years ago had coaxed Julian out of his ready-made blue serge; try it, just once, you'd be so handsome! He had laughed and humored her.)

"The same Samuels, the same smell—hot irons and lint and dead cigar smoke. You're sure you don't mind?" He ran his hands over the coat he wore, buttoning the middle button, patting the pockets. "Am I shabby? It hasn't mattered, but next week I'm to have this conference—" He laughed. "You should have heard Samuels, crooning over this suit. He said, 'My God, you wear that yet? An old age pension that suit should have. My own business I ruin, such fine materials I give my customers.' " Julian pushed out his lips, his thumb and forefinger made a fold of the sleeve, rubbing it, he sniffed at it. (See, he was saying, here's Samuels. Can't you take it lightly?)

(I've wanted to buy things for you, you wouldn't let me.) The unspoken words made a barrier across which Beatrice's laugh came shakily.

"I told him I'd been out of circulation, for a while. But I was getting back in. It won't take very long."

"Even if it did—" Beatrice was trembling— "I'd be glad to do it. If you'd only ask me—"

Julian lifted his head quickly, the smile gone. "Thank you," he said, "it's really a great favor. You remember where the shop is?" Then he turned, and Pansy came scuffing past him to collect the breakfast dishes.

"Yes, I'm all through." Beatrice moved away from the table, but she waited until Julian had closed himself into his room. Make no mistake my girl, she thought. This is no opening wedge. It's just—just that I have good taste. No—Samuels said where's the wife —embarrassing to say, why, Samuels, I believe I have no wife.

When Beatrice had finished dressing she stood outside Julian's door. She was practicing to herself the words she wished to say after she had knocked and opened the door. Behind it the sound of typing went on, in erratic rhythm, silence, then a rattle of keys, silence, another volley. The sound of Julian's thought, excluding her. She lifted her hand, pressed it softly against the panel for a moment, and then knocked. At Julian's "Yes?" she opened the door.

"Don't you want to come along to Samuels'? I'm going now." Too tense, she should have practiced longer. "You always—I mean—we used to go together."

"But you see—" Julian leaned back in his chair, not turning his head. The brilliant ceiling light struck across the deep line between his brows. "I'd be no use." A muscle in his cheek twitched. "Samuels measured me up yesterday."

"I could describe them to you." (Beatrice could see them, going down the steps into Samuels' shop, she could hear their gay arguing. That's for a bookie at the races, Bee, not for a sober scientist! If Julian would only go with her this morning!)

"I'll just have to trust your judgment." Julian's hand moved on the typewriter, and the carriage jumped. He bent forward, his long fingers arched, and slowly tapped the roller back into place. "I can't stand there like a ninny while you talk about hairlines and invisible checks! Let Samuels pick it out, if you don't want to! He'll palm off something he can't sell."

"Of course I'll do it," said Beatrice, hastily. She stared a moment longer before she closed the door.

It's just an errand, she thought, walking along the Avenue, her head ducked forward a trifle, an errand he might have asked anyone to do. But why had he cried out so at her insistence that he come? And in Samuels' small shop, listening to Samuels explain the superlative value of each length of goods he opened and draped in folds with stubby fingers, Beatrice had a strange, stinging flash: like the moment of regaining consciousness, when the self is like a glove turned inside

out, exposed directly to impact, the impervious surface of egoism useless. Julian had been unwilling to come! He would have none of this sentimental journey to a past that was done for. The same shop, he had said, the same smell.

"No, not brown, Mr. Samuels. His hair has too much gray. Not that tweed. Too sporty." He had remembered well enough yesterday, when Samuels fitted his tape measure about shoulders, chest, thighs, and jotted down his row of figures. Fine and flat, a stomach to be proud of, Samuels would say, the tape measure dangling from his mouth. Dear God, all the things they had laughed at! But Julian had stopped laughing, he had stopped living, he had stopped loving! Now he was alive again, and she—

"He's lost weight," said Samuels, bending over his shelves, lifting out another pile of fabrics. "Most men puts it on, he should feel lucky. Trouble with his eyes, maybe, but we all have troubles. Mine is indigestion, very bad. And nerves. Now this piece. See yourself the quality in this piece." He was eyeing Beatrice approvingly. "Nice vorkmanship," he said, a forefinger on her cuff. "That cost you money, yes?"

"I'm a working woman now," said Beatrice. I've got to get out of here, she thought. I can't stand it. "There, that's possible, that one."

Samuels carried the bolt to the window, he draped folds over his arm. Gray, not too light, with a hint of

barred pattern in darker threads, hard-surfaced, it would tailor well, it would keep its shape, it would be good for traveling. "Beautiful goods," murmured Samuels devoutly. "Tell your husband he should stop in tomorrow, I will be ready. Long ago he should have come to me, that suit he was wearing!"

Beatrice pulled on her gloves. "You know how he is about clothes," she said, and then went quickly out of the shop, up the steps to the street before Samuels remembered what he used to say, and repeated it. Julian would forget an appointment for a fitting, and Samuels would telephone. She could hear his sad, reflective voice, with its accent. "Such a man with his mind full of intellectu'l matters, that is why he is lucky when he has a wife."

Beatrice started at a determined pace through the long crosstown block toward Broadway. She must walk off this mood before she reached Agatha's. At a word this ache behind her eyes would be distilled in tears. The easy rhythm of her usual walk was gone; her head drooped, her shoulders drooped, her body twisted a little sidewise at the hips, there was in her light tread a growing indecision. At the Broadway corner the south wind pushed at her, the morning sunlight was bright on windows and sharp-angled buildings down the opposite side of the street. A taxi cruising past slowed, the driver peering at her, his hand swinging back toward the handle of the door in invitation. She would

telephone Agatha she had to work on the program, she'd come in before dinner. By that time this sentimental rendezvous with—not death, just Samuels!—would be ridden down under the wheels of the day. She stepped into the cab before she knew she had made a decision, and gave the address of her office. The driver tipped down the meter flag, they waited at the crossing for the traffic light to flash green. I'm running away again, thought Beatrice. Because I know Agatha has talked with Julian. As the cab moved, she leaned forward, speaking quickly. "I'm sorry, I just remembered, I have to go first to this other place." She had to repeat the address for him. Ridiculous to take a cab for so few blocks. She couldn't change her mind again, or he'd know she was crazy. Anyway the masseuse would be with Agatha, Beatrice would be sure to leave first. The driver and the moving cab held her to this decision. At the apartment house she tipped the man a quarter, and he said, "You going to that first address? I could wait."

(If she said to Agatha, I've a cab waiting—) "I don't know how long I'll be here."

"I could wait," he repeated. "First job I've had today. 'Sall right, the meter ain't running."

"If someone comes along, don't wait for me."

Minnie admitted her, without enthusiasm. "Your mother's in her study," she said. "First time I've had a chance to vacuum her rugs since she came home."

"Where's Miss Lind?"

"All I know is she didn't come yet."

"Mother's not trying to work, is she?" Beatrice stepped back toward the door. "Perhaps I shouldn't interrupt her."

"I wouldn't put it past her." Minnie sniffed disapproval of able-bodied people like Beatrice and Humbert who couldn't see to it that Agatha didn't have to slave for them.

Down the hall the study door shot open, and Agatha stood there, a negligee of sage green satin fluttering as if she had moved quickly.

"I thought I heard you, Bee," she said. "You weren't skipping off?"

Beatrice went toward her. "I didn't know just what to do," she said. "I never dare interrupt when you have that door shut." She kissed her mother's cheek quickly. "What a sweet dressing gown! It's new, isn't it?"

"I just shut out Minnie and her rampaging vacuum cleaner," Agatha touched the satin folds over her throat. "I still lose my breath when I get up too suddenly," she said. "It is pretty, isn't it? Humbert brought it last night. You know, it's the first time he ever brought me a real present. Oh, handkerchiefs at Christmas, the things you have to do."

"We-ell." Beatrice hesitated. She wanted to say Fear the Greeks! but Agatha looked so pleased. Since

the accident she had had a reticence about Humbert. I can't say wait till you're quite well again, and see!

Agatha smiled at her, a little quirk at a corner of her lips. "Don't think he's been up to something!" she said. "He's a reformed character—for the present." She went slowly back to the chair behind the flat desk, trailing the satin; she moved with a deliberate caution, this business of getting about under her own power being a habit which she had not quite enough vitality to recapture. The russet hair curled at the base of her small head, above the round flat line of green satin her throat looked defenseless, like a child's. "Shut the door before Minnie begins her racket." She gave a little sigh as she seated herself, and Beatrice, pulling off her gloves, moving reluctantly toward a chair at the desk corner, thought, here we are again, she's arranged this on purpose.

"You were at work," she said, looking at the pages of manuscript which littered the desk, the gaping drawers of the filing cabinet.

Agatha leaned forward and with her left hand began to shuffle the pages together. "I was just amusing myself," she said. "Looking over some old stuff. It's a book I started last fall. Some of it's not bad. But I'm not going to touch it."

"I should hope not, until you're really strong again."

"I can use that for an excuse." Agatha brushed aside the papers. Her eyes, as she lifted them to Beatrice,

looked very dark under the heavy lashes, almost black. "It's an experiment worth trying."

"I can let you have money, of course," said Beatrice. The green draperies at the windows made a pleasant background for her mother. She would look at them, keep her face quiet and bland, pretending that she had no notion that Agatha was moving with determination upon her.

"No, thank you."

"Humbert can't keep you in the style to which you are accustomed."

"It's something, isn't it, if he keeps me at all?" Agatha laid her right hand on the desk, beside the left. The cuff into which the full sleeve was gathered fitted tightly about that right wrist, but only in contrast with the other hand did the slight overplumpness show. "Or if we keep each other." She smiled at Beatrice, her intonation altering the meaning of *keep*. She picked up a pencil, holding it as she always had between the forefinger and the middle finger, moving it in small circles. "They still aren't quite mates." She watched the pencil. "But you see I can use it. I could write now. I'm strong enough. But Humbert isn't. It's taken me a long time to admit this." The pencil slipped from her fingers, and she drew her hands down to her lap, out of sight beneath the desk. An almost imperceptible ripple on the surface of the satin suggested that the fingers still were in motion, and Beatrice felt a sudden pride in her so

strong and tender that it ached. She had been so valiant, working to regain the use of that hand and arm. Only yesterday she had said, laughing, "I'll probably diddle my fingers the rest of my life, I've kept at it so steadily." It had been a kind of miracle the way she had pulled herself up, after the apathy of the first weeks.

"Why should you sacrifice yourself for him?" Beatrice cried out, the obverse of her pride in Agatha being her old dislike for Humbert. "How long do you expect him—"

"Don't talk that way!" Agatha spoke incisively, brilliance like sun on snow flickering across her face. For a moment Beatrice was a child, shrinking under rebuke. Then Agatha smiled. "There's no sacrifice in my not working," she said, humorously. "It's not as if I were a genius. It was just a job I did fairly well, writing. Now I'll try another. I can always go back to writing if I don't pull this off. Julian told me, a long time ago, that Humbert was just showing me he was quite a man. I couldn't see it then. I hadn't left him many ways to show it—ways that he could like. You know, Bee, I was sorry I hadn't died. I expected to, and I was disappointed. I'm ashamed of that. I didn't know enough to die. But I'm learning."

"You don't expect Humbert to—to change his spots, at his age?"

"No." Agatha shook her head slowly. "The change

is just that I've moved into a different place, relatively speaking."

"I never expected to hear you putting women back into the home because men can't stand it if they aren't lords and masters."

"I'm not talking about women and men. I'm talking about Humbert and me."

"But you mean me, too, and Julian!" Beatrice was trembling, her hands pressed together, the palms cold and damp. "That's why you've said all this. Julian's been here, I know. You think I ought to go with him to Ohio. It's not a question of my work. Julian doesn't know or care what I do. He didn't say he wished me to go, did he? Why should you blame me?"

"Aren't you putting on a coat I haven't cut for you? If I blamed you for anything, I think it would be that you couldn't hold a man like Julian. After all, he certainly intended to love you all his life. He's that kind of man, and there aren't too many of them. But what he came here for was to talk about Leslie. She's being stubborn about next year. He doesn't want her with him."

"Oh, no," said Beatrice. "She must go to a good preparatory school. I've told her I'd send her."

"Because, he said, it would remind her too constantly of the separation, and he doesn't want her bitter against you."

Beatrice twisted in her chair, pressing her shoulder

against the back, turning her face away from l mother. Her heart whirred crazily, as if a spring h broken.

"Of course, she's devoted to him. But it would be wise to let her take your place that way." Agath voice was firm and practical. "When she comes to s me, I'll try to persuade her."

(All neatly arranged. Julian was sending Leslie see Agatha.) "She can't decide such matters for h self. She's only a child."

"She's a nice child. She doesn't like to be coerce any more than the rest of us. It might be easier to ta her around if I knew what your plans were." Agatl said that quietly, and then was silent.

Ah, they were aligned against her, all of them! T whirring in her breast was a physical pain. She want to cry out, I have no plans, I am being whirled along, only wanted to be happy, is that so terrible? But ca tion stiffened her tongue. Easier to make confession a stranger than to Agatha. A stranger would list with interest, he would see the picture as she drew i Agatha would listen with an attitude of judgment, sl would line up whatever Beatrice said beside what sl knew of her daughter, more than that, beside her n tion of how Beatrice should conduct herself. Leave m alone, what if I once lay curled in the darkness of you womb, I am separate now, I am apart from you. Tha was Leslie, too! Beatrice had a quick, fantastic imag

a mother sitting with a basket piled with all she could collect of her children's secrets, their desires, their impulses, looking them over, holding them to the light, thrusting a hand down to the heel, clucking at weak frayed spots, at holes, at stains, setting to work, her shining needle moving in and out, to repair the damage she had found.

Beatrice turned her head toward her mother. Agatha didn't look much like that image, except for the quiet alertness of her eyes.

"Whatever you're up to," Agatha cocked a finger at her, "you don't look as if it agreed with you."

"I've been working like the devil," said Beatrice.

"But you lapped that up like cream at first. What's turned it sour, Bee? You know I don't wish to pry into your affairs—but I'm rather fond of you."

"I'm all right. I didn't sleep too well, that always spoils my beauty." Beatrice rose quickly, smoothing down her jacket, slapping her gloves against the palm of her hand. "I must get to the office, I've a mass of work." She started toward the door.

"Maybe you'd sleep better if you'd talk."

Beatrice spun on her heel. "How would it make you feel—" The words rushed through the brittle defense her caution had erected—"if you were left outside everything? I didn't know what Julian was doing. I heard from a stranger— All I know of what he intends to do I hear from you—"

"Why should that surprise you?"

"You mean because I've had so little time for him? If I'd sat all day and all night in the apartment it would have made no difference, he wouldn't have come near me! I had to go to work, you know that, we had to have money!" (I should have gone before this started, thought Beatrice, when I saw Agatha meant to get at me, I should have gone then!)

"Did you have to fall in love, too?"

The question dropped like a stone through confused, eddying feelings, dropped to the bottom of Beatrice's consciousness and lay there, cold and heavy.

"I can't help it if I do make you angry," went on Agatha. "I can't see you lose Julian—and Leslie, too —without lifting a word against it. I don't know who the man is, unless it's that Blair you talked a good deal about when you began your broadcasting. I don't think much of his effect on you. I'm not even sure you are in love. You'd enjoy having him make a lot of you. I don't think much of him, either, poaching on posted ground. He must know you have a husband and a daughter."

"Oh, come, Agatha!" Beatrice was shrilly flippant. "You get around a little! Why, you were thinking of Reno, yourself."

"That's nothing to my credit," said Agatha. "And it certainly didn't give you the idea!"

"No. I just meant poaching's a common outdoor

sport these days. You needn't criticize my young man for that."

"It doesn't promise well for your future."

"Who cares about the future? Now is when I live."

"You sound like a baby—or a fool."

"Call me names if you like!" Beatrice felt blood pound in her temples, burn in her throat and face. "All this is beside the point, isn't it? Julian's through with me, he has no need for me, he's proved it now. He wouldn't care if I had a dozen lovers! Sheppard has nothing to do—" Tears were in her throat, choking her.

"You've told yourself that so often you almost believe it, don't you? I begin to see what's wrong with you, my poor Bee." Agatha drew her chair nearer the desk, resting on her left elbow, her hand curved under her full breast. She spoke with a soft, quick earnestness, her sharpness gone. "You've run so fast trying to escape that you've lost your wind. You can't run any farther, and something's catching up with you at last. It overtakes you in your sleep. Our sins always creep out of hiding then, in queer disguises, and pick our brains and hearts to shreds. You failed on your job. You met misfortune and you quit. You didn't help Julian come back."

Beatrice was trembling, in tremors that started at her knees and crawled through her flesh up into the pit

of her body, crawled there like lizards small and sluggish.

"I wonder if you ever really loved him, or if you are capable of love." Agatha's hand moved up to her chin, a finger touched her lip as she spoke. "You like to please people superficially. As long as they admire you, pet you, you respond delightfully. But if they make deeper demands upon you, off you skip. Julian stopped petting you, making love nicely to you, he'd always taken care of you and suddenly he couldn't. I understand now how he had to hide away. He had to remake everything."

Beatrice held her arms tight against her body, trying to quiet the crawling lizards. "He didn't want me," she said. "He wouldn't let me do things for him. He wouldn't even touch me!"

"He never needed you more. Not you, exactly, but a woman wise and tender enough to wait. But you transferred your interest, your emotion to other things. Pleasant, flattering things. I tell you, Bee, you have to do a lot of work on love. It doesn't get along by itself. Creative work. You brood and wait and work— You've been one of the takers. I have been, too. That's how I know."

"All right." Beatrice tipped back her head, holding her eyelids high, rejecting the tears that burned behind her eyes. "I wasn't the right woman. I'm too shallow, too light, too selfish. I admit it. I admit everything.

So what? I might as well go where nothing more is asked of me, in me. Sheppard would be bored to extinction if I pretended to be fine and noble."

"You can't escape the bitterness of failure by boasting of your weakness," said Agatha, drily. "Thank God you aren't happy! That's your only chance to—well, it sounds queer, but it's the only way I know to say it—to save your soul."

"You sound like a line in one of Leslie's poems," said Beatrice. "She writes about 'crushed with sin we rise—' Only she crossed out 'to save our soul.'" She drew a long, difficult breath. This was too like her recurring nightmare, in which she tried frantically to clothe herself and every phrase fell into rags, leaving her naked. In the dream she had wrapped Julian's coat about her. That was amusing. "Happy?" she said, shrilly. "A ridiculous word, a child skipping rope! Did you expect me to be delighted at this—this exposé of me? The only reason I've been wretched is that I've tried too hard to do what I should. It's humiliating to find that I needn't have tried. I might have gone with Sheppard months ago. Julian doesn't want me."

"Why should he?" Agatha struck her fist against the desk, loose sheets of paper rustled. "Are you complaining that he's not on his knees?"

"No." Beatrice looked at her mother. Even the spurt of anger could not warm her, could not stir a response in her emptiness. But the trembling had

stopped, she had her voice under control now. "What good does it do anyone if I feel regret or remorse or any of those backward-looking torments? What's done is done. Just like going on the air with no chance for rehearsal, isn't it? You fumble your lines, you stutter, maybe you don't even know you're on. When your hour is over, it's over, and you don't get it back." She shrugged and turned toward the door.

"The difference—" Agatha pushed back her chair. Beatrice, her hand on the doorknob, heard the brush of satin over the rug as Agatha moved toward her. "The difference is that you never get off the air in this job of living. It's a continuous performance. Bee, dear." Beatrice held herself rigid as a hand touched her arm. "I'm sorry if I've said too much. I do, when I get started. Just when you've been doing so much for me, too."

Outside the room a bell rang, and Minnie went along the hall. Beatrice turned swiftly toward Agatha. "It's all said, isn't it? Just as you planned. Here's Miss Lind, late by request. I'm not worth so much trouble." Their eyes met, a baffling, bright hostility in Beatrice's, a shadow of inquiring disappointment in Agatha's. Then Beatrice opened the door.

Miss Lind, laying her hat and coat on the carved settle, gave Beatrice a shy smile. Beatrice told her good morning cordially, waved back at Agatha, caught a sardonic glance which Minnie sent over her shoulder as

she vanished into the kitchen. Minnie couldn't have heard them, thought Beatrice, as she waited for the elevator; she was no keyhole listener. Just the way her face looked.

The taxi had not waited. She could find one on Broadway. If only she had gone directly to the office! Then tonight, tomorrow, Agatha would have made her speech. Beatrice climbed the hill, her heels defiant on the cement walk, her body arched forward, hurrying, hurrying away. She looked incredulously at the jeweler's clock. Could all that be said in so short a time? She sat erect in the corner of the cab, as it wheeled through the side street toward the Park. I'll admit it's all true, she said. What more do you want? If that's the way I am, that's the way I am. I'll send a wire to Sheppard. I'll say I'm coming, darling. She tried to imagine him beside her in the cab, to feel his lips come down on hers, but the phantasy had no life, the image of his face was only cardboard. No, that's not the way, she said, and wondered what she meant. She closed her eyes, and suddenly she relaxed, and the movement of the cab, carrying her forward, became part of a larger, mysterious movement to which she yielded herself. No more struggle, no more flight. Through her small, smooth bones, through her soft flesh pricked the sharp, acid-pungent germinating shoot of knowledge. She knew the subtle, devious ways in which she had been inadequate to Julian's need. She knew them. There was,

in this ultimate admission, an extraordinary peace, a giving up. The only chance to save your soul, Agatha had said. Soul, character, what was the force that ate your heart out if you tried to deny it? Why did you have to measure up or whirl forever in confusion like a withered leaf? Habit, convention, an attitude put over on you in infancy. Sheppard's phrases. When she struck them, they gave forth no ring, they were cracked, split. The taxi swung along the Park Drive—like skating, she had said, months ago. She opened her eyes, and saw forsythia in points of yellow along curved branches. She had lost Julian. Springs ago. She closed her eyes again, and saw this new self of hers, like a child just born, ugly, creased, wriggling, but breathing. She could strangle it with a thumb and finger pressed about its weak gullet, she could smother it under her hand, she could walk off and leave it on a doorstep. Now what am I going to do with you, she thought, interfering with all my plans? I don't know how to bring you up! I should have found you years ago. Thirty-seven's pretty old. (Hurry, hurry, she had told herself, you'll soon be too old for love, for the gay, amusing things in the world.)

She remembered a night when Julian had come to her room, fumbling along the wall to reach her. He had spoken her name, a whisper, imploring her for comfort, aid, a hand in his blackness. She had pretended that she slept; she had thought, I cannot bear it, another night

with his despair! He had stood there until she set her teeth into her lips to keep from screaming, and then had felt his way back to the door. She had turned her face against the pillow and cried for a long time. But he had not come again. He had known her sleep was pretense, and rejection.

It was queer that admission, encounter with herself had this core of peace which all her feverish evasion had lacked. When you at last came crashing through all your pretenses, your evasions, you had solid ground under your feet, however low you stood; you no longer had the secret, devouring fear that you would some day fall.

The taxi stopped, and Beatrice sat forward, opening her purse. She'd put all this aside until tonight. Wind herself up, go through the motions, Beatrice Downing in her Woman's Page of the Air. As she paid the driver and stepped out, she was thinking, suppose I said to Julian, look, I'll give up the broadcasting, that would prove something, wouldn't it? Then, as the elevator starter greeted her, as the car shot upward with her, she felt her thought double on its tracks and confront her. Dear God, another attempt at escape, even in a gesture of atonement! Because the situation was entangled now, with Sheppard, with Hollister, with Loftus, because the glib success of the first days had disappeared. She went hastily down the hall, setting her heels sharply on this new evidence of deviousness. The

door of her office was locked. Frowning, she found the key and let herself in. On top of a pile of letters was a note from Mary Timmer, secretary. "Have gone to library for items. Hollister's got a sore throat so he croaks like a hinge. Have to fill in fifteen lines. M.T." Good girl, Mary. Of course she liked making up errands; she felt more impressive on the wing than pounding her typewriter alone here in the office, but she took the program most seriously. Beside the letters sat the square shiny florist's box with its silver cord. Beatrice swung it up, one finger under the cord, and dropped it on the wide window sill. She'd wear it, even the engineer had said, "Hey, where's the posy?" when she had, the day Sheppard left, thrown it into the waste basket. But she'd be buying them for herself soon! She caught the familiar odor—through the pasteboard, or clinging to her jacket—and wrinkled her nose. Cloying-sweet, who had used scent to cover corruption? But she must go over her script, Mary'd have to make fresh copies, omitting Hollister, thank God, that was a break for a day at least. How should she explain his absence? If only he had sprayed in time, now maybe—but he couldn't spray with *Très Joli,* and she wasn't asked to advertise Vel or Ricks.

She leaned against the corner of the desk, flipping the letters one by one from the pile. Fan mail, strange handwriting, pencil scrawls, violet ink, Mary had sifted out circulars. The thing was to count and classify,

Mary had a neat graph sheet to record the progress. The telephone made her start, she reached it without rising, and at the drawled, "Well, there you are at last!" she huddled forward, bracing a heel against the floor. "I began to think you'd given up business. Are you alone there?"

"Why, it's Sheppard in person!" Beatrice flung out the words with brittle gaiety. She had forgotten the quality of Sheppard's voice, the trick he had of pause and emphasis which gave a persuasive, insinuative overtone to casual phrases. "Back from the open spaces! Did you have a nice, triumphing time?"

"I'm coming up, Beatrice. You are alone, aren't you?"

"I just got in, I'm busy as hell."

"Yes? I just got in, too. I want to see if the old landmarks are still the same." A click, and then silence. Beatrice replaced the telephone, pleased that her fingers were so steady. Sheppard would light a cigarette, he would stroll out of his office, the elevator would climb with him, in a moment he would turn the handle of the door. Just this morning she had thought today he may come back. It might as well be today as any day. If I give him up, I shall be utterly alone. Are you alone, he had asked, and his voice wound itself with subversive mockery around her weak and scarcely breathing recognition of herself. He would expect nothing of me, she thought: not even fidelity. He would demand a

great deal—even those few words in his voice had keyed her to the artificial glitter he desired. Exciting, obliterating. An imitation of life. Perhaps that was all she could take. It was better than loneliness, a posturing to hide the pit over which they danced.

When the door opened, Beatrice still leaned against the desk, half sitting, half standing. As Sheppard stepped in, her hands closed over the smooth, rounded edge of the heavy wood. For a moment they faced each other, Sheppard staring, his head thrust forward, eyelids folded back until a rim of white showed around the dark iris of his prominent eyes. Then he moved toward her.

"It must be your eyebrows," he said. "If you'd plucked them, I might never have fallen for you. Damn it, I've tried to wipe you out with a couple of more willing women, and it's no use!" He stood beside her, truculent, aggressive, a kind of exaggeration in his manner, in his staring eyes, in the way he moved his lips around his words, even, thought Beatrice, as she leaned backward from him, in the somewhat loud black and white of the suit he wore. "No, it's not exactly the eyebrows. You know, your face is done with a soft-focus camera, that's it. Most women have hard, sharp features, all lines and angles, with no dimension. Yours is soft, blurred, feminine, always that suffusion of emotion— Here, take off your silly hat!" He gave it an expert twitch, and tossed it behind her on the desk.

"Soft focus, hair and all, except when you screw it up like that. You aren't still angry, after missing me all this time?"

"No. I'm not angry." Beatrice twisted away from him, leaning hard against her hand. Just his line with women, deliberate, flattering, the tactics he had used at first. How I turned and preened myself, saying here I am, tell me more! It is still pleasant!

"Listen, Beatrice. I have a plan for us. I've been too damned considerate and patient, that's the trouble. You need to be bullied, don't you?" His hand closed over her knee, the fingers hard. "I'm going back to the Coast, I lined up a damned good job, pre-work on a picture, I'll tell you all about that. You're flying to Chicago tomorrow with me, we'll have a night there, I'll go on to Reno, drop you off there, and then pick you up in six weeks. How's that?"

Beatrice slid away from his hand, and stood up. "I'm supposed to have a job here," she said, slowly. "If nothing else. Or don't you think even a job's an obligation?"

"Oh, that! It's served its purpose. It took you out of—where were you, the kitchen? It made quite a different gal of you, with, shall we say, my help. Hollister can carry on. I saw him last night; he's just coddling himself. He'll be back tomorrow. You could go on writing the stuff if you want something to play with."

"Nothing matters, does it?" Beatrice looked at him,

and curiously his staring eyes, the way he mouthed his words seemed like a mask behind which the mummer capered. "Nothing. Well, it won't matter to you—not very much—not very long—if I don't go. Not now, not ever."

Sheppard thrust his hands into his pockets, he jerked his head forward, his eyelids thickening. "What is this?" he asked. "There's a point beyond which this coy, female flight loses its charm."

"I'm not being coy." (Had she thought it would be terrible to give him up? That she would shrink under that arrogant, demanding gaze, would feel the feverish need to avoid his ridicule, to act the part as he liked it?) "It's over, that's all. It's ended."

"Is it jealousy?" Sheppard watched her closely. "Some fool told you about the Cameron woman? I didn't know she was going West when I did. You still have a provincial streak, haven't you?"

"In spite of all your efforts." Beatrice nodded. "That's it, perhaps. No, not jealousy. I didn't hear about your women. Except from you. I won't tell you what happened. It wouldn't make sense to you. But we're all through. Don't you feel it?" (He's unreal, she thought, unreal and artificial. His power over me was my own desire for unreality, for destruction.)

"I should have taken you last February," said Sheppard, harshly. "I thought it more amusing to see you

outgrow your little bourgeois background and come all the way yourself."

"Think of the time I wasted on that woman!" Beatrice mocked at him lightly. (See, you can't touch me, I no longer scramble humiliatingly to put up the hard, wanton front you thought you were molding!)

"You've stood me off before, but we both knew you didn't mean a word of it."

"And now," said Beatrice, still lightly, "we both know—"

"You haven't by any chance been stringing me along because I was useful, have you? Building you up—By Jesus, is that it?" His face was close to hers, threatening, distorted, and Beatrice, looking up, startled, had for a moment more comprehension of him than she had ever had before. Under his rejection, his denial, his loud assertiveness, lay insecurity; he shouted to drown out silence, his pose was armor made of papier-mâché to cover emptiness, his denial first of all was of himself.

"You know I'm not that smart," she said, "surely you know that about me."

"You look ingenuous enough—but you've—" He shrugged. "Oh, hell, it's all cold now. I suspected it the day I left."

"Now you just wish you'd told me first, don't you?" Beatrice stepped backward around the desk, slid into the chair. Her knees had a dismaying quaver, she must

keep this casual to the last word! "Never mind, in a day or two you'll believe it was you who threw me down!"

"I won't come back another time, you know."

"I know."

Two strides took him to the door. As he turned the knob he glowered over his shoulder. "I didn't want to get married again, anyway," he said, and slammed the door.

Beatrice stared at the door, at letters of her name in heavy black on the frosted glass, inverted, backwards. Like a child she tried to say them, to make a new name, and suddenly she sat forward, opening a drawer of the desk, taking out typed sheets of script. That was too easy, she thought, and felt humiliation run over her skin, prickle in her throat. What had happened to her grand passion? She couldn't even make a noble gesture of giving up love, could she? In a way Sheppard had hit near the truth; he had been useful, building her up. Not in the way he meant, venal, calculating. But she hadn't hurt him. Nicked his vanity a little, nothing more.

She picked up a pencil, and bent over the script. Check out Hollister's lines, smooth over the gaps, she couldn't do much until Mary Timmer came with fresh lines. She would work hard on this job, that was all she had left, wasn't it? She had started it with no help from Sheppard, even if he had added flourishes later.

She had been so harried and distraught these past weeks— The pencil drew a line of triangles along the margin, and stopped. Why, thought Beatrice, I didn't start this work myself, Agatha arranged it for me. I've been bolstered, boosted, carried— Firm ground under her feet, how ever low she stood! Well, little, pindling weak creature, where do you go from here? The words were a shout in her brain. Sit down and mourn, or stand up and try to walk? What had Agatha said, "You never get off the air in this job of living, it's a continuous performance." If it looked rather bleak—

At a sound in the corridor, Beatrice glanced toward the door. Against the opaque glass was the shadow of Timmer's peaked hat. She picked up the manuscript, Mary rushed in, her angular, thin body breathless and agitated.

"I thought I'd never get back, we've got so much to do!"

Beatrice nodded, her face composed. "I'm just running over this. Pull up your chair."

That evening Beatrice walked slowly along Broadway. She had telephoned that she would be detained, and Leslie's, "Yes, Mother," conveyed no surprise. She couldn't sit at the table with Julian, impersonal, polite, despising her—or had he even that liveliness of feeling toward her? She had tried to plan what she would say to him, but phrases of apology, of humility,

had a mawkish, inept sound. If only she could go away for a few days, until she had adjusted herself— But it seemed imperative to talk with Julian now, at once, before she lost the clear shock of discovery. In a few days she might (this she thought with grimness) have persuaded herself she'd been pretty fine after all! She postponed the hour of her homecoming, riding up on a bus, dining alone in a small restaurant, walking slowly, staring into windows. She might stop at Agatha's. Agatha would be worried after her broadside of the morning, Beatrice could say, "Look, you've cracked me all up, now what do I do?" Lean on your mother, will you? She went into a florist's shop, the windows full of spring flowers, the cool air inside the shop sweet with narcissus, pungent with the dark-pollen scent of tulips. She selected a white bowl with scarlet tulips, she wrote a card, "In memory of the death of a Heel," tore it in bits, wrote on another, "Thanks, B."

She stood a moment on the corner, waiting for traffic. Along the dim, dingy street came two young figures, arm close in arm. They stepped down from the curb, and stood there, near Beatrice. Young, bareheaded, shabby, caught for the instant in the timelessness of emotion. The girl's cheap coat, brown and yellow plaid, strained over her uplifted, pregnant body, her hair was tied back with a bit of ribbon from a small face; the boy's lumber jacket was unbuttoned at the

throat, he held his dark, curly head well up, he carried a tin lunch box. He kissed the girl, and as he started toward the subway kiosk, she gave a little murmur, and he turned again. She laid her cheek into the hollow of his throat, her eyelids brushing shut, just for an instant, and then she was running back toward some shabby room in the dark street, and he went striding toward the subway. They might have been alone in all the world. Beatrice walked on, seeing again that gesture of the girl's, tender, selfless, profoundly instinct with her need. They're young, she cried out to herself, they're young!

When she came to the door of the apartment, she stood a moment, turning the key in her fingers. Julian was home, she could hear the radio, chamber music; as she opened the door the bass viol began its emphatic underlining of the theme. She closed the door softly, and listened. She didn't know the music, but it seemed to complete the gesture which that girl had made, and Beatrice moved briskly before a wave of pity, of nostalgia for all bright beginnings washed over her head. She must be quiet, cool, practical. It was as well that Julian couldn't possibly have any further use for her; it would be too difficult to go on living in the same house with a man who knew your exact stature.

The kitchen door gaped on darkness. Pansy had gone, then. Beatrice tossed aside her hat and gloves. Leslie's door, too, was ajar, with no light. She might

be sitting beside her father, her books spread on the table. If she is, thought Beatrice, that will be a sign that I can just crawl off to bed. (Coward, you hope she's there!) Like starting a cold motor, the way she had to hold her mind hard on her intention until she had her feet moving toward the entrance to the living room.

Julian was there alone, leaning back in his armchair; he was filling a pipe, thumbing grains of tobacco slowly from the leather pouch into the bowl, his long fingers careful, accurate. He stretched his hand toward the small table beside him, and laid down the pouch. Then he ran his fingers over the front of his corduroy dressing gown, brushing away bits of tobacco. He turned his head, his face quickening from its quiet absorption. "Is that you, Leslie? Back so soon?"

"It's me, Julian." Beatrice went past him, settling in a corner of the divan. "Don't get up. I'll sit over here. Has Leslie gone out?"

Julian leaned forward to twirl the dial, cutting off the deep notes.

"Don't turn it off," said Beatrice, "if you want to hear it."

"I don't, particularly," he said: "Leslie went back to Greggy's, she'd left her books there this afternoon. Minnie will walk home with her." He smiled. "And that will make her furious. But for all she thinks she's

so grown up, I don't like her wandering around town alone."

"Did Agatha convince her about school?" asked Beatrice. That would do for a start, however clumsy; it said, you see, I know a little about things.

Julian had just broken a match from a paper package; he held it an instant before he moved, and then his forefinger located the strip of sandpaper. "We didn't speak of school at dinner." He lighted the match, his little finger curled under the pipe bowl, he sucked down the flame.

Beatrice drew in a quick breath, watching the first spiral of smoke float around his head. He wouldn't pick up that lead.

"I stopped at Samuels' this morning." (Was it only this morning?) "I picked you out an elegant piece, conservative *and* smart."

"Thanks." Julian hitched his chair around a trifle, so that he faced her, and sank back in it, one knee over the other. "Do you know what I was thinking?" His pipe dragged at a corner of his mouth, his smile was a quick grimace. "That was the way I felt about you—when you started to be the breadwinner. I used to grind my teeth till you were safely home. I don't know why I bring it up now, except as a measure of absurdity. I'd fancied myself as a protective male, you see. I did a lot of teeth-grinding first and last, wore 'em right down to the stumps." He grinned, biting at the pipe stem,

and then laid the pipe against the arm of the chair, his hand beating slowly. "I should have cleared out long ago," he said. "I was too sunk to know it. You got a bad bargain, and you made the best of it. I—underestimated your—abilities. You've been patient—and courageous. I just wanted to get this said before we turned to practical matters."

Beatrice shrank back against the cushions, her hands lifted at the wrists, palms out, fending off—what? She stared at Julian. His face was quiet, without mockery, without that bitter intensity of listening which had been like corrosion. The high forehead, the deep sockets, the dark firm jaw—no mockery, no cruelty there! He had learned so well to do without her that he had laid aside not only any present demands, but any memory of what once he might have asked and failed to find. It was the picture she had constructed of herself, wasn't it, until today? Why not take it, crawl behind it, forgetting the humility which had so strange a taste upon her tongue? Her hands crept together, fingers wrenching. That ugly, naked, scarcely breathing self—thumbs hard over the gullet and it would cease to breathe! She could say, "Thank you, Julian," gravely, sweetly, and, "It hasn't been very easy." Or, "It is all coming out all right, isn't it? You have your work, Leslie can go to school, and—I—" That was what he expected her to say, he had arranged this to save her face! That dream in which she covered herself with

Julian's coat! Before he left her, he was investing her with a covering woven of his own strength.

"Such as the apartment here. You will scarcely wish to keep it."

"You're letting me off easily, aren't you? When you know—I'm just no good." The long breath which she drew filled her with a curious lightness. "You're too generous. I have to tell you—I've stumbled over myself at last. I've been pretty much of a flop. It doesn't do you much good, my finding it out now, but I have to tell you."

Julian's posture altered subtly, although he seemed not to move; a stiff contraction of his relaxed body, knee biting over knee, fist still against the chair. "You mustn't blame yourself," he said, distinctly, "if things didn't work out—as we once expected."

"I walked out on you, and you know it."

"See here, has your mother been talking?"

"It was what they call a still, small voice, Julian. Oh, if you'd just say you despise me, I might feel better!"

"But I don't. I had a spell of hating you. I was eaten up with jealousy— But after all—" He set his feet hard on the floor, and straightened his shoulders, leaning forward in the chair. "Good God, do you think I don't know how impossible it all was? All your lightness, your fragility, your charm dragged into the pit where I wallowed? You had every right to make an-

other life for yourself. Why stir it all up again? I am content now with what I have."

Beatrice felt his words swelling, opening, incredibly bright, quickening, assuaging. His intonation, clear, stern, warned her, as if he said I loved you for your weakness, you have not changed, it was I who changed.

"But what if I am not content," she said, slowly. "I'd like to make it up, a little, if you'd let me. Let me go with you, for a while, at least. I can do small, useful things. Like finding a comfortable place for you to live —like picking out your next suit. Then Leslie would go off willingly to school. I could come back later, if you—"

Julian made a sharp gesture of rejection. "No. No. You're just being—what?—sentimental. Look at your work."

"I'm not running out on that. I talked with the director today. I can go on writing the scripts, and the syndicated paragraphs, and someone else goes on the air—for a while. I give up the show-off part, you see. But I—I'm tired."

"And what—" Julian's mouth was thin, hard, drawn back a little from his teeth. "What about this—Blair?"

Beatrice pressed a hand against her breast where her heart leaped shatteringly. "You knew that—too?" she whispered.

"How could I help knowing?"

"Did Leslie tell you?" Leslie, peering at the taxi in the dark street, chattering to her father—

"Leslie? You told me, your voice, answering him on the 'phone. Did you think me deaf, too? But Leslie—" His fingers pulled at his cheek, ran over his forehead. "That's what she's worried so about."

Beatrice tried to speak, but a kind of panic dried her throat. What could she say? It's over, it's finished. Had she thought she would be let off easily?

"Or will he wait while you play dutiful wife for a few months to ease some little pang you feel—of pity, say, or—" He checked himself abruptly and tried to smile, a mirthless movement of his lips. "I told you not to stir things up."

"But we have stirred them up." Beatrice lifted her head, her face flushed. That flash of violence from Julian meant feeling: she would know what it was! "Listen, Julian. It's as if you'd been away, on a hard journey, and I had been too childish, weak, foolish—oh, call it what you will!—to follow you. You've come back, stronger, wiser. Sheppard Blair was someone I turned to. I hate being alone! I'm afraid of it. I didn't love him. I was—dazzled. He propped me up. You know—one of those sky-rocket affairs. Whiz, zip, exploding stars—and then darkness, a charred stick somewhere. Are you listening? It isn't pity that I feel. Pity, for *you?*"

"What then?"

"Envy."

"Oh, God, if I could only see your face!"

Beatrice got to her feet, stumbling in her haste, and stood beside his chair. "See, Julian!" She seized his wrists and lifted his hands, cold, resistant, and bent her head between them. They were insensible, rigid, for a moment, and then the finger tips moved, soft, delicate, brushing over temples, hair, eyelids, mouth, so lightly they seemed less tangible than thought.

"You are as lovely as ever," he said, and Beatrice scarcely breathed against the finger which lingered in its tracing of her mouth. "I have missed—not seeing you." His hands dropped suddenly, drawing hers down, and she waited, trembling. But before he spoke there was the sound of a key turning in a lock, of a door opening.

Leslie came so quickly down the hall that Beatrice was still standing beside Julian as the girl reached the doorway. She stopped, a quick shutter dropped over some eagerness, some pressing anxiety in her face. She peered at them, her eyes tear-bright, the lower lids swollen, the tip of her small nose pink, her face washed into childishness by crying.

"Hello," said Beatrice. "What's the trouble?"

"Trouble? Trouble? My goodness, I don't know anything about any trouble." She jerked off the handkerchief tied under her chin, and put one knee up to catch the stuffed portfolio as she peeled off her jacket.

"Except I'm tired of everybody treating me like a baby. I had to wait hours for that Minnie, and I could have come home by myself, but she had to finish making sandwiches because they're playing bridge, and I've so much homework I'm just about crazy." The portfolio slipped to the floor, and she stooped for it, dabbing the gay handkerchief at her eyes.

"You better go to bed," said Beatrice. "You can get up early—" (Your tears are a child's, she thought. I cannot bother with them now! Take them to bed, leave us—)

"You know I can't possibly go to bed for hours and hours!" She stood up, her face crimson, her mouth buttoned tight.

"Why not get it off your mind?" asked Julian. He sat forward in his chair, an alertness in the swing of his shoulders and head. "You were glum at dinner, but you had to go back to Greggy's. Come here, Leslie, whatever Greggy said, I put her up to it. Or was it just that she was playing bridge, and couldn't say anything tonight?"

"She had company," said Leslie. She leaned against the side post of the doorway twisting one ankle around the other, bare legs above the crumpled yellow sock soft, childish; under the yellow sweater her breathing was quick and light, like a bird's heart beat. "I think you ought to tell me what you're going to do, instead

of letting me find it out from other people and making me feel so foolish."

Beatrice felt despair heavy on her eyelids.

"What are we going to do?" asked Julian, "that we haven't told you?"

"I had to be sure Greggy meant what she told me this afternoon, that you didn't want me to go with you —next year. She—well, she practically said I'd be a nuisance to you. I wanted to ask her if you honestly said that. She had all these people and I couldn't talk to her and Humbert was making jokes and everything. I just sat there waiting for Minnie. We were just going when a boy came with some tulips for her, and she came out to look at them." Leslie screwed her eyelids tight, and then opened them roundly, staring at Beatrice. "She told me— If you were going all the time, with Father—"

Beatrice made a little rush toward Leslie, she put an arm around the soft, slim waist. "Darling, we weren't holding back on you!" She spoke swiftly and under her words ran a thread of pleading. (See, Julian, let it be true! Julian!) "We've just been talking about it. There were things to arrange. Were you anxious about it? Of course I'm going. Agatha just hoped I was, we hadn't really told her first."

Leslie drew back a little, her body stiffening, and for a moment her face was transparent, mobile, a shimmer

of feeling, doubt, hostility, the relinquishing of fear, the relinquishing of some part of devotion.

"I see," she said. She hugged her portfolio to her breast. "Well, I won't get this done if I don't get at it."

"Now wait a minute," said Julian. "There's something I have been holding back." He got to his feet with an abrupt, decisive movement. "I wasn't sure what I wished to do. I hadn't spoken of it. I thought the Ohio scheme was—well, a good solution. But we don't have to go off there."

We don't have to go. He had said *we*. Beatrice heard little else of what he said. Something about another offer, consulting editor for a publishing house, scientific texts, probably a better future. To him that hath. "It might work out," he said, with no doubt whatever in his voice.

"And you weren't going to tell us?" cried Leslie. "All this fuss, and we just stay here?" She gazed at them with bewilderment at their adult folly, with a shrug she let them both slip away into their adult world, and whirling she ran along the hall and shut herself into her own room.

With the closing of the door, a wry blackness fell across Beatrice, a shadow achingly sad, like the elongated shadows thrown by the sun just as the earth swings fully into light. A curious craving for penance, for punishment, almost a regret that the worst she could fear was not to happen. A shadow thrown by the

brilliance of release, of freedom from self-abasement and fear. Julian had no need of any sacrifice, she could not offer that as proof. Leslie had felt that, too, a child's regret that her phantasy of service was blown away.

"All this fuss," said Julian, "and we just stay here. Are you disappointed, too?" His smile was ironic and tender. He retreated a few steps, locating with his hands the high back of the armchair where he had been sitting, leaning against it. "Here," he repeated, but this time the word was a challenge, and his hands opened, the long fingers curving back from the palms, steady, exultant.