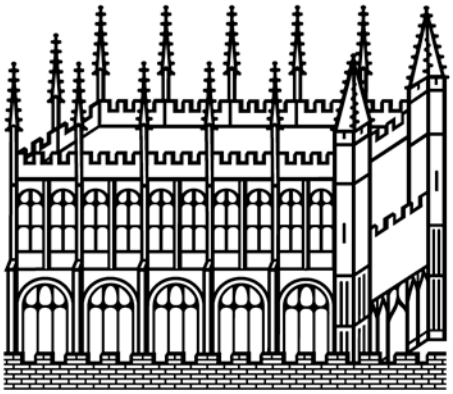

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We Are Incredible

By

Margery Latimer

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By

MARGERY LATIMER

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WE ARE INCREDIBLE

I

Stephen Mitchell

1

The pillars of the house could be seen, the garden walls sloping to the brook, and the trees whose branches swept clumps of white daisies and witches' mist. At dusk the catalpas would fill the lane with scent and later, when the wind rose, there would be sounds of blossoms as they fell, sounds of cattle plunging in the meadow beyond and of the dog lapping water from his pan. As it grew dark the stillness would become deeper until its tone would be full enough to make the sound of wings and hoofs sharp and transitory. Then, again, with the falling of the wind would come that sick, sweet smell of heavy blossoms, of blossoms in grass and trees, whiter than ever before.

And now the scent was upon him and the dark was gathering. He smiled to see that when the change was taking place, when all was unfolding and falling as he had predicted, he had no emotion. It was only when the dog began gulping water that the man felt something delicate inside him tremble and pierce as if it would break through to the life he tried not to remember, to his youth when night after night he had rushed from that house into the garden, when

he had stood near those trees with his shoulders bent back upon the grotesque arms they flung out, his head and throat thick with wonder. He was conscious suddenly that it was his body that brought him back here each night, that in his blood and bones lay some unreasonable demand, utterly mysterious yet mechanical, which took him to this place whether his mind wanted to come or not. He knew that his body had never grown old, that now when seventeen years had passed and his mind had got free of her, deep in his blood and bones pounded the marvelous life of his youth.

Then he laughed. His body, toward which he had learned indulgence, was bound forever to a virgin, a woman years older than himself who was so fastidious she was sterile, so exquisite that she was cruel. Ever now when his mind coolly examined this curious bondage he knew that somewhere inside him was the sheath his youth and his passion had made for her. But had he made it for her? Somehow, it seemed to have been with him always, a precious and a perfect form. He knew that the woman who sometimes nodded to him, masked, evasive, was still unknown to him even though his mind always made her an arid old maid. He knew also that his ears still longed for her voice, for her words which had once cast a haze over everything, a mist of many colors until that happiness

would come into his throat and spread over him, until he would be breathing, hearing and seeing in an incredible harmony which nothing else had ever brought. Even now as he remembered it came. Probably the blossoms, and he crushed one with his foot. But he knew it was from her, that she was near and he drew back into the shadow.

No one came past him but he thought he saw a figure move from the house to the garden, a girl, he decided, and then as the moon beat upon her face and arms bent back against a tree he saw that she was very young. Suddenly the outlines of the house, the garden flooded with light, the girl, all turned to pain, to terror, not only for the time when he, too, had rushed into that garden, but for the sudden consciousness of his perilous separation from life.

The girl came toward him and he saw that her face was dazed and beautiful, that her hair from forehead to neck was a blaze of copper, that her arms were very white and he imagined they smelled faintly of raspberries. He knew that he wanted to feel his body grow numb and his mind grow blank until he could rush down the lane again filled with the old emotion, lost once more in the richer life of his body. Stars would be in him and he would be breathing again in that passionate ecstasy, hearing and seeing, and for days he could walk about in his

bright dream. He turned but the girl had vanished and now the heavy sickness of blossoms rose on the wind until he too walked away. When his foot touched the cement walk he turned. Behind him was a mass of dark, glossy leaves thundering in the wind. No light could be seen, no blossom. His customary hatred of the place when once his feet touched cement smothered him until he reached for his pipe, caught it in his teeth, and cursed.

Ahead were the corner drug store, the post office, and next the church. He glanced at the notice of a special sermon posted in white pasteboard letters: "Shall We Try Everything Once?" Then he crossed the street and went on through the courtyard past the broken, empty benches set in clay. His feet rang out on the walk as if he were the only one in the town, in the world, he thought and a boyish catch came into his breathing. Now there were few trees and the houses, even in the dark, looked bleak. He heard a baby scream and somewhere water was dripping from a hydrant. Then it was still again and empty, with the moon shining hard on clay.

2

He never slept in the morning after eight because at that hour Gloria Fry began practicing on the piano. She was nearly twelve, was small

for her age, and had already played at two recitals. He usually rose with the first chord so that when she reached the measure at which she always broke down he could be taking his bath. During that time the composition had to be played from the beginning five times before she could correct the error and then the error had to be gone over ten times. As he recognized the familiar discord it occurred to him that Gloria now played the corrections as part of the whole.

His breakfast was laid on a wicker table at the far end of the porch overlooking Deva's sand pile. Deva, aged four, and the only delicate member of the Fry family, spent her time while he was breakfasting, with a small scoop trying to throw sand on him. Once he had turned and made what felt like a frightful face at her and she had rushed to the kitchen to tell her mother. He was afraid of children and ill at ease with the entire Fry family but when he thought of moving, of adjusting himself to a new set of horrors and possibly more painful eccentricities he would suddenly give Mrs. Fry four months' rent in advance. For years he had been finding women less and less commendable and now it seemed that he was surrounded by them. At that moment Myrtle Fry came in with his coffee and rolls.

"Good morning, Mr. Mitchell. Did you sleep well?"

"Quite well, thank you." Apparently his tone was never as cold as he intended because Myrtle Fry always sat down.

"Isn't this another beautiful day, though! I hope that coffee's all right. I made it fresh just now because I wouldn't dream of serving you warmed-up coffee. You're not looking so well this morning. I hope nothing's troubling you."

"Nothing," he murmured hastily and turned as some sand hit his shoe. He saw Deva outside in an orange smock, her legs buried in sand, and her hands busy with the little scoop.

"Why, Deva!" shouted the woman. "Don't you know that Mama has to sweep up every bit of this? Shame on you! If you do that again you'll come right in the house and go to bed." She looked at Mitchell searchingly. "I suppose you have a good time every night but really I think you ought to be home and in bed earlier, Mr. Mitchell. Perhaps you think I'm not the one to say this to you but I feel toward you like you was one of my own and I thought I'd better speak to you."

"I'm a bad sleeper," he threw in hastily.

"Yes, I see. Well, I sure am sorry for you. I know what it is to lie awake nights. You can't tell me anything about that. But isn't it wonderful to be alive on such a day as this? And yet there's lots of sickness right in this town. Lots of it. I tell you we ought to be thankful

for what we've got. How about a nice fresh doughnut? No? Well, you certainly are a light eater for a man. Rex just bolts them down."

"For some reason doughnuts have never appealed to me."

"Oh, is that so? Isn't that odd? But Minnie Huggett has the same trouble with them." She shaded her mouth with one hand. "That poor thing can't keep anything on her stomach," she whispered. "She's never had a strong constitution, though. My, I'm so glad I've got my health. I don't know what I'd do if I was one to be ailing all the time. I know one thing, no one would take care of me and I'd have to drag around the best way I could. You bet Rex Fry wouldn't lift his hand to help his wife in the kitchen even if she was dying. Yes, sir, that's Rex Fry for you." She ran her hands through her stiff bobbed hair until it stood out like a brush. "My, I talk to you as if you're one of the family. And I guess you are, Mr. Mitchell."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Fry."

"Mrs. Fry! Say, can't I teach you to call me Myrtle." She opened her mouth and held up her fat hands in amazement. "Mrs. Fry! Goodness, only the iceman calls me that. Well, I wanted to talk something over with you, Mr. Mitchell. I feel that you're one of us and won't

gossip and Rex feels the same way and Gloria and Deva love you like a big brother."

As she bent her head Mitchell compared her warm, coarse skin with Hester Linden's, her fat hands with those fine, austere fingers. Something in him loathed and yet clung to this woman's automatic fertility. "I hope I can help you," he remarked and lighted a cigarette.

"My, you're another one just like Rex—always smoking. I tell him if he had to choose between me and his old pipes and cigars that he'd take them every time." She began breathing in sighs, her hands on her hips, and her eyes looking off into the trees. "If I didn't look on all this as an art I don't know where I'd be. Motherhood and all of it's an art. Well, my mother died just a year ago, no, eleven months, no, eleven months come Friday because I remember I was down on my knees cleaning the refrigerator the day the news came. It was one of the hottest days in July and that left my poor sister all alone except for me here in Beaver Falls. Deva, this is the last time I'm going to speak to you! I mean it! You'll come in the house the next time you throw any sand on my clean floor."

The child suddenly threw away her scoop and jumped up and down, shouting in the manner of her father, "Pipe down! I'm not listening to a word you say."

The woman was gone. There were screams then, terrible cries, and he hurried to his room. For his excessive sensitivity he blamed Hester Linden, for his anger now as the screams rose, for his horror when he knew that he wanted to kill Myrtle Fry, let his hands sink in that thick neck until her face was black. No wonder he had never got free of Hester when he prowled around her place each night in foolish maundering, teasing his body into memories. No wonder he was weak and futile at thirty-one when he had no work and allowed himself no friends. He thought of his plans at sixteen, at eighteen, at twenty. But when he had broken away from her he had been more imprisoned than before, his life held by an impossible dream.

"Mr. Mitchell!"

He hesitated and then he opened the door to Mrs. Fry. The neck of her green crêpe dress was damp with perspiration that rolled from her cheeks. Her clear blue eyes, her mouth, a delicate downward curve, seemed like irrelevant details in the masses of rolling flesh.

"Will you come back to the porch? I don't like to talk here in your room. You never know what people are going to say. I tell you I know the folks here in Beaver Falls, always gossiping and if they can't discover something to talk about then they make it up." On the porch she

sank into a rocker and began fanning herself with the morning paper. "I was telling you about my sister, Dora Weck. When Mama died she came here and went to live with Hester Linden."

At her name the man felt again that deep, involuntary happiness, the curious change in his breathing and his blood, but he looked into the clear eyes of the woman without flinching.

"Dora was engaged to Joe Teeter when she went there and now it's all off. I suppose he isn't good enough after meeting Miss Linden's friends and all but I bet he's worth the whole bunch of them. And he's got a creamery that'll keep her in riches as long as she lives. It's his father's now but he'll get it all some time."

"Is your sister's hair copper-colored?"

"No, red. She's a Weck through and through. Anybody'd recognize it. I'm more from my mother's side, the McConkles. As black as a gypsy, they used to say, and as spirited."

"Isn't her skin unusually white?"

Myrtle Fry examined her own arms. "I guess it is lighter than mine but she don't have the work I have. I guess she'd have red arms, too, if she had to slave all day." She covered her face and began to cry. "Her being the baby and all she never knew what work was—I always had to do it. And now she's got too stuck

up for any of us and I'd say she wasn't good enough for Miss Linden's friends."

"How did she happen to go there?"

"Just saw her on the street, Dora said, and stopped that big car of hers and made her ride home with her. Then the next day she said that Miss Linden wanted her to come there to live. And now she's absolutely changed from the nice girl everyone liked. And it's my fault because I let her go." She wiped her eyes on her dress. "Poor Mama, if she ever knew I'd fail her that way with Dora. I can't sleep nights or anything thinking about it. First thing we know Joe Teeter won't have her and then where'll she be when Miss Linden gets tired of her? She'll have to come back here and sponge off us all the rest of her life. Look at the other girls Miss Linden has taken! None of them ever get married even though she does teach them nice ways and look at the men she's known—they all slink round like they're dead."

"What did you think I could do about it, Mrs. Fry?" he asked stiffly.

"I thought maybe you'd go to Hester Linden and talk up to her and tell her what's what. You don't look to me like a fellow that'd be taken in and I guess you aren't afraid of her. I know people that are scared to talk when they're with her but she's no better than the rest of us even if she has got that big house and all.

That's the way I look at it. Land sakes, how does that make her better? I should say not."

"I think you're the one to speak to her, Mrs. Fry."

"There you go again—Mrs. Fry! I was thinking about it all night. What right have I, Mr. Mitchell, to spoil my sister's life? Here Joe's waiting for her and all and he's a steady fellow and just thinks the world and all of Dora. Look at the people Miss Linden's been interested in before! There's Amy Hemingway, turned down a rich man that would have married her quick as a wink, and now she lives abroad with a lot of foreigners. There's that fellow that went insane and the one that jumped into the canal. What was his name?"

"Addison Bowood."

She got up and began walking heavily around the porch. "Oh, I was crazy to let her go! I know I'll be punished for this—I bet my poor mother knows about it and I promised her I'd take care of Dora for her." She began crying again, wiping her tears away with her arm. "I said to Rex, I said, 'Rex,' I said, 'I can't see anything in Hester Linden to make the men go nutty. She's pretty enough,' I said, 'if you like that type but she's hardly a pick of flesh on her and so quiet, no life in her at all.' "

"How do you feel when you meet her?"

"Just like beating her for the trouble she's

made. Oh, I know all about her charity work and all, but that's on the outside. What do all those poor things go crazy for and commit suicide if she's as good as that inside? No, sir, I know she sets herself way above everyone even though she is always giving. Oh, my poor little sister!"

"I think you ought to go there yourself, Myrtle."

"What if she wouldn't let me see her? They say she's got a maid to open the door and even if she's home she doesn't have to come down if she isn't a mind to. Now if you went, Mr. Mitchell, she wouldn't know but what it was a magazine agent or something."

"On the other hand, it is more natural for you to go, since it's your sister."

"Sure, I know it. Oh, they say she's got everything swell over there, one of those grand pianos and everything swell. Well, I will go! I'll tell her that she can't take my sister away from me and her family. But the only thing that bothers me is that maybe Dora won't have Joe Teeter. She's treated him real mean. But it was Mama's wish, she wanted them to marry, and Dora was devoted to Mama. Not as much as I was, of course, but she took on lots more than we thought to the funeral. Everybody spoke about it. She was white as a sheet and trembling just like this."

"Why don't you go now?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"She's likely to be in her garden now—she has lots of roses."

"Oh, goodness, I've got such a lot to do, that's why. I don't know how I've lived all these years with this load of responsibility on me. Dishes and meals and all. Goodness!"

Mitchell glanced down the short neck to the rolls of flesh over her shoulders and arms, the breasts, the hips, and paused at the ankles which bulged over low slippers. She seemed half conscious of her rotundity, her overripe body with its elephantine slopes and curves, its deep rich tints. She was bound to her food, her few clothes, her ideas of what a wife and mother ought to feel and do, and yet she had life and he had none.

"Mr. Mitchell, you've just got to eat more, that's all there is to it. I was saying to Rex this morning, 'Rex,' I said, 'Mr. Mitchell don't eat enough to keep a bird alive and I'll either have to cut down his bill or make him eat more.' Yes, that's a fact and I'm going to set my foot down if you don't pick up. I promised Miss Puffer I'd have you fat as a turkey before long, but you just don't take any interest in your meals. Oh, that telephone!"

He got his hat and went outside, his mind following Myrtle Fry to Hester Linden's, and

he wondered why he had not offered to go, why he shrank from the thought of that meeting. For years he had gone to her house every night to walk in the little black thicket at the edge of her place, to look into the garden and over the dark slopes of lawn to the house. Suddenly it occurred to him that the face he shaved each morning must look calm to the people he met, serene, with a trace of stoicism around the mouth. Often when he looked in the glass, touched his lips, his cheeks, and then stood back for the whole bleak effect of thin hair and stern chin, it shocked him to know that underneath was the quivering face of his boyhood, the uncertain mouth, too full, too red, the piercing eyes which, as he remembered, seemed to turn in and stab him. He recalled his last glimpse of Hester. He had watched her, a month or two before, pause with one hand on the door of her car, he had heard the familiar, definite tone as she gave directions to the driver, and he saw again the remote look in her eyes, the long, fine fingers of her other hand holding the satin coat which fell to her small feet in their high-heeled slippers. Ten years before she had been no different except that perhaps now she was more beautiful.

He caught a change in his mental images of Hester. To-day they were less severe, less arid, and he noted that Myrtle Fry's antagonism was

stimulating. He hurried on toward the small club where he spent most of his days playing cards. He recalled the group that had been around Hester several years before; Amy, Roland, Addison Bowood, Avery Smith, Mark Johns and himself. He felt when he remembered them the same nausea that had come in the days when each one had considered himself foremost in Hester's affections, when each had jealously told the other experiences he had had which proved that Hester had a particular regard for him which no one else could share.

But why should he feel actual pain, sickness, when he recalled these names? Addison Bowood had jumped into the rankest part of the canal and hadn't been discovered for twenty-four hours. Amy and Ronald had gone to Europe. Avery Smith was in a madhouse. Mark Johns was married. He remembered Mark's bright gold hair, Amy Hemingway's red mouth, the day he and Amy discovered in Plato's Dialogues Hester's philosophy which they had thought was all her own. He laughed as he remembered how they defended her to each other. Then in the evening as they all sat before the fire Amy had become scornful and some delicate thread which bound them together had snapped. He could see Hester now as she had looked at them, poised, evasive, without emotion. He could hear Amy's terrible weep-

ing. He laughed aloud as he remembered that they had discussed the fourth dimension until Amy could control herself. Then, suddenly, he heard the falling of petals in the darkness, the sound of leaves thundering in the wind, and the sick, sweet odor of blossoms flooded him. He walked into the club.

"Hello, Mitchell. Play a game of billiards?"

He shook his head and went on to the small back room where he played cards with a group of cronies who were too old to work. As he took his seat no one looked up but they all mumbled husky greetings. He heard from a larger room at the right, "Yes, you bet she ought to get a term for that. She got a hundred from each of us and Jones bought his wife a new buffet and I've got to buy mine God knows what and then the skunk wasn't pregnant at all!"

"You're late, Mitchell. We need you to liven things up around here."

He looked about at the white beards, the dim eyes, the fingers cupped behind ears, and he was amazed that his low vitality could register even with these. Then as he turned to the cards it was as though Hester Linden had never existed.

3

The Fry dining room was bright with varnish that shone from plate rail, from doors, windows

and floor with a harsh glare. Rex Fry's hair was bright, too, but its glow was less insistent. They sat at dinner. Myrtle Fry wore her orange silk embroidered in what appeared to Mitchell to be beetles, and Deva was in white with stiff ruffles at throat and elbows that made her delicacy almost a malady. Gloria in green with yellow tassels, her slender, wart-infested fingers on the cloth, interrupted anyone who tried to speak.

"And Mr. Mitchell, I tell you I've never in my life met such a woman as Miss Linden. I've seen her before but never like this. Gloria, if I have to speak to you again you'll leave the table—she was so sort of polite and friendly that I didn't feel at home—she was so kind of—oh, I don't know."

"Can't you get at it?" snapped Rex. "What happened?"

"Rex Fry, have I ever tried to tell anything at this table without having you spoil it and trip me up just when I'm getting into things? It's too bad that I can't take my time with a story the way you do. Do you ever hear me stop you right in the middle of something? I guess not! There'd be something doing then. I listen and listen to you grinding out stuff that I've heard a million times and I never say a word. Gloria!"

"Come on, Mitchell, have some more meat!"

"Did you see your sister?" suggested Mitchell.

"Goodness, the flowers that woman's got! My! And she was out in the garden like you said. When I told her what I'd come for she sent in for Dora and then she began to talk so friendly and polite that I couldn't think of a thing to say . . ."

"I'll bet," mumbled Rex.

"Say, Rex Fry, can't I talk in my own home? Do you have to say something mean every time I open my head? Stop! Don't give her any more meat. You'll have her sick and then I'll be up all night. Do I have to send you away from the table, Deva Fry? And now she acts just like Miss Linden, Mr. Mitchell, just as polite and all and I think she looks something like her. I said to her, 'Dora,' I said, 'I've come to take you home with me. We need you with us,' I said, and she stared at me as if she didn't know what I meant. 'Mama,' I said, 'wanted you should marry Joe and he's ready for you so I want the thing settled.' Miss Linden looked at me so serious that I forgot what I'd said. 'Do you think that marriage is the thing for Dora? Is eighteen the . . ."

"Humph!" interrupted Rex. "Is marriage the thing for her? Say, she's lucky if she gets anybody. Next thing and she'll be left high and dry like Miss Linden. Men don't put up

with no high-horse monkey business for very long, I tell you, not for very long. Say, I'm going to skin you if you don't quit that interrupting. Do you hear? Nobody can interrupt or contradict me in my own house while I'm in my right mind. She's lucky if she gets a man, that's all I've got to say, a white-looking thing like her."

"Shame on you! She's as red as I am."

"Red nothing! She hasn't a drop of red blood in her. It's water, and stagnant at that."

"Rex, why, Rex! What will Mr. Mitchell think?"

"Oh, men understand each other and they can thank God for that, can't they, Mitchell?"

"So then I couldn't think of anything to say to Miss Linden and I just . . ."

"Say, get it out! Is Dora going to be on our hands for life or not?"

"Then she said to Dora, 'Do you want to marry Mr. ——' and she couldn't say his name."

"Wouldn't," suggested Mitchell.

"Then Dora said just as haughty, 'I won't marry him,' and Miss Linden said, 'Well, that seems to settle it,' and invited me to look at the flowers. What could I do but look?"

"When we got Dora Weck on our hands an old maid and all you'll wish you hadn't looked so long, I can tell you."

"Say, Rex Fry, listen to me a minute!

Haven't I deprived myself of everything to get *this little* home and to give our children beautiful things?"

"Rot!"

"You can't speak to me that way!"

"Say, for God's sake, is she coming or not?"

"I guess I'll tell you when I get good and ready. The idea of interrupting me every minute! I guess I've got some rights around this place."

"I suppose Dora didn't want to leave?" offered Mitchell.

"I said to her, 'Come on, Dora,' and she pulled away from me as if I was poison and then she said to Miss Linden, 'Do you want me to go?' and Miss Linden drew away and said, 'It is all with you, Dora.' And then Dora was about crying and she said, 'But can't you say you want me to stay?' and Miss Linden didn't make one sound so Dora ran back to the house. 'She'll send you her answer,' she said and gave me this beautiful bunch of pansies."

Myrtle Fry looked at her husband and left the table.

"What's eating her now?" he mumbled and slapped the hands of Deva which were both near her nose. "None of those dirty tricks at my table, young lady." It was three seconds before Deva's scream rose and then she rushed away to her mother. Rex, excusing himself,

departed jauntily. Mitchell and Gloria looked at each other.

"So you take music lessons," commented Mitchell lamely.

"I've taken since I was six."

"You like it?"

"Gee, I should say not!" She looked up gravely at Mitchell. "But Mama says some day I can be a concert player and I'm going to have a pleated chiffon dress."

A door opened and Rex came down the hall, the voice of Myrtle following. "You don't appreciate a thing I've sacrificed for you, not one thing, Rex Fry, and I can go on doing for you all the rest of my life and you never will."

"Pipe down!" shouted Rex. "I've given up a damned lot for you but you don't hear me howling about it fifty times a day."

"Yes, I suppose you've slaved for me from morning to night and gone without things and never had a decent rag since your wedding." The front door slammed and Mitchell saw Rex Fry walk down the street toward town.

"And you like your music?" inquired Mitchell.

"I answered that before," said Gloria.

Myrtle Fry came into the room. She had put on an apron which emphasized all her curves, the line of shoulder sloping with lavishness into arm and wrist, the perfection of a goblet in

breast and thigh. Mitchell wondered why he enjoyed her with the same pleasure that he felt in a sketch by Matisse, that same sudden joy in line. Her face was meaningless. No, the eyes and mouth, because of their contradiction, were interesting. He caught her glance and followed the red rims of her eyes, the mottled look of her skin. She opened her mouth to speak, coughed, and took a pile of dishes into the kitchen. In a moment she was back again, steadier, with a suggestion of deliberate poise in her clasped hands. Only a moment with Hester Linden had taught her that trick, he noted.

"Mr. Mitchell, please excuse our little tiffs. Rex is a wonderful husband to me—I'm sure you've seen that—and he'd give the world and all for me. We don't mean a thing by these little quarrels—it only takes us a minute to make up."

"Yes, of course. And is your sister going to stay on with Miss Linden?"

"She's going to let me know. Isn't that silly? I haven't any patience with this foolishness of making up your mind and all. I know right at first and then I do it and no crying about it afterward, either. Deva, let go Mama's skirt! A big girl like you! She's got to come back. I'm going to put my foot down if there's any more foolishness. Do you want some nice prunes for breakfast to-morrow, Mr. Mitchell?

Say, I don't know what to cook for you any more. Deva, let go Mama's skirt! Say, if you don't mind me some morning you'll wake up and find me gone and you'll never see me again."

There was an instant of silence and then Deva's cries rose, this time with such anguish that Mitchell put his hand down on the child's shoulder. She drew away, running to her mother, and shoved her head between the woman's legs, her body trembling and her cry falling to a wail as her mother bent to her with, "As if I'd ever leave my honey girl." Then as the wailing continued overlong the woman pushed the child away from her with, "If you have to bawl forever get away from me. Go upstairs! Go on! Nobody wants to hear a big girl like you bawling. Shame on you!"

Mitchell looked down at the dirty, clenched fists, the legs covered with mosquito bites and then he heard an intolerable shriek as Deva ran from the room. A twinge of pity made him look at the woman until she said uneasily, "If you don't make them mind they'll run all over you."

4

He had thought it strange the night before as he passed the Hemingway house that someone should call his name. The place had been closed for a year. Amy was in Europe. Her

parents were dead and even the old aunt who everyone in Beaver Falls said was too mean to die had passed away one winter and the servants had disappeared. But there had certainly been a step on the walk shortly after the sound, as if someone were about to follow him, and later he had heard the door creak. He had been so sure he was imagining it that he had not turned.

To-night he meant to investigate and as he walked through the courtyard he wondered if Amy had come home. Someone had called his name, now he was sure of it, and it had been a woman's voice. Suddenly he was irritated at himself for being eager about a voice and before he had time to turn back he was laughing at himself. It often came over him like that, the absurdity of his life and his increasing uselessness. Then he was off again on the futile wheel of self-analysis until he heard the sound again, stopped, and saw Amy Hemingway in a tight black dress that burst into a froth of chiffon just below her knees. As she walked toward him her legs appeared in red stockings and her feet in slippers almost as tiny as Hester's made tart sounds on the walk. Then her hands were on his shoulders and her warm body was close to his in a sudden assumption of affection.

"You old darling," she said playfully, "I've missed you terribly."

He knew from the excess of emotion in her voice that she had probably not given him a thought but when he met her eyes he saw that she suddenly wished she had missed him.

"You always act as if you know all about me, don't you?" she remarked gaily and led him to the porch. "Ever since I've been at home, Stephen, I've been eating these divine things. Look, aren't they beautiful?" She pointed to a plate of small cakes rolled in nuts and sugar.

"Where is Ronald?" said Mitchell. He disliked the minor affectations of women, the excessive coo and whirr of their tongues over nothing, and their little tricks of shoulders and eyes, of fingers and feet, which proved to him that they considered themselves adept as charmers.

"Oh, yes, Ronald! Why, I'd forgotten all about him. We never married, you know. Somehow, marrying a person you're in love with never works. But I'm sick of the whole business. Men mean nothing to me now."

"Why did you come back?"

"You don't like me at all, do you," she said slowly, without emotion.

He sat forward, stimulated by the candor in her tone and the sudden clarity that sharpened her face. They might be friends again, after all, in spite of her affectations. But she laughed and threw back her head so that he saw she was overconscious of her poignant chin and the col-

umn of her neck, aware, too, of the laugh which fluttered out with a wistful ring.

"You're abominable! Here I am trying to be enchanting to you and you're picking me all to pieces. You haven't said one nice thing to me yet and we haven't seen each other for years."

"You're no older," he remarked.

"And that's devilish of you."

He had hoped she would overlook the slur or else laugh. "But other women like to be told such things. How long have you been here?"

"I came—Oh, I've forgotten when I came." She sat down on the broad swing, drew her legs up and placed her chin on the black froth. Then Mitchell realized that she was not seeing herself as he had thought, with a mixture of pity, devotion, and accuracy, but he saw, as she turned to him, that she was still thinking of herself at eighteen. As he looked at the young ankles and feet he wondered, half shuddering, if women always stayed the same, if they never withered but kept the same rôle, the same lines.

"Beaver Falls looks just the same."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Why haven't you ever left, Stephen?"

"Other places are no different."

"But they are."

"Not for me." He tried to estimate her age.

"What's puzzling you?"

"Your age," he replied briefly.

"I used to be two years older than you, Stephen. And just think," she added, "Hester's in her forties."

A curious silence came over them and she stopped swinging. He heard the crickets in the grass and a frog croaked down in the pond. The stillness rose until he felt that Amy had gone away and that Hester Linden sat in her place. He could catch the delicacy of her breathing and he saw the cold glow of her cheek, the austerity of her bare arm, the eyes, hurt as they looked at him, yet remote. Then the voice rang with Hester's contradictory definiteness. "When I feel as if I'm her I feel real."

His ears were straining for that tone, for the rich life it brought back to him and he said, "Please talk, Amy." He watched and listened until he saw that she had absorbed every gesture, tone and attitude of Hester Linden's until it had become her most fundamental self. Of course, to express the girl he had known must seem to her, as it had seemed to him, a monstrous artificiality. But he remembered Amy on a Christmas Day running through Hester's drawing-room, a wreath of holly on her bright hair and a wine-colored dress of soft wool to her ankles. She had seemed simple and authentic then or perhaps Hester had given her that

absolute quality, heightened all of them through her splendor. He thought of the lies, the evasions and insincerities which had come from Hester's stubborn and deliberate evasion of reality and then he heard her voice ring with, "But, Stephen, what is reality?"

"And all the time I was in Europe I thought of her the way you think of Jesus when you're little."

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly. He wondered if she was going to become maudlin and tell him her life story. Then he noticed that her face had a hollow look and that her voice was thick. But she could never be anything to him but a meaningless puppet, an irrelevant mumbler and sentimentalist. He caught himself up sharply. And what was he? How did he appear from the outside?

"And I couldn't get on with Ronald. It was terrible. I found out that I was only pretending to be interested in life and that I had never really been part of it. I found that I was perfectly empty, just nothing!" Her voice rose to a peak and stopped.

"That's not so alarming, is it?" he questioned. "Don't we all discover that?"

"Don't you see, I only feel important when I seem to be her. My whole life seems to be in her somewhere and when I try to pull away I just feel dead. I'm dead now."

"Now, Amy, it's too bad for you to play with obsessions. You're a normal person."

"I am not!" she cried angrily.

"Well, don't try to make me believe that a Tennysonian hangover like Hester could break you up that way. You've had an unfortunate love affair."

"Of course. I've had more than one. But that's why. Ever since I left her I've seen nothing but the part of life that's left out, the real part. That's all I see or hear. You are almost unbearable to me. You were right at the beginning so I pretended that you weren't—it's so frightening to accept the other."

"Oh, really, Amy." He laughed heartily. "And you seemed so to me. We'll probably be friends again."

She stirred at his tone of masculine tolerance and forbearance. "But why should we be?"

"We both appear to be in the same state. Infantile."

"Absolutely not!"

He caught the old jealousy in her tone and it brought back the times they had angrily compared notes on Hester's affection. Once Mark Johns had told him in a quarrel that Hester was in love with him, that she had kissed him, and again he felt the intolerable nausea that had crept into his throat. Later Mark had admitted his lie but Mitchell had never been sure. And

Amy had once told him that Hester said she enjoyed her more than anyone else. He hadn't thought of that for years and now it burned him again until he turned to Amy, his cheeks red, and asked her if Hester had actually said it.

"Probably not," said Amy. "I was always lying."

"I'm just curious about it. Try to remember."

"But you know Hester doesn't like anyone. I suppose that's why everyone loves her."

"Then she didn't say that to you?"

"Why, no, Stephen. It frightens me to see you so childish. Honestly, haven't you done anything for the last ten years but think about Hester?" She was silent for a time and then she said, "But once she laid her hand on my shoulder."

"Then you were the favorite?"

"Why, she had none, I tell you!"

That seemed to anger him more than anything else. "What fools we were!" he cried.

"Are," she corrected calmly.

"We haven't been weaned yet, that's the trouble."

"Stephen, why do you insist upon placing me with yourself? I've had experiences that you could never have had—I've been through practically everything . . ."

"Now, Amy."

"I know that my devotion to Hester is absolutely different from anyone else's. And I'm positive that it's the best thing that ever happened to me. I know that it's beyond life."

"But what's the sense in trying to idealize your evasion. Can't you see that you're merely evading an impersonal world by pretending that there's a better one behind it? And that gives you a chance to moan all the time for another world and you can escape lots of unpleasant things."

"But I've seen the other world!"

"Of course you have."

"Oh, Stephen, please don't pose as emancipated and that kind of thing. It's too absurd. Remember I've known you for years."

"Then you're back here to be one of Hester's puppets again?"

"Don't be superior. You haven't forgotten her."

"She doesn't control one cell of my brain."

"Does your life mean anything?"

"No. Why should it?"

"When you were with her didn't it mean a great deal?"

He selected a cake. "These are rather good, Amy," he said evenly.

"I don't care how childish I appear. I want to go back and have it all over just the way it

was because I was happy then and now I'm not."

"I'm going along now," he said and stood up.

"Where are you living?"

"With the Frys."

"Oooo, what a hideous name! You'd better come around here and live, Stephen. This house is large and really comfortable."

"I don't believe I'll come at present," he replied.

She was roguish again and flippant. "I'm ashamed of you," she said. "You've grown so rude." As she shook a finger at him she leaned forward, rising on her toes, and suddenly her mouth was level with his. Myrtle Fry imprisoned in flesh and vulgarity seemed closer to him then. But if marriage could have broken his bondage to Hester, he thought, he would have married Amy long ago. She had always been fond of him.

"Good night," he said briefly. "Don't . . ."

"Don't tell me what not to do!" she cried. "And please remember that I don't consider you any more wonderful than you consider me. I see right through you. You're neither a man nor a woman nor both. You're nothing and you don't register with me."

The tone, the gestures, and the impudent swing of her body were so old, so familiar to him that he caught her in his arms, but as his

hands touched her flesh they turned cold and she drew away. In a flash he remembered the warmth of that Christmas morning, the wreath of holly on her head, and the soft wine-colored dress hanging in folds from her slender waist. That day his hands had not turned cold when he touched her, but when Hester had glanced over at them the gayety had vanished, the warmth in his legs and stomach had gone and left him empty and foolish. Again he saw Hester's face in that look of scorn and later she had drawn him aside and said: "Please, Stephen, don't be silly and vulgar with Amy. That sort of thing is so tiresome."

He had nodded, his throat closed with misery, and from that day he had hated Amy because she seemed to be responsible for Hester's changed opinion of him. In the critical look she sometimes turned upon him he read complete alienation and a sense of monstrous grief began to creep over him. He had gone to Hester one day and explained it to her, insisting that he knew all that sort of thing was silly and a waste of time, but she had examined her nails and changed the subject. He felt detached from his memory, tolerant of his childishness, and yet he cried, "She ought to be burned at the stake!"

Amy's laughter poured down on him from the step. "How absurd we've been all evening, Stephen! I don't often get this way. I think

it must have been you—but it has been fun, hasn't it? Pretending to be obsessed, I mean."

"Oh, yes," he replied, "pretending to be obsessed is always great fun."

"And it makes life interesting."

"Doesn't it, though."

"Won't you come and have dinner with me soon?"

"Yes, if I can persuade you to dine with me at the Frys'."

"You're horrid!" she cried. "Well, I'll fool you, I will!"

"Splendid. Good night, Amy."

Automatically he took the road to Hester's house and as he listened to the sound of his feet on the pavement he felt an inclosing warmth rise from his body, rise but not reach the austerity of his mind. And then it occurred to him that perhaps a word from Hester, that poignant, remote glance turned upon him, would take away his illusion of mental independence. If the telephone should awaken him some morning and he should hear her voice he would be a boy again. He might go anywhere in the world but a cable from her would bring him back. Then it occurred to him with the increasing warmth and lightness of his limbs that this bondage must seem luxurious to his body.

He saw ahead the mass of dark leaves and as he drew nearer the scent of blossoms came. Now

he could see the narrow path between trees, the outline of the porch. As he looked his eyes were washed of all other visions, of the thousand cruelties he saw each day, and as he drew nearer and heard the sound of water pouring over stones, heard the rustle of leaves, his ears were cleansed of all other sound and as the air came into his nostrils there was a magical change in his breathing. Then he saw the girl.

She lay on her face in the deep grass, her arms circling her head. The moon rose higher as he watched, and changed her hair to copper, made her dress a pool of white. But she lay still with the light upon her. Suddenly she moved a shoulder and then she appeared more still than before, the other twitched slightly but the arm did not stir. He waited for the cry, a peculiar, forsaken moan, but none came. He thought of Amy, Mark, others, and their grief seemed inclosed in the body of this girl who made no sound. Then the light came brighter and he could see the rough bark of the tree beyond, the feathered ends of grass, a button on the girl's sleeve. The blossoms above her shook like bells and below were the ones that had fallen, white cups set in grass. The sound of water and leaves, one sharp, the other mellow, increased with the light until everything that could be seen or heard was clear and piercing.

The man stepped back, waited, but he heard no other sound.

5

The next morning Myrtle Fry told him that Dora had sent her answer. "And she took her time doing it, too!" Myrtle was in pink gingham that crackled as she walked and Deva, sick from her fright of the day before, so the man supposed, was not in her sand pile. "There's that terrible doorbell!" she cried before he could question her. "Excuse me, please."

She returned an hour later and found him still on the porch reading the paper. "The most dreadful thing has happened. Clella Fry —she's cousin by marriage to Rex's Aunt Faydie —was taken to the hospital this morning." She pointed to her breast impersonally, her gaze on the sand pile. "Cancer," she whispered. "Has to come off." She paused, glanced at him. "And we never knew a thing about it. Just last week she did up a wonderful batch of doughnuts for Aid and Wednesday, no, it was Thursday, yes, I remember it was because I forgot to order butter—well, Thursday she came to the house and asked to borrow some citron. I didn't have a bit in the house. You know how it is. Oh, if I'd 'a' known that in just seven days she'd be in the hopsital I'd have sent Gloria to the store for some."

"Very sad," said Mitchell.

"That's exactly the word for it. But this town is just full of sickness, you never know what anyone has—and next they're dead. There's those two blessed lambs across the street at death's door with whooping cough. I'm glad I didn't let Gloria and Deva go near them—you have to be careful when you have children, Mr. Mitchell. Oh, some day you'll know what it is to have kiddies of your own. And Alma Utter's baby's got epilepsy and she can't do a thing but sit and watch it. There, Alma's got all the clothes she wants, lots of money, and a big car, but I'll bet she'd exchange it all for my two kiddies that are strong and healthy. When I think of what happens to others I'm sure I'm blessed."

Mitchell wondered if he had let a decent interval pass, if now he might venture to inquire about Dora Weck. But the woman continued, was called to the telephone, returned, and told him how much coal it took to heat the house in winter.

"I'm wondering about Miss Weck."

"My, it sounds funny to hear you say Miss Weck. I was always Miss Weck, you know, and sometimes I wonder why on earth I ever stopped being that. You know how you get sometimes. Oh, I'm so upset about poor Clella Fry. I wonder if I ought to call Rex."

"You said you had an answer from your sister?"

"Oh, excuse me for not telling you before. Yes, I have had an answer. She's coming in time for dinner to-night. You know I'm so upset that I don't know what to do first. Miss Linden's sending her in the car. And she's been used to everything just lovely at Miss Linden's and I can't think of what to have for supper. Of course I want to have everything go just lovely at first."

"Let me do something," he suggested carelessly.

"You? Well, Mr. Mitchell." She threw up her arms and then dropped them. "Shall I set you to sweeping?" she asked jovially. "Well, I guess if you try to keep the conversation going that'll be your share. Rex might decide to act mean and he hates Dora like poison. To-morrow I've planned a picnic to the grove so that Dora and Joe can get together and all of us are going—you, too, Mr. Mitchell. Now, don't say you won't come," she warned, "because I'm depending on you."

"I'd be delighted," he replied mechanically.

"That's right. Do you know I just can't get Clella Fry out of my mind, poor old soul. Just last year she made over my taffeta so it looks like new and she always brought something to the children on their birthdays. There never

was a bigger-hearted soul anywhere than Clella Fry. Well, an operation certainly sets a person thinking. Who knows who'll be the next? It might be me. Here I am in front of you, well and strong so far as I know, but I may be up there on that table . . . That's the funny thing about life. You can't never tell."

"Did your sister seem happy?"

"I didn't think to ask her."

"You mentioned her being so agitated at the thought of leaving Miss Linden," he added hastily, "that I wondered."

"Oh, she'll mope around for a couple of days. She'll miss the nice house and all, but she'll get used to us. I think that picnic to-morrow's going to liven her up a whole lot. Ever been out to the grove? It's just wonderful. People that have been to Niagara and Yellowstone say it's as pretty as anything in that line out there. My, I wish I could get out and see what other people see but here I am chained to my house and kids. It's a wonder I don't go crazy, Mr. Mitchell, and no one knows what goes on in my head, or here." She pointed once more to her breast. "I've got my share of troubles but sometimes it seems as if I've got more than my share. Sometimes when I walk past the canal I feel as if I could lean over and drop in and not give it a thought. Honest, I've been ready to give up lots of times."

"I suppose we all feel that way, Myrtle. What did your sister do before she came here, or is that impertinent of me?"

"I should say not. You just ask me anything you're a mind to. We all lived in Glover until Mama died. Cancer, too," she added in an undertone. "And Dora went to school and she graduated the summer Mama passed on. I was so glad Mama could see her—she looked just grand and the parlor was packed with presents. All our relatives. But we always gave liberal to them, and we always went to all the funerals in Beaver Falls no matter who it was, and I must say they all turned out for poor Mama. The house was packed and the yard and way into the street. There's something nice about it, even though it is so sad and you can never get over it. You never do get over it, you know, no matter how hard you try."

Mitchell heard himself inquire further into Dora Weck's history and his curiosity, since the woman was so unconscious of it, appeared artful to him and almost treacherous. He had stood watching the girl as she lay in deep grass, he remembered that he had stayed there too long. Then he heard himself ask many absurd questions about Dora.

"And she used to be full of fun and just as jolly and peppy. Joe Teeter's been in love with her for a long time now. He's the only beau

she's ever had and Mama wanted they should marry and so did the Teeters. I don't know what's to become of her if she doesn't settle down with Joe soon. We aren't ones to go out in the world and make our way. We've got to have our own homes and all."

"She's so young, Myrtle. I don't think eighteen . . ."

"Now, please, Mr. Mitchell," she interrupted. "If you start talking that stuff to her about wanting to marry or not wanting to like Miss Linden or being too young, why she'll just slump back and let us take care of her."

"How about sending her to school somewhere?"

"Mama did want her to go to learn to be a typewriter but she didn't take to that and I know she wouldn't make a teacher, and besides they never marry. I know that marriage is the thing for Dora to make her happy. All she needs is a few kiddies and she'll be as happy as I am. I've gone into all sides of the question—I had a paper on it for the Gastronomic Girls once—and motherhood is the only way out for women. They think they don't want it, Mr. Mitchell, but all those things they think they don't want they take to like lightning afterwards. It's the funniest thing. Now, we mustn't put ideas into her head."

"Miss Linden has probably been busy."

"Well, when Dora finds out what Joe can do for her—he's got charge of the Creamery now —I guess she'll have a different tune to sing. I know my sex pretty well."

"Well, how old is—is the young man, Mr. —— I can't recall his name?"

"Twenty last month—the fifteenth—I remember, because Mrs. Teeter didn't come to Aid that day and Dora never sent Joe a present or anything. I felt so ashamed that I baked him up a cake. And he's never said one thing against her in all that time and Mrs. neither. I met her at Aid constant all winter and she never was anything to me but a perfect lady. And she's not one to talk behind your back, either. That surely speaks well for a person. Now, I'd just love to stay and talk all day, Mr. Mitchell, but I've got so much to do I don't know where to start."

"Don't let me keep you," he said sharply and looked at his watch. "I won't be home for lunch."

"Oh, that's just fine. It'll give me more time toward my dinner. I'm going to get up a good meal even if it is only my sister. Some folks don't believe in doing for their own," he heard her say as he took up his hat, "but the Wecks have always been decent that way. I suppose it's born in me. Don't forget, now, six sharp!"

6

When Dora Weck came into the room that night Mitchell found that he had been wondering all day if the moon had given her skin its whiteness, and if her hair was the intense copper he remembered, pouring over her head in savage coils, too violent to be seductive. But as he looked at the girl he saw that it was Hester who had laid her dazzling pallor over apple-red cheeks, Hester again, who had given the heavy, passionate mouth its severe line so that the restrained fullness of the lower lip had taken the look of frustration which the eyes expressed in their piercing, yet remote gaze. Even the lavish body of the country girl had a look of delicacy, of fastidious aloofness unknown to Glover or Beaver Falls. He felt a stab of satisfaction as he looked back at the hair. Hester could never change that, he reflected, and it hadn't the coarseness he had expected to find in daylight, or the harshness, but the same passionate blaze, a vivid contradiction of the woman's imposed refinement. But Hester would evade those implications, he remembered, and call the flame a triumph of God, a symbol of flaming spirit, of life.

She had said, "How do you do?" and then gone to the window to look out, not on the bed of nasturtiums, he well knew, but at a garden

of twisted trees, of deep grass and stone walls, of flowers like tiny bells, dropping softly in the dark. He noticed a slight movement in her shoulders as if a weight had come into her breathing and then her body was still again. He glanced down at the feet that could never wear Hester's slippers and on to the frock which, he decided, from its artful simplicity, must have been selected by Hester. Then, as his eyes examined a string of crystal beads, acknowledged their unmistakable authenticity, he felt the old stir of jealousy as he remembered that Hester had never given him, or any of the others so far as he knew, any kind of gift.

Then Myrtle ran in from the kitchen. "Isn't Rex in sight yet? Everything's going to be spoiled. If I tell him to come at a certain time he never comes until he's good and ready just to show me he's boss. Men make me good and tired." Then she noticed her sister and laid her red hand on the girl's arm. "Men are careless but they mean well and they're worth the trouble they give." She went to the window nervously and looked off down the street. "Well, I can't help it!" she half screamed. "It's enough to have to get the meals without having no one here to eat them when they're ready. Everything's spoiled now, but what does he care! Oh, we might as well go on in and not wait. I'll call the kids and you two go in."

Mitchell looked at Dora, who made no movement, and he remembered that for ten months and more she had sat down with Hester at an irreproachable table of walnut placed between a deep fireplace and windows opening on an arbor where Agda brought the coffee on warm spring nights. They used to stay on, listening to the frogs, the rustle of leaves, inclosed in that peculiar stillness, their eyes fixed on distant hills, until night came.

"He's nowhere in sight! We'll just start without him, that's all. He can't expect to upset the whole house." She rushed through the house to the kitchen, crying, "Now my meat's all spoiled—I can smell it—I knew it would be!" She was back again, shouting from the porch to Gloria and Deva who were overlong in appearing. When they finally ran up the steps she shook the elder and slapped the younger, who drew away with, "Please don't be mad at me, Mama." Then she hurried back to the kitchen.

"Come over here, Deva," said Mitchell, but the child ignored him, nursing her arms, swaying and muttering to herself. He noticed that Dora was looking at him and that her face was more pallid, the mouth more severe, and the eyes set beyond him in a fixed, self-conscious stare.

"Come on in, folks," said Myrtle. "I've given

him up. If he don't know when to come home and can't be considerate enough to come when it's all special like to-night then I can't worry about him. He'll eat a cold supper. Is that him now? Look quick, Deva!" At the sound of her name the child sprang toward her mother and threw her arms around her knees. "Don't be mad at me!" she cried over and over until the woman leaned down with, "Stop it! I said, stop it! Come now," she said, pulling the child loose. "I want you to eat a good supper and be a nice girl. Promise, me, now. Thank goodness, he's coming. Now," she said brightly, "everything's all right and we can eat. Rex," she demanded as the man came in, "where you been all this time?"

He smiled at Mitchell and shoved Deva, who was standing where her mother had left her, into a corner. "Been bawling again, ain't you?" he mumbled. "Big girl like you and still a bawl-baby. Quit it now!" he shouted as her screams rose.

"Say, Rex, for goodness' sake, do you have to stir the kid up the minute you come into this house?"

"Pipe down," said Rex, and twirled the piano stool. "Needs fixing," he commented. "Always something for me to do around here." He ran his hands over his glossy hair and sat down, one leg crossed over the other.

"Don't you see who's here?" asked Myrtle.

"No. Who? Hello, Mitchell. Excuse me."

Myrtle giggled and pointed to Dora. "There she is!"

"Hello, Dora," he said and went toward her, holding out his hand. "What makes you so quiet? I didn't know you were in the room. Oh, come on, you can give me a better handshake than that, can't you? Here, this way! Say, Myrtle, we've got to feed this girl up so she'll get some color and put some weight on her. Well, after our picnic to-morrow you'll pick up." He winked at Mitchell and began striding around the room, his hands in his pockets.

Mitchell watched Dora put her hands over her cheeks and struggle for that fixed look of remoteness to hide behind. He knew the bewildered, sickening confusion that had given her eyes that feverish glitter and when Myrtle announced dinner he saw from the mechanical way she stepped forward that she was numb and frightened.

He saw her glance over the table as they sat down. There was a platter of roast pork with dressing and baked apples along the edge, a pan of stuffed onions and another of macaroni. There were mashed potatoes in a cut-glass bowl and a high dish shaped like a serpent had a mound of currant jelly gleaming between the

open jaws. A fluted bowl held cottage cheese and the bread was there, its rich, brown crusts glossy with melted butter. Rex prepared at once to carve the roast. He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

"You haven't said yet why you were so late," remarked Myrtle peevishly, her warm face between her hands.

"And do I have to?" he replied, his knife deep in the pork.

"Everything's cooked too much," she cried with a rising voice. "And I wish you'd try to be more considerate of me since I have to get all the meals. At least try to come on the special occasions when I ask you to." She glanced at Dora and smiled sweetly. "These men are an awful trial, but we love them all the better—Oh, Rex! take some of that meat off Deva's plate. She'll never eat it and I'll have to throw it out. Do as I say!" she cried. Then she turned to Dora, explaining. "I can't get it down her, for some reason. She's so dainty."

Rex glared at Deva who put her hands over her eyes and began to sob. "Here, here," said Rex. "You can leave this room if you're going to bawl. No bawl-babies at my table." The crying stopped instantly and the child looked down at her plate, her head to one side and her mouth twitching. Rex busied himself with his food, talking to no one, except to ask Mitchell

if he would have more meat. Finally he wiped his mouth and put his thumbs in his vest. "I've had a hard day," he commented soberly, regarding the carving knife. He took it up, wiped it on his napkin, and began marking the cloth until Myrtle cried, "Have you no respect for me at all or the work you make?" Then he laid it down. "Yes," he repeated, as if there had been no interruption, "I've had a hard day."

"Dora," said Myrtle reproachfully, "you're not eating a thing."

"I suppose you're homesick for Miss Linden," said Rex quickly, but Dora shook her head. "Well, that's right. It's a bad thing for girls to get attached to old maids. No good has ever come of it in the past or will in the future. A woman'd better stay with a man if she knows what's good for her. If she's got somebody to look after she won't be trying to fly off to heaven every day or so when things go wrong. Well, Dora, I'm sorry we can't give you nice things like you've been having, but I know a man that will. More potato, Mitchell? Oh, come on, they gotta be eaten up. Come on, we'll have to throw them out if you don't. That's right, old man. Myrtle, you know Joe took in over ten thousand last year in his creamery and that's putting it low. Joe's one that will go far in the business world. He's business through and through, that guy, and a good honest boy

besides that'll work hard and be a decent citizen. There aren't many of that kind around now, I can tell you."

"I should say there isn't," said Myrtle quickly, "and Joe's the best fellow in this town, and when he left Glover he . . ."

"This all you gonna have?" interrupted Rex.

"Well, can't I get the words out of my mouth even?" She rose in dignified resentment and carried off the dishes, Gloria following with the plate of bread and Deva attempting to carry the butter and the cheese. Finally she returned with an enormous rhubarb pie with a meringue and beside it a plate of candy.

"Say, Myrtle," said Rex, "have a heart. You trying to make us all sick? Next thing and I'll be in the hospital with Clella."

Myrtle leaned forward. "How did you hear about Clella?" she cried.

"You telephoned," he answered.

"I did not telephone."

"Look here," said Rex. "I'm in possession of my right mind and when my telephone rings and my stenographer answers and tells me . . ."

Myrtle Fry dropped her knife and a spray of rhubarb juice stained the cloth. "I didn't know you had a typewriter," she said hollowly. "You always said you hated to have a woman around your office."

Rex turned to Mitchell. "The underwear

business is picking up again. For a while there it looked serious but she's picking up again."

"Glad to hear it," offered Mitchell.

"Yes, times are better but we're not out of danger yet. Say, Myrtle, your pie's not bad. Isn't that so, Dora?" He leaned toward her and pinched her cheek in the manner of a land-owner conferring a favor upon one of his dairy-maids. "But get some meat on you, Dora. I won't have my women looking as if they didn't get fed right."

"Dora, can't you eat your pie, either?" asked Myrtle. "And here I got up this nice dinner just on your account."

"Never mind," said Rex, "to-morrow at the grove she'll get fixed up. Eh, Dora?"

He turned to wink enormously at Mitchell. "Dora told you about Joe yet?" he inquired. "Hasn't said anything about Joe yet? Why, Dora!"

"Miss Weck hasn't had a chance," began Mitchell, but Myrtle interrupted him with, "Now, she's only my sister, Mr. Mitchell. Can't you call her Dora?"

"Please do," said the girl faintly and looked at him without smiling. Even Deva turned to look at him and he felt a stab of anger at his embarrassment.

"And the grove's just beautiful. Have you seen it, Dora?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, it's Beaver Falls' one beauty spot. I know plenty of people who've been all over, Niagara and Yellowstone, and they say it beats both of them all hollow. Of course I can't say how true that is because I've never been anywhere in my whole life." She looked angrily at her husband and narrowed her eyes. "Mrs. Adams and some of those from the Gastronomic Girls—Yes, you'd have to spill it, wouldn't you!" she cried at Deva, who put her arms over her face in time to catch a smarting slap. "And don't begin crying, Deva Fry, or I'll give you something worth crying about."

The child hung her head sullenly for a moment and then she turned to Dora and said in a high, strange voice, "I don't like you!" Mitchell saw Dora wince and then try to smile indulgently. "And I won't ever like you, either," she insisted.

"She just loves her mother, don't her, darling?" said Myrtle complacently. "More coffee, Mr. Mitchell? No? Well, that's funny."

Then Deva lifted her finger and pointed at Dora. "I said I didn't like you," she repeated, "and I won't ever like you."

"Why not?" asked Rex.

"And when my birthday comes you needn't give me a present because I don't like you." The child gave her mother a radiant look and ran to

her, her arms lifted, and was caught between Myrtle's breasts.

"I won't ever like her!" the child shouted.

"Why, Dora, can't you take a joke?" said Myrtle sharply. "She's only a little girl and she's just fooling. Run now, Deva, and give poor Auntie Dora a kiss. You've made her so unhappy and she's all alone, she hasn't any nice Mama to love her and—" She looked up but Dora was gone. Mitchell and Rex suddenly excused themselves. "Wait a minute, Rex," called Myrtle. "Aren't you going to stay and help to-night? I've been working out in the kitchen all day."

"And I've been working, too," snarled Rex. "Do I have to do your work and mine, too?" He turned to Mitchell and suggested a game of billiards at the club.

"Rex, are you going to leave me with all this to clean up?"

"Get Dora to help you." He took out a cigar and cut off the end. "Dishwashing isn't a man's job."

"I can't ask her to work on the first day she's here."

"Well, I've had a hard day. What about me? Don't you ever give a thought to your husband? Haven't I got my work as well as you?"

"I can't see that you're so busy now that

you've got a typewriter to help you," she threw in bitterly. "Never told me a thing about it, did you, not a thing! Sit there in your office with her all day and never say anything about it." Her voice grew higher and sharper. "But you know what I can do, Rex Fry, and don't you ever forget it, either. Sometime you'll come home and I'll be gone."

"Aw, Myrtle."

"Well, I will." She could barely speak and stopped, her eyes filling with tears. "And—and I'll be in the canal."

"Now, now . . ." Rex put his hand on her shoulder and patted it briskly.

"I've put up with abuse and neglect and things that other women wouldn't tolerate for one second and I'm getting tired of it." She raised her glittering face to her husband and moved back from him proudly. "You're going to understand something about me pretty soon and see some one else besides your own selfish self, I can tell you, or else—I tell you, I won't go on this way."

"Aw . . ."

"Don't think for one minute, Rex Fry, that you can treat me the way you do because you can't. You'll come home some night from that fine typewriter of yours and find me gone—you just wait!"

As Rex lighted his cigar Mitchell noticed

that Myrtle, instead of falling into a faint, had begun to pick up the dishes listlessly. Suddenly she discovered a rhubarb stain on the cloth and began examining the condition, then, of her best napkins. As Rex called to her from the door she asked him what he wanted for breakfast and if he thought that two dozen weiners would be sufficient for the next day.

"We want to have enough," she said and began counting on her fingers. Then she stopped for an instant and looked sadly out of the window. "That poor Clella Fry," Mitchell heard her say, "that poor soul way up in the hospital and maybe she won't pull through and maybe she don't care if she does or not. Well, good-by," she called to them, "and for heaven's sake be at home at a decent hour to-night for once."

7

At noon the following day when Mitchell, having omitted breakfast, appeared in the dining room Myrtle Fry told him that the picnic was postponed. "It's a shame, too, because I've got a lot of stuff from yesterday saved up to take and Joe had ordered the pop."

"What's the trouble?"

"Well, Dora's sick, or says she is, and won't even try to go. I told her she'd feel a good deal better out there where it's so beautiful and all,

but she won't budge. Wasn't I saying yesterday, Mr. Mitchell, that we never know what's ahead? And she's awful white, looks just like dead."

"I'm awfully sorry. Anything I can do?"

"Not a thing, I guess. She's got a fever, but she isn't sick anywheres. Rex said it was the dinner last night but she didn't eat hardly anything. I watched her the whole time. Were you sick last night, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Not exactly . . ."

"I know it was that cheese. It's too heavy to eat with such a big meal. Well, I'm glad you weren't sick. Rex was. He threw up everything," she said heartily, and made a lavish motion with her hands. "Yes, I was real sorry for him for a while."

"Are you all right?"

"Heavens! I never get sick, Mr. Mitchell. And I've never been sick the way Rex was. Mama used to say it would be better for me if I was. They all say it's better. And Dora's just like me that way. I said to her, 'Dora,' I said, 'Rex was sick but he's trying to shake it off. He went down to work and all, so why don't you get up?' But she just gave me the most dreadful look I've ever seen and I called up Dr. Jackson. It'll cost money but it's better in the long run to be sure. She looked like she was all—I don't know—she looked like she didn't have

any body at all—honest, I can't describe it."

"She's a very sensitive girl, Myrtle."

"Sure, all of us Wecks are. But that don't excuse her looking at me as if I was no better than dirt, does it? And I felt so unimportant that I wanted to slink away somewheres while she was staring me through. Honest, for the first time in my life," she said shrilly, "I felt like I wanted to throw everything up." As she looked at him her eyes filled. "I never thought anyone would ever give me such a look as that. And I couldn't describe it to you if I tried a hundred years. Oh, there's the doctor."

She went to the door and the man heard her talking to the doctor as he followed her upstairs. "I think she needs a good strong tonic—Rex says she needs iron—something that'll give her stren'th. She always has had a good strong constitution, but since Mama died she hasn't been the same girl. Here, let me look over your medicine, I'll find something."

It occurred to Mitchell that Hester had imposed her refinements upon them, her ideals and evasions, in a more sinister way than the church or school. The thought of her was a strange, harmonizing force, a subtle ecstasy, and yet his mind recoiled sharply. He was aware suddenly of his separation from life. After her, average life was a nightmare, an unthinkable bestiality. One became crippled from the chest

down, paralyzed. He might go to Hester and ask her to release Dora, but he knew that already the woman had ignited some obscure desire for purity, remoteness and passivity. The marks were upon her, the shrinking, the fevered aloofness and disdain. He heard Myrtle and the doctor coming downstairs and then he saw the woman walk out to the car, making grotesque gestures. When she came into the room again she looked as though she was at last able to enjoy the situation.

"He thinks it might be intestinal. She looked at both of us in that terrible way with her hair all laid out on the pillow. But the doctor didn't flinch—he's used to all kinds of people in his business. All he said was that she wasn't to think about herself so much, and I for one agree with him. If there's one thing that can break you down it's thinking about yourself from morning to night. I guess Rex had it right this morning, all right. He said, 'Too much going on in her upper story.' "

"That's it," said Mitchell.

"Yes, Rex usually has it pat. I've seen that man look at a person and sum him up in a minute—and be right," she added triumphantly. "Absolutely right." She rose to answer the telephone and in a moment she was back. "It's Joe Teeter," she explained, "and he wants to come up and see her. He's got flowers. Should I let

him up there when she's in her nightgown and all? They're engaged but you know how people talk in Beaver Falls and if it got out . . . Well, what do you say? Sure, I knew it was all right —I just wondered what you'd make of it."

She ran back to the telephone and Mitchell heard her explain that an agent had been at the door and she couldn't get away a moment sooner. "Yes, come right over, Joe. She's crazy to see you. No, you silly boy. Yes, sure." Then she was back again. "He's got flowers. Isn't that just dear of him? I'm going to have Deva in rose color for the wedding and she'll carry the ring. Meenie Puffer's got the cushion. I'd like to give Dora a swell wedding because it's something to look back to all the rest of your life. I'm going to run up and straighten Dora and when Joe comes you come on up with him. You'll like Joe."

He wondered vaguely what a man named Teeter could look like and saw him in overalls with a long, slack chin, uneven teeth and straw-colored hair. He thought of Hester's probable horror at the name alone, of Hannah who had been instantly changed to Vega. It seemed natural that Mark Johns should have married Vega, Hester's personal maid. She had been closer to her than any of them, she had brushed her hair, cared for her clothes, read to her—a thing which Hester had never allowed any of

them to do, not even Mark, whose voice was beautiful. He remembered the time he had called in the morning hoping to catch Hester breakfasting in something loose and lacy, but she had finally appeared in one of her dark silks with lace in the sleeves. He had not known what to say, she was so formal and determinedly tolerant. And none of them had ever seen her bedroom.

He wondered if Dora Weck had ever got that far, if her room had been in the unknown region above that Hester, in her intricate simplicity, always emerged from. None of them had ever progressed farther than the third step on the stairs. Perhaps Dora had occupied one of the lower rooms opening on the garden. The one with the glazed chintz shades covered with roses and delphinium. He caught himself up, aware that he was occupied most of the time with artificialities, while his real life appeared to be going on without his knowledge, sending up signs from time to time, indications which his mind would attempt to interpret.

The bell rang and Myrtle came heavily downstairs. "Hello, Joe," he heard her say, "come on in."

He was a tall boy, broad and rather heavy, with a round face, large eyes, and a seraphic expression between his tilted nose and upper lip. Mitchell noted the awkwardness that was

so much a part of his vigor that it became an asset. He was conscious, too, as their hands and eyes met, of the boy's health. He was as strong and definite as a tree.

"Just look!" cried Myrtle and pointed to a basket of fruit and a long box.

"How is she, Myrtle?" asked the boy. He looked so earnest that Mitchell thought he was pretending. No one, he decided, could be that interested even in himself.

"Come on up and see," suggested Myrtle, but the boy hung back until she took his arm. "Come right along, and you, too, Mr. Mitchell."

They started upstairs and Mitchell was amazed at the boy's shyness. When they entered Dora's room Joe went to the window, his gifts behind him, and his back to them all.

"Look who's here, Dora!" cried Myrtle gayly.

The girl turned her eyes upon them and then upon the boy, who did not turn until she spoke to him. Then as he stumbled toward her, the man pulled Myrtle out of the room. "We've got to go back in a minute," she whispered. "It isn't the thing to leave them alone like that."

"He's a nice boy."

"And Joe's a good boy, that's more important, I always think. You know he made a thousand dollars last year in buttermilk alone.

They're going to have a new building next year, white inside, everything modern. The Teeters have lots of money in the family, but they've always worked just the same. They've always been on farms until now. I knew Joe's brother in high school and there was a kind of joke about our marrying, but nothing come of it on account of Rex being there as a salesman for underwear. Then I married and came here to Beaver Falls and when Mama wrote me about Dora and Joe I had tender feeling for him."

"How did Dora meet Miss Linden?"

"I don't know exactly how it transpired but I guess she was standing on a street corner and Miss Linden just stopped her car and asked her to drive around town with her. She's a great one for that. Next she was living there and Rex gave me a good going over for letting her go. 'I hate an old maid,' he said to me, 'and it won't help Dora any to be around that one.' My, this reminds me of Ed Teeter, Joe's brother. That winter to Glover when we were going around together Ed had a big overcoat and he wore his hat pulled down and up at the side, and he looked every inch a senator. I guess we've got to go back now."

"Will you excuse me, Myrtle?" He glanced at his watch. "I must rush along. I have an appointment." The idea of anyone's rushing to

an engagement in Beaver Falls struck him as being so humorous that he turned away to keep from laughing.

"Have I hurt your feelings in any way, Mr. Mitchell? I'd feel just terrible if I had. And I haven't given you a thing to eat. Imagine!"

"Don't bother. I'm not hungry."

"You pay for three meals and it's my duty to put them down for you. At least, that's my feeling. I can't wait to see if they've made up," she whispered, as he started down the stairs. "Don't forget to come home and eat a good supper, Mr. Mitchell. And, Mr. Mitchell, I bet we can have the picnic to-morrow. Don't forget now. And try to be home early to-night. I don't think it's good for you staying out so late every night. You haven't got a strong constitution, anyone can see that."

8

The grove was a part of the hills which appeared from the edge of Beaver Falls to be green mountains blotted here and there with the gold of ripe wheat. Trees and grass had the bright morning clarity after a night of leisurely rain and streams were full. The sky was clouded in part and yet in the east displayed a clear blue with masses of white just appearing from the farthest rim of hill where a roof could

be seen with a glimpse of red to the right, which, as the car drew nearer, appeared to be a barn with pigeons roosting on the spires.

Myrtle Fry turned around in her seat. "I think we'll have a nice day after all."

"Oh, yes," promised Mitchell. "It's going to be a fine day."

"And isn't the scenery beautiful this year?"

"Yes, indeed."

"The old Walden place looks good yet, don't it, Rex?"

"Needs paint. Look at that barn."

"I see a giant, Mama," cried Deva. "But if he comes after us I'll eat him up."

"Did you put in the cups, Rex, the way I told you to? Oh, goodness! Well, you just try to remember or we'll have to go all the way back. Gloria, look in the basket and tell Mama if the cups are in."

"I want a sandwich," cried Deva.

"Stop it! Yes, I mean it. Listen, now, if you . . ."

"Don't start bawling now," warned Rex, "or you'll get left by the side of the road."

"The cups are here, Mama," said Gloria. "Could I have this doughnut? It's right on top."

"You'll shut that basket and behave," said Myrtle.

At that Gloria began pinching Deva slyly

until the child had to be taken into the front seat, Mitchell being powerless to control either of them. From this point she looked back, thrusting out her tongue at first one and then the other, until Gloria cried, "Mama, make her stop!"

"Say, can't you get along with your sister even when she's in the front seat?" asked Rex, half turning.

"She's making faces at Mr. Mitchell," replied Gloria.

"Deva! Aren't you ashamed? Well, I'm going to put a stop to that. Mama's ashamed of you."

"Cut it out, now," cried Rex, "or I'll set both of you out in the road."

"Now, now," said Myrtle, "Papa's only joking. He wouldn't put his little girls out in the road to stay all alone. He's only playing." But Deva's cries rose until Myrtle, reaching back to slap Gloria, knocked off Mitchell's hat. "Oh, Mr. Mitchell, what will you think of me? I'm so sorry. Goodness, you'll imagine I'm a terrible woman, I'll bet." She looked back at him laughing, while he brushed his hat.

"Watch out," said Rex, "or I'll get jealous."

This remark appeared to stimulate Myrtle because she reached into one of the baskets and gave both children bananas. Whenever she caught Mitchell's eye she burst into roguish

laughter. "Well," she said, when the car was at the top of the last hill, "just see how it's clearing." She pointed to the sky lavishly. "Just look, Rex!"

"Say, haven't I told you not to ask me to look at anything when I'm trying to drive this blamed car? If you want me to kill all of you, why just keep on pointing out things for me to look at. I don't know how anybody short of God Almighty could drive a car with you in it."

Presently they swung down a slope into a meadow and Myrtle jumped out and began pulling at the baskets which Mitchell had to insist upon carrying. Then they walked through the long grass to a little wood whose coolness came from trees and vines and cliffs which flung down a stream of clear water.

"Just think of it!" began Myrtle. "Yellowstone, Niagara, and neither of them any more beautiful than this."

"Hang it," said Rex, "that old pond to Glover's got this wiped off the map forty ways."

"You never liked it so much when we used to go there," snapped Myrtle.

"Well," said Rex, "I'm going to get wood. Mitchell, will you stay and protect the ladies?"

"He hadn't better leave us two alone, had he,

Mr. Mitchell?" said Myrtle coyly, but the man was gone with Gloria after him, tripping over roots, her thin arms swinging.

"Can't we eat now?" begged Deva, who sat close to her mother with her chin on her knees and her legs and feet completely covered by her dress.

The woman bent over the basket and brought out a quart jar of dill pickles, a large cake, a kettle of doughnuts, and as she set the potato salad on the ground Mitchell felt utterly helpless.

"Can I have a pickle, Mama?"

"Deva, if you don't stop teasing you're going to go hungry. Run and play! Look at all the nice grass there is. Say, if I'd been taken to a place like this when I was a child I'd have taken advantage of it. Isn't it wonderful the way Dora picked up, Mr. Mitchell?"

"I don't like Dora and I don't like Joe," said Deva.

"But, honey girl," began Myrtle, "wouldn't you like wearing a rose-colored dress and carrying a little cushion with a ring on it?"

"No," said Deva.

"Yes, you would, and if you aren't awfully nice to Dora when she comes, why Dora won't let you go to her wedding?"

"Can I have a sandwich now?"

"You can not! Say, won't you let me alone

even when we go on a picnic? Get out there and amuse yourself."

The child stood up and picked her way cautiously to a rock upon which she finally sat with her back to her mother.

"It's all fixed between Dora and Joe. Dora hasn't said a word but I can kind of tell. They had ought to be coming any time now. Joe went around to get the pop and he wanted Dora to say 'hello' to his folks. Mrs. Teeter's poorly," she explained. "Dropsy of the heart and some stomach trouble. But she's every bit a lady even if she was brought up on a farm and she's certainly done a good job bringing up her boys. None of them is sissies and yet they're just lovely to women. That's why I like Joe so much. He's manly and yet he's gentle, too. Deva, don't sit there like that. Get up and do something! Why, if Mama was little like you she'd have climbed all these trees by now and looked into the birds' nests and found a baby squirrel to take home."

At that Deva began an awkward dance on the grass which suddenly ended with her crying, "Here they come! Dora! Dora!" She threw herself against the girl and then ran on to Joe. "Got any candy?" Mitchell heard her ask as he went forward. Then he looked at Dora.

He saw the French blue muslin dress, which,

from its lines and lace, made him know that it had been part of her wardrobe in Glover. Then as he raised his eyes he felt the same sudden catch in his breathing at the restrained fullness of the mouth, its imposed austerity contrasted with the flames of hair which curled over her head outlining ear and forehead in lavish coils. To-day there was the same slowness about her, the savage quiet, but as he looked at the white skin he imagined that beneath it lay the short fur of an animal. For an instant, in that wild green place, her head coiled with massed locks, seemed to look at him from the body of a leopard.

"I'm glad you're better," he remarked.

"Thank you." Her smile was brief.

"Hello, Mitchell," said the boy, and as he grasped his hand the man felt again his simplicity and stubborn definiteness. Then, as Joe put his arm through Dora's Mitchell noticed that she did not seem to resent his closeness and when he made an awkward observation about the place he saw her nod at him with such a glow of appreciation that the boy added an intolerable platitude, blushed, and went back to the car. Mitchell followed and they took the case of pop between them, Dora leading the way through the tall grass. As she plunged ahead Mitchell wondered if Joe was watching the movement of her hips, and then as he glanced at

him he saw that he was not shaken by seductive details but by the realization that this girl was his mate.

Myrtle had spread the cloth and laid out the food. She sat with her legs pushed out painfully in front of her, fanning herself with the paper from the potato salad bowl. Rex was busy with the fire, his slender body bent over a flame. Mitchell saw that Gloria and Deva were missing, but he was silent.

"Hello, folks," said Myrtle, and waved. "Rex's got the sticks all fixed for the weiners and the coffee's going on in two minutes. Hello, Dora! Hi, Joe!" The boy put out his hand and she caught it, trying to rise. "My, you're strong!" she cried, and flashed him her look of overripe health. "Dora's looking fine, too, isn't she?" she continued, arranging her skirt. Then Mitchell saw her look up at Joe and wink. "We've found out what makes Dora well, haven't we? Hi, Dora," she called, "let my nice husband alone and come over here. Stop, he's the only one I've got or expect to have. Yes, we're talking about you," she said with a giggle. "You ought to have seen yourself yesterday, young lady. You looked like a corpse. I guess you'll be all right now." Again she winked at the boy.

Mitchell watched for a shrug, a flush of annoyance, a sign of nausea, but the girl merely

bent over her sister and flicked a small spider from her neck.

"Let's see you two together," cried Myrtle. "Go on, Joe, and stand up with her. I want to see if you two make a good-looking couple," she explained.

It was Dora who moved to the boy and thrust her arm through his, turning her face to him and moving closer as she caught his radiant, half-bashful look. Mitchell noticed the boy's covert shame as Myrtle called Rex to look at them, watched his cheeks flush and his brows draw together as Rex beat him over the back and laughed.

"Go on, now, Rex, and set the coffee on. We want to eat. Or I do," she added roguishly. "I suppose I've got a terrible appetite. Oh, Mr. Mitchell, there you are standing off by yourself again. Come right here and sit down by me. I guess Rex won't mind this time."

As Mitchell sat down beside her he saw not Dora's but Joe's sudden unsteadiness as if their mating had an element of terror in it, of shame, and then he watched the boy in an agony of wretchedness suddenly point to a tree, saying, "I like that kind best." The girl caught his arm closer, pressed against him until Mitchell saw in each movement the alert languor of an animal, of a leopard with a woman's white, sullen face and blaze of coiled hair.

"Don't they look happy?" whispered Myrtle. "I always thought Dora looked best in the clothes Jennie Nimmons down to Glover made for her. She knows her build and what to put on her better than anyone else. And I don't care how expensive clothes she's had on her back since, she's never looked so like herself in anything but this. Say, Dora," she cried, "we're talking about you. Yes, sir, we are, we was just saying how good you looked standing there with Joe."

The boy turned away quickly, half stumbling, and they moved toward the gate.

"Don't go far," called Myrtle, "because we're almost ready to eat. Say, Mr. Mitchell, tell me if you'd cut those pickles in two if you was me. Would you? They're those big dills from Jenkins' . . . Rex! *Rex!* Where's Gloria and Deva?"

"How do I know?" snapped the man. "I've had this blamed fire on my hands the whole time. I can't look after everything."

"But Gloria went with you!"

"I suppose she's fallen in the creek," said Rex.

"Where's Deva? Where is she, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Let's go back toward the car," suggested Mitchell.

"Deva! *Deva!* Can't you hear Mama calling you? Isn't that just like Rex to let them

get lost? He doesn't care anything for his little girls, or for me, either. He doesn't care for anyone but himself—it's always him, never anyone else. What does he care about my suffering now? Look at him back there, not even noticing me!"

Tears came out on her cheeks until her face and neck were blotched with red and faint purple. Her breathing became heavy and Mitchell had never seen her large body so dejected. He shuddered now for fear she would tell him the story of her marriage, of their numerous intimate difficulties, but she began seeking her young again in appalling cries.

"I've never been happy since I left Glover—not for a minute—and I don't know why I've ever put up with him as long as I have when he's treated me worse than a dog ever since we got back from our wedding trip. He's a selfish man and he'll never be different."

Mitchell saw Deva in the back seat of Joe's car and called to her, but she made no answer. "There's Deva," he told her, and the woman rushed forward.

"What do you mean by frightening me so?" she demanded. "Hasn't Mama enough to worry her without your being a naughty, bad girl like this? What are you doing here, anyway? Mama's been almost out of her head for hours thinking you were in the creek drownded or

something. What have you been doing?"

The child looked at them and Mitchell saw that she had been crying with her dress over her head. "Nobody was paying any attention to me," she explained with a scowl and then dropped her head.

"Well, I'd like to know who pays attention to Mama or to Mr. Mitchell. Nobody! Nobody at all! Come on, now, Mama's got to hunt for her other bad girl. The idea," she said dragging her forward, "the idea that Papa and Mama can't bring their two little girls out on a picnic without having them be naughty. Mama's awfully angry with you," she said coldly, and walked back toward the picnic cloth. Then, in an instant she had the child in her arms kissing her so pitiably that Mitchell went on ahead in search of Gloria.

As he hurried through the deep grass he thought of Myrtle, of Rex, of their two children, but his reactions were torpid. He could formulate nothing, feel nothing except the realization that their bondage was as terrible as his own. In a moment, confronted by that laden cloth, Myrtle's pains would be ephemeral. And what of his own, his network of agonies? He had been singularly free of it for several days. Weeks might pass, months, years, but he knew that it waited for him under cover, that when he least expected it there would come that bind-

ing, exultant sense of his bondage. Even as he recalled it happiness spread over him in tortured anticipation. Then he came upon Rex still fiddling with his fire.

"Find the kid?"

"She was in the car."

"They never get hurt," he mumbled. "Know more about taking care of themselves than we do. But women have to have something to worry about. They enjoy thinking the worst. I guess they get a lot out of it, so why should I bother my head? Let 'em go to it. I'll go along with you and we'll find that other kid of mine. Say, is this coffee anywheres near done?"

Mitchell looked at the man's glossy hair, his small, snarling mouth and wiry body. He could see him going from town to town with his sample case selling underwear, see him in his office with his feet on his desk and a cigar in his mouth. He was nervous and restless, a man small in all ways, and yet whose charm to Mitchell was as positive and healthy as that of Myrtle or Joe.

"I never get excited," he said and shook himself, stooping to brush the grass from his trousers. "Now, my wife's always going off her head about something terrible that's always just about to happen and hasn't yet. I've tried to talk her out of it but when she's set you can't do anything with her. She's a stone wall, so I keep my

mouth shut. You have to let them go it, that's the only way out. I guess we'll have some rain. Looks like it. Well, we couldn't have asked for a better summer than this. There she is over there!" He pointed to a tree whose branches extended out over the creek and they hurried to the child who clung there. "Well, you got up, can't you get down?"

The girl had wound her thin arms around the limb which to her was apparently a terrifying distance from the ground. Her stocking had a long rent and her dress was twisted around her so that she could barely move.

"Please help me down, Papa," she called. "Please!"

"Show us how you got up, first."

"I can't move. Honest, Papa, I can't, and I been calling . . ."

"A big girl like you and can't climb down a tree that's smaller than you are!"

At that moment Myrtle appeared with Deva caught in her fertile folds. "Gloria!" she screamed. "Get right down from that tree this minute! Did you hear me?"

The child moved her head. "I can't," she cried.

"Well, at your age," began Myrtle, "I was up and down all the trees on our place. The idea! Ten years old and can't . . . Gloria Fry! Just look at those stockings I put on you

for the first time this morning! I might have known it. Just look!" She set Deva on the ground and rushed to her other child. "Aren't you ashamed? What's Mama going to do if you insist upon tearing your clothing to shreds this way? And look at that clean dress! Get right down!" She began pulling the child's leg. "I'm not going to tell you again. You get down!"

"I get dizzy."

"Dizzy nothing! I'm ashamed of you here in front of Papa and Mr. Mitchell. What'll they think of a big girl like you in such a fix as this?" She examined the long rent in the stocking. "And these nice new stockings that I put on you for the first time this morning. I don't know what I'm going to do with you if you keep on this way. We'll all be in the poor-house next, that's where we'll be, and it'll be your fault, too, for not minding Mama and being a bad destructive girl. . . ."

"Say," interrupted Rex, "your coffee's boiling over."

"Can't you take it off?"

"I don't know anything about coffee," said Rex. "That's not my job."

"No, I suppose your job is to sit in your office and talk to that new typewriter of yours that I never knew you had. Yes, that's your job. You've never done one thing to please me and

I don't suppose you ever will. You're the most selfish man that ever lived and you can't be anything different. I was a fool to think you'd change." She rushed away, red with anger and scorn. "Never mind," Mitchell heard her say as she passed him, "never mind, Rex Fry, you'll be mighty sorry some time—you'll find out a few things, you will. . . ."

"Here you are," said Rex, and helped his child down. "And you keep on the ground after this. Do you hear me? The ground's good enough for me and I guess you can put up with it, too. Isn't that right, Mitchell? Now, don't cut up any more monkey shines to-day, do you hear?"

They walked back in silence until Gloria said, "I was going to surprise you all by climbing a tree."

"Well, next time don't bother. Stay on the ground and use some of the sense God gave you." He turned to Mitchell. "Isn't that right? The ground's always been good enough for me. Oh, quit that blubbering!" he said kindly. "Shut up! It's bad enough to have Dora Weck moaning around. That girl gets me crazy with all her high notions and this and that not good enough. I said to her last night, 'Dora,' I said, 'I'll foot the bills, Dora,' I said, 'and you marry Joe right soon now,' I said. You've gotta let women see who's boss or they'll

run all over you. If you put them in their place they'll be perfectly happy. Believe me, I haven't lived thirty-six years for nothing."

They found Myrtle pouring the coffee, with Deva beside her, a pickle in each hand and her face smeared with icing. Dora and Joe stood watching the clouds move across the sky and as Mitchell drew nearer he heard the boy say in his shy, definite voice, "I always think clouds are just fine." He saw her turn to him, her eyes drawing over him a rich net of ecstasy. "Joe!" he heard her cry in answer to another observation, and he saw that Joe was trembling with the utter awkwardness of his passion and with fear, which, as he turned away from the girl, seemed to mount and burn in his ears.

"Come now," called Myrtle. "We're going to sit down. Come all!"

Mitchell watched Rex arrange himself for his meal on the grass with Gloria beside him. Myrtle, when she was not fretfully commenting on the flavor of her food, turned upon Deva a look of gaunt disappointment and loneliness. "I haven't had time to look in on Clella Fry," she said once, but no one replied. "Poor thing," she cried in a suspiciously ripe voice, "she never had any fun out of life. Never had a thing but work and worry. Just lived from day to day. . . ."

"Well, she isn't dead yet, is she" interrupted

Rex. "Say, don't forget the weiners, Myrtle, after I shaved all those sticks."

"That's right, we've got weiners to roast! And," she added, turning to Deva with a flash of devotion, "Mama's got room for them, too."

Mitchell heard Joe whisper to Dora and saw that they were eating nothing, heard the girl's ecstatic "Joe!" and saw again the animal with the coy white face and savage body; imagined, too, that he saw the leopard's spots shining through the sheer dress, making a clear pattern against the blue. No wonder the boy coughed suddenly and looked off through the trees, his eyes tortured again. But his mouth, his hands and body all denied the agony of that torture and, as he turned to her again, seemed hot with its enchantment.

"We're engaged," he announced presently, and squashed a moth which had lighted on the girl's dress. "Pardon me," he said stiffly as he brushed away the wings, the dust, a foot. The man was sure that for an instant Dora looked upon the boy with sudden loathing. He was sure, too, that in that instant the net of her enchantment broke and left her vision clear because her body seemed chaste, again, and remote.

"How wonderful!" cried Myrtle, assuming amazement as she came to them with two bursting weiners on long sticks.

"But," began Rex, "I don't call that the best news. When's the wedding coming off?"

"Soon," answered Joe, and turned to Dora, but the girl looked at the spot on her skirt attentively. "Just as soon as she'll have it," he said tenderly and put out his hand. Mitchell saw an inexplicable change come over her face as she saw the stubby fingers on her knee, heard her cry out as if her throat were closing in death, and then saw her take a weiner from Myrtle.

"Goodness!" cried Myrtle. "Embarrassed in front of your own folks? Why, Dora! Or did you choke on that horrid salad? I got too much pepper in it and I'm just sick about it. I don't know whether anyone noticed or not. Rex likes it hot but I don't see why I should be spoiling everything just on account of him. Here, take a drink of pop. Why, Dora! Joe, you take her away for a while. I guess she's sick to her stomach," she whispered.

As she walked away, her arms hanging by her sides, Mitchell wondered how her body could appear so impermanent and aloof, frigid, he thought, as he saw Joe put out his hand and then withdraw it.

"Come on, now, Mr. Mitchell, you aren't eating a thing."

"That's right Mitchell, we don't have a picnic every day, you know. Here, Myrtle," he

added kindly, "I'm all through eating, so you sit down and I'll wait on you."

"Mr. Mitchell," said Myrtle, "I don't know how you feel about those things but I thought Joe was the one to be with Dora when she didn't feel just right. You know how it is. If you have your own around at such a time it's never so bad. Now when I feel sick I don't want anybody but my Rex. Do I, Rex?"

"You sure don't, honey," cried Rex.

"And you know how to cure me better than anyone else, don't you, Rex?"

"I sure do."

"Well," said Myrtle suddenly, "I'm sure glad I put off my washing and came to-day."

9

Mitchell sat alone in the blood-red glow of the Frys' parlor lamp between the piano piled with soiled sheets of music and the bright gold mirror which held the bloody shade and a dish of dahlias. The day's newspapers lay beside Rex's smoking stand and a bracelet set with glass glittered from the green carpet. In the corner on a little white chair sat a doll with half her head gone and long spears of hair striking out. Beside the stiff legs which had no feet lay a taxi, three spools, and a tiny black rubber doll with a knitted shirt to its knees. Mitchell looked at

the exotic squares and cubes in the carpet which carried out their pattern in monotonous rows and then as he glanced at the mantel with its line of family photographs, with all but Deva bursting in healthy smiles, he thought of Hester. She would be lying in some soft, deep bed, her white body chaste in its static virginity, her sheer limbs straight and cool under the sheets. At the thought he began to curse her in oaths that piled up like heavy quilts over her body, nailing her to the bed, but as the curses fell he laughed and blood seemed to coat his tongue.

"Well," said Dora Weck.

He saw her in the doorway between the green tapestry curtains, saw her white face and large eyes, the mouth drawn into an insecure smile. She came into the room and he saw that she still wore her picnic dress. He could see the spot the moth had left on her skirt.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

He went into the kitchen to the pail of water that stood on an old stool near the door and as he turned to take a glass from the cupboard he saw that she was behind him, following with her leopard's tread, softly.

"It's not fresh enough," she remarked.

He looked at her and then he took up the pail and went out to the pump. But she was behind him with her glass. "Here," she said, "you needn't pump a whole pailful!" As he pushed

the handle up and down and heard the splash of water on the wooden trough he wondered if all women had that crisp practicality. Then he glanced at her. She was drinking rapidly with her throat thrown back and behind her was the thick black of bushes which seemed, as he watched, to melt and bring into sharper relief the lines of her body, the fierce coils of hair, and the white arms and cheeks. Then he saw the line of breast and the slope of her limbs as she leaned back to get the last drop.

"Thank you," she said.

He stood looking at her, one hand on the pump, and then he saw that she was watching the trees, huge and indefinite as palms at night, that spread out and covered the sky. There was a moon and all about them the deep black was rising to their waists and higher, until it pounded against his ears and throat. "Do you want to go in?" he suggested unsteadily, "or shall we take a walk?"

"I'll just set these things inside so Myrtle won't scold," she answered.

Then she was back and they went around to the front of the house through blackness that rolled away from their feet in waves as they stepped forward and left the lawn smooth like a deep carpet. As they stumbled on the step he glanced up at the house, white, fantastic, and yet secure between clouds of black and those

monstrous trees that covered the sky. Myrtle and Rex were inside and Deva and Gloria and below them the blood-red lamp.

"Did Hester mention me?" he asked quickly.

"No," she answered. "Did you know her?"

He looked at her, grasped her wrists in a sudden burst of strength, and for an instant the dry crust of his body appeared to slip away and leave a new figure, sharp and fresh, cool and hot. Then the streets seemed to dissolve and leave only the body of this girl and the sound of her feet on the walk. He felt a slow ache creep from his wrists up into his arms, and suddenly his body felt hot.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To hell," he replied lightly, and laughed as he felt her quiver. But his body grew hotter as he listened to the soft pad of her feet beside him on the walk. She had made no movement to turn back, and as he glanced down at her, he saw that her body was moving with his, her arms, her legs, in some slow seduction that stung him.

They crossed the white road under the street lamp and heard the crackle of broken backs as they trod on beetles that had flown to the light and fallen. Then they pitched into thick gloom and the man, remembering the fiery coils of hair so near his face, and the long, thick body of a leopard chastely hiding beneath the sheer

dress, felt terror. But they burst out into the light of the main street and paused in front of a window upon which was painted, "The Heart of the Home," and looked into the center of a heart and saw a gleaming washing machine with black knobs and white paint and scrolls of gold with touches of red. Across the street was a window which exposed an entire family dressed in light cotton underwear, some sitting in small wicker chairs, some standing, but all apparently happy and unconscious. Mitchell could imagine Rex at his desk and the new stenographer, in a very short skirt, at his side taking dictation.

They went on to the courtyard and into the dark again. Suddenly a man rose up from a bench and as he spoke Mitchell remembered the bright day he had watched three men take Addison Bowood from the canal. He had felt nothing except wonder, a kind of breathless awe at the swollen, dripping corpse and the brightness all around. Now as he looked at Mark Johns he felt the same stir.

"Hello, Mark," he said.

"Well, Mitchell!"

He winced as he thought of the boy who had sung to them in Hester's drawing-room and as he remembered his agony when Mark had told him about Hester's kiss, he felt the return of his old hatred for an instant. Then, with the sud-

den pressure of the girl's hand against his, as if recalling him to his passion, the world slipped away.

"Charming night," said Johns, and Mitchell introduced him to Dora. They walked slowly under the trees with the girl between them, silent until Johns inquired about Amy Hemingway.

"She's just back from Europe. Let's drop in and see her."

"Curious how I've neglected everyone," mumbled Johns. "I don't go about much any more. It's been years since I've seen you, Mitchell."

"Not so long," said Mitchell, angered by the unchanged quality in the man's voice. He remembered that Hester had adored his voice, and that like his own futile sensitivity, she had made it impressive and permanent. Never, he thought, could he escape the trivialities of his reactions any more than Mark could hope to escape that deep, rich voice.

"How is Mrs. Johns?" he asked.

"Better, thank you. She has lumbago and the weather's been bad."

As the girl's leg struck his he was again engulfed in hot waves that spread over him and he put out his hand to grasp her arm, but John's voice suddenly cut through the dark.

"Do we cross here?"

"Yes, right through here."

They came to the last stretch of park which

lay in a point between intersecting streets and whose end was marked by a bowlder, a bench and a lamp post. Mitchell glanced at the man in the harsh, dead light, and as he looked he imagined the deathless face of Hester Linden lifted toward Mark's, the lips, the eyes, and he felt his throat tighten and close. "My God!" he cried suddenly. "Why don't they plant some grass in this park?"

"The boys run over it so much that it isn't worth it," said Dora.

Mitchell ached to know why Mark had broken with Hester and for a moment he wanted to leave and rush down the long road to her house, to her white hands and maddening body that hid behind soft silk, to sink into the protection of her cold flesh which, by some miracle, he would warm as they listened to the icy torrents of words that would never again chill their blood.

It again occurred to him that she was almost old enough to be his mother. But he needed to enter her, to be inclosed by her flesh as he had been inclosed by darkness. If only he could fasten his hands upon her heart, fasten her eyes upon his eyes, her lips upon his, and have that moment closed and final.

"Of course," said Mark, "this is it. But isn't it rather late for a call? It's almost twelve."

"Amy's always about," mumbled Mitchell.

"There she is now," he added as the porch swing creaked.

She was at the door in a white gown which spread out behind her as she came toward them laughing. She gave a little cry when she recognized Mark and threw out her hands. "I really ought to kiss you," she said. Then she reached for Mitchell's arm and he introduced Dora.

"Oh, yes, indeed. How do you do, Miss Weck?"

"It's awfully late," began Mark.

"Foolish! I adore it."

She led them to the porch. "Mark, tell us where you've been hiding all this time. Stephen, try some of these divine cigarettes that just came. Aren't they wonderful? Do you smoke, Miss Weck? Now, Mark, I want to hear everything about you and I'll ask questions so that you can't keep anything back." She seated herself in the swing and the light shone on her gold slippers and the high arch of her foot which was intensified by slender, dazzling heels. "Aren't these the most wonderful cigarettes you've ever smoked? Ronald sent them. He's a dear that way."

"How is Ronald?" asked Mark.

"Very well, I imagine. But I get so irritated at him for that reason. I've never seen him when he didn't feel corking or ripping or splen-

did or something silly like that. He's perfectly absurd that way."

"And," put in Mitchell, "you prefer to have him ill so that you can be the sympathetic mother and the beautiful nurse who gives up her life for him."

"That's it," she agreed and laughed, "I adore men who have something wrong with them."

Mitchell shuddered. But Hester, he thought, liked to take healthy men and cripple them, make them her slaves and then turn them out. If they stayed around there would be minor irritations and she would gradually lose her hold, but if she sent them off herself she could hold them for good, providing they were fools like himself.

"Mark, you seem thinner."

"I believe I am."

"So is Ronald."

"You enjoyed Paris this time? Wasn't it Paris?"

"Yes," she answered wearily. "Paris part of the time. When I was there Beaver Falls seemed charming and now I want to go back. I'm dying to go back. After all," she concluded, "my friends are there. Nobody here seems to like me very much."

Mitchell wondered if he and Mark were cruel enough to let her remark pass without comment and he found, after a moment, that they were.

No one spoke for a time and then Amy went into the house and returned with ginger ale and cake. She launched a long story about the revenue officers and her pearls, her gowns that she had worn and how they tried to make her pay duty on them, her anger, her perfectly devastating anger which left her so weak that she had to go right to bed when she reached her hotel, and she hadn't been able to wear one of the gowns because they were so saturated with that dreadful place that it made her violently ill to think of them.

The intricate white frock that she was wearing was obviously one of the unfortunate ones, Mitchell decided, and started to speak, but as he caught the dazed look on her face he held back. She seemed, for a second, to be lost in her lies.

"I suppose I'm getting old and that's why I make such a frightful row about everything. But Hester's almost fifty, isn't she," she said unexpectedly.

Mark did not stir except to finger the cretonne on his chair. But he finally said, "Yes, she must be getting along."

"Mark," she began, "I hadn't heard you were married until Stephen told me the other night. We were talking about Hester and the old days," she said pointedly. "Miss Weck, do have another cake, they're so awfully good. What perfectly gorgeous hair that child has!"

she said coldly and then looked at Mark. "Mark, I'm excited. Did I know her?"

"I don't remember," he said, "and yet you may have seen her plenty of times. She was Hester's personal maid for eight years," he explained simply.

Suddenly Mitchell was suffocated. It was as though Hester herself was slowly closing in on him through an infinite number of projections. What was Amy? Dora Weck? Mark? All three were shadows of Hester coming closer and closer. What was the town? Merely the ugly shell that held a strange garden, and inside the garden, breathing into it and through it, was Hester. The impulse to go to her came on him so strongly that he took hold of the chair.

"Of course I remember her," he heard Amy say. "She was a darling person. Hester adored her. But how did Hester ever let you take her away, Mark? That was clever of you."

Mark smiled. "I never found out," he replied evenly.

It occurred to Mitchell that he had never believed that his separation from Hester was permanent. In every other part of his life he could accept finality, but not in this. He must go back sometime, one day he would be there with her in the rich, empty silence of her long, warm room. He was appalled and frightened at his childishness and then as he looked at Amy and

Mark he felt despair settle over him. It was not natural to have one's life so poignant, he reflected. It should be a smooth, muffled dream of transient meanings, full of inevitable quarrels and utilitarian attachments, all the joy in the major things of life, food, propagation, hunting and sleep.

"Wasn't her name Vega, or something like that?" he heard Amy ask.

"No," replied Mark gravely. "Hester called her that because she didn't like her real name."

"Oh, really. What was her name?"

"Hannah!"

"Yes, that's rather bad."

"I know," said Mark, "but I couldn't put up with Vega."

Mitchell tried to remember her but he could see only Agda with her sallow cheeks and sunken chest serving coffee in the arbor.

"Where are you living, Mark?"

"On the Ashton road, out past Hester's about a mile."

"I've never noticed houses out that way."

"It's back from the road. You'd hardly find it."

"But I want to. I mean to!"

"Won't all of you?" asked Mark looking around.

"I'll bring Mitchell out very soon," said Amy, "and then gather you and Hannah up and

we'll have dinner here. How's that, Mark? Do you think Hannah would like it?"

"I'm sure she'd be delighted, Amy."

"Oh, Mark, please sing something, please!"

Mitchell knew that if the man sang his voice would rise as it had when they sat in the long drawing-room with the curtains pulled together shutting out the moon and shadows. He could feel the soft silk of Hester's gown sweep his leg as she paused to adjust the lamp near the piano, he could hear the light sounds as she moved and he caught the odor, not of perfume, but of clear, cold skin, of austere arms and lips.

"Come along, Mark," said Amy, and took his hand.

"Are you sure you want me to?" asked the man pretending, as Mitchell well knew, to be the shy, charming lad Hester had adored.

"Don't be absurd, Mark. We all want to hear you. Miss Weck has never heard you, but I know that she wants to. Don't you, Miss Weck?"

Mitchell felt that Dora's name had never grated more unpleasantly upon his ears. And Amy appeared to delight in giving it a sharp, flat ring when she said it. But Dora, completely at ease, was regarding Amy in the cool manner of Hester. "Of course I want to hear Mr. Johns sing," she said.

"Well, come along, all of you," cried Amy,

and sailed on ahead, her arm through Mark's, her shoulders bent forward and her head raised toward his. And then at the piano she made lavish preparations and threw the music on the floor so that both men grew flushed and hot and Mitchell finally told her he would pick up nothing more. "Not even me?" she asked coyly, assuming vivacious surprise. "Mark, you would pick me up if I fell, wouldn't you?" She began playing a few measures. "What was that little thing Hester used to like so well, Mark? Do you remember?" She fell slowly into its rhythm.

Mark began to sing and at the sound Mitchell felt himself grow hot and cold. He caught the twinge and then the torment of austere arms which would never wither, of a deathless face which looked without feeling upon the world, of his own body which would die and with it his ears and eyes and his voice, of his tiny moment of life spent and bound in dreams.

He felt Dora's hand on his arm and looked down at her white face and followed her out of the house into the darkness. The lights had changed the bushes into golden spikes that bristled from the thick black that was deep and soft as water, and everywhere Mitchell saw his desire and his death.

"Good-by," he called to Amy, who had come on to the porch, "we're strolling along. This child has to go to bed." And he heard Dora

say good night to Amy and to Mark, whose voice rushed after them in its illusion of personal warmth and kindness.

"That was a nice song," she said.

He made no answer.

"I've heard her speak of Mark Johns, I think."

The words came on him like fresh pain and then he knew that she was trembling, holding her body taut and stiff as steel. "I think Miss Hemingway has beautiful clothes," she said softly. "And I liked her slippers. I've never seen such thin heels—I don't know how they hold her up. I should think they'd break."

He laughed, "She buys everything in Paris."

"Imagine going there and seeing all those beautiful streets and the dresses and people."

He knew that as she walked she was crying and that from time to time her hand went up to her eyes and then she would laugh and point to a crooked street or to a house whose windows were like eyes. Sometimes a dog barked and ran to them smelling of their clothes and once a cat sprang into a tree and scratched the rough bark with her claws until pieces fell on the walk. All around them persisted the deep black of night.

"Are we going this way? But why?" she asked.

He saw that they were on the road to Hester's

house and that soon they would be in the little wood where white bells lay upturned in deep grass and where the deathless rise and fall of Hester's breathing would plunge them into radiance. Presently he caught the air which seemed to be her breath and he lay down on the ground utterly weary.

Somewhere in the house she was sleeping in her deep, white bed, her hair in coils on the pillow, her limbs straight and austere. She had no need of him or any other man or woman because she was locked away from all desire in the caverns of her heart. But she could keep them all from other women and other men by sucking their blood for which she had no use, leaving them white and dry, one corpse upon another, waiting always for the moment when she might let them taste for an instant of her blood and be drawn back to the deathless beat of her heart, to the womb from which they had come.

She would lie cold and still in her caverns so that she might drain the rivers and hills and rocks of life and men and women of blood, so that she, alone, might remain deathless in a world of change, her womb heavy with all. And for those who could not forget their own lives, their shops and neat homes, for them she would lift her lips for an instant upon small white teeth and they would vanish into dust.

He could see her body now as she lay there

cool and remote, far from need or desire, her limbs austere and yet rich with the blood of their veins. And she would stir in her bed when morning came and yawn as Agda came in to raise the shades. She would lie there, a monster with a cold heart and icy flesh, and never would she give to any of them, in return for their blood, a moment of rest in her arms.

"Come," said the girl suddenly, "the ground is very damp."

WE ARE INCREDIBLE

II

Dora Weck

1

Dora looked around her little room and wondered if Mitchell knew she had stayed awake the whole night. She wondered too if the damp ground had given him pains in his arms and legs and if she dared ask him how he had slept. There had been no sound from his room since he had put out the light at three that morning after they had crept up the stairs quietly for fear of waking Myrtle, shuddering over the creaking boards. She remembered the long scream her bed springs had given when she got into bed and the sudden tears which had made her turn her face into her pillow and lie there shaking. Back in Glover she had never been like that.

She should have been down in the kitchen with Myrtle hours ago helping her get Rex's breakfast and pacifying the children. At that moment she should be in the hideous dining room which smelled of fried eggs and potatoes passing plates of bread and dishes of jam. And in a few weeks they expected her to be in her own home, lifting her face for Joe Teeter's unexciting kiss when he left for the creamery.

But it seemed a monstrous lie that she would ever be with that awkward, stupid fellow, or

with anyone but Mitchell. They would stay in Beaver Falls just until they were married and everyone could see what a fine man she had and then they would fly to Paris. The thought of Mitchell's long white hands, the sharp memory of his shoulders and his skin, made her sink down on her bed in sudden humility. She dared not wait to see if he would ask her to breakfast with him on the porch. If he merely looked at her in that cold way, assuming that she had eaten . . . She put her hands over her face. But why had he thrown himself down on the ground before her? Why had he taken her arm on the way home and never spoken once and then suddenly held her against him in the dark by the porch? The air had been cool then, but now it was hot and dry and her clothes felt damp against her skin. She looked into the glass and saw that her hair was curled against her forehead in thick, wet coils and that her cheeks were red. Then the thought of Mitchell made her body feel bright and hot like the sun and a terrible hatred for Hester Linden spread through her brain.

The screen door banged and she saw Rex Fry hurry down the walk. Then Gloria began practicing on the piano and Myrtle rushed up the stairs and burst into the room.

"Mrs. Smelts passed on last night. There she was in church Sunday looking as well as any-

one could expect to look at ninety, and now she is gone—just like that. And there's those eight children of hers and all of them living just for her and now they're all alone and don't know what to do. And Alma Utter's baby isn't expected to live through the day. I'm going down now to call up the doctor and find out how the poor little thing is. It'll be the next, probably. And poor Alma! I bet when she sees my healthy kiddies and all she feels sad. You know she worked so hard to have one, too—she was telling me once—and I guess it wasn't God's wish because now the little thing is miserable all the time, never had a well day in its life. A fit every time they feed it the wrong food. I said to Rex this morning, 'Rex,' I said, 'we certainly are blessed. Look at our two fine kiddies and our nice home and all.' This just shows you, Dora, that you can't never tell what's going to happen in this world."

"I know," said Dora.

"Now, you come along down and get your breakfast eaten so's we can get the dishes done up. I'm going to Aid this afternoon. Goodness, I've got so much on my mind, Dora. Oh, I can't tell you how all this weighs me down. It's just like my own was dead or sick."

They walked down the stairs together and Myrtle, shouting to make herself heard above the piano, turned her large, red face again and

again to Dora with, "You can't tell how anything'll work out in this world." Then in the dining room she sat down and fanned herself with the morning paper. "Dora, sit down and eat. Deva. *Deva!* What did Mama say about going into the road? You keep out of there, like I told you. Now, look at that! Isn't Rex the most careless man you ever see? Look at those ashes. I've told him constantly not to use his coffee cup, but he has to for that reason. He's always got to show me who's boss around here." She glanced up at the clock. "Well, I guess Mr. Mitchell's not coming down for breakfast this morning. Did you hear him get in last night? Four or five in the morning, something like that. I hadn't closed my eyes yet when he came. I don't understand what keeps him out so late nights—I can't see what he does. But you know how men are and I sometimes wonder where he is and if it's anything elevating that he's doing."

"He seems very nice."

"Oh, he's wonderful. I'm not saying a word against him even though I have found bottles in his closet. He's a perfect gentleman and all that."

Dora wondered if Mitchell had died in the night, if he had gone to his room and taken poison and if, while he lay there in the dark, his heart had suddenly stopped. "Does he seem healthy to you?"

"Well, I wouldn't say he had a remarkable strong constitution but I think he'll hold his own for a while. These thin people bear up a lot longer than us heavier ones. Take Mrs. Smelts. She didn't have a pick on her and lived to be ninety. It's not the same with her gone, somehow. *Deva!* I said get out of that road! Next you'll have to come in the house if you don't mind me. Do you want to get run over and cause us a lot of bother and suffering just because you're a naughty girl and won't mind her mother? Now I am going to spank."

She rushed out of the house while Dora went into the kitchen and, without reason, went down cellar. She sat down on a bench that held a basket of soiled clothes and put her head on the wringer of the washing machine while Deva's cries rose high above Gloria's faulty chords. Then the telephone rang and Myrtle's heavy steps went across the floor. She heard Myrtle call her and she went upstairs dumb and bewildered.

"They say there's hope for the baby after all. Mrs. Torkey just called and said it was out of danger. My, that's a load off me. There's the doorbell. Goodness, I don't know how I can be expected to keep this house decent when it's always something. If it isn't one thing it's another."

She returned presently with Joe Teeter.

"Here's the boy," she cried jovially. "Bless your heart, Joe, if she don't appreciate you I'll whip her until she does. How's that, eh?" She led them back to the parlor. "Sit down and talk it out, that's the best way. No, you needn't practice for a while, Gloria. But you can't play, no, I said! Come back here, you're going to help me with the dishes. It's too bad a big girl like you can't help her mother more. I've got so much work I can't see."

Dora looked at Joe, who sat on the piano stool twirling his cap. He looked heavy and sad, as if he might burst out crying, and she hated the way his trousers bulged around his feet. When he stood up they seemed ready to fall off and they oozed down around his dusty shoes in flapping folds. She thought of the way they had sat on her porch in Glover, Joe silent, always clearing his throat before he spoke, and then awkwardly trying to put his arm around her in the dusk behind the vines. Then the soft, wet feel of his lips on her cheek and the frightened sound in his throat as he finally told her good night and stumbled off the porch, turning back with that silly smile on his face. And then the time he had rushed back to her and buried his face in her lap, sobbed, and then run off! She felt worried for fear he might put his head in her lap again and tremble and cry. Myrtle might come in from the kitchen and Mitchell

might come downstairs and see the whole thing. No wonder Hester had been disgusted with Joe. She remembered her words, "Joe is not the one for you, Dora. You must wait for some one who can give you the big thing. So many women have to be content with the lesser—but you aren't one of them." But Hester hadn't known she would meet a man like Mitchell.

"I wish it wouldn't ever stop!" cried Joe.

"What do you mean?"

He leaned forward, his eyes wet and bright, his hands clenched together. Moisture stood out on his forehead and he took out his handkerchief and wiped it away before he cleared his throat and spoke. "I mean I feel so good sitting here with you. I wish it wouldn't ever stop. I mean you're so—wonderful, Dora."

She stood up suddenly, thinking she heard sounds from Mitchell's room. "Come on outside, Joe." As he brightened and held out his hand she added, "It's hot in here."

He followed her into the yard and she saw the trees that had been so large the night before, the bushes that had been banked against the house in black, soft masses and the house, itself, that had been white and looming. Now it looked bleak and in need of paint and the grass was dry and crackled under their feet as they went around to the garden. There was the pump; there he had stood with his hand on the handle

while she had felt different from ever before.

They went back to the little step at the end of the garden and sat down. On one side were the large-veined rhubarb leaves and on the other the corn stood high in the sun, its ears bursting with yellow floss. Dora felt the old, intolerable scorn as she saw the boy's black-rimmed finger nails and caught the strange, damp odor of his hair.

"You know how I feel, Dora. I can't talk about it. But you aren't like other girls. You've got something none of them have got. Don't you remember that night I met you at the social and took you home? We sat on your porch for a long time."

"I don't remember," she said.

"And the next day I went around to your place and in the afternoon I asked you to go to the Fair with me and I never thought you'd go. Say!" he cried, his voice thick with emotion, "remember those hogs? Remember that big fellow with the spots and the one that weighed four hundred? Whew!"

"I don't remember," she said.

"And then we went through the fancywork place and on to where the ladies were serving coffee and I drank three cups and got away with it. Gosh! And then the races. Remember that horse I bet on, Dora, and how she won in the end when nobody thought she would? Gosh,

I hollered when she came in with the gong ringing."

"Didn't it rain, too?" she asked.

"We had showers off and on all day," he replied and was silent.

Dora heard the water running into the bath tub and she knew that Mitchell was not dead and that he was taking his bath. In half an hour she would see him, perhaps sooner, and she could go into the dining room and stand in the doorway while he ate his breakfast on the porch. He might even ask her to join him and she would sit there, happy and frightened, but her eyes never flinching.

"I bought you a different ring, Dora. I thought after I had such bad luck with the first that I'd get a different one."

She looked down at the velvet box which sprang open and saw a diamond set in platinum.

"Joe!" she cried and took the box in her hands and stood up against the corn with the sun shining hot in her face. "Why, Joe!"

"You wait," he said proudly, "the wedding one is going to be better than this even."

She pushed the ring on her finger and held out her hand so that the sun made it flash in colored rays. Then she pressed the lid of the box against her cheek, half mad with the soft touch of the velvet, and again she looked down

at her hand. She could see her body in white satin and her feet in slippers, gold with thin heels, and on her head a lace veil that fell in folds as she moved forward over the thick carpet. She could hear the bells and half see the people, hear their murmurs of awe as she moved down the aisle. And the evening paper would say that the bride was beautifully attired in point lace and carried a bride's bouquet of lilies of the valley and roses and that she was one of the popular young ladies of the town, a recent graduate of the Glover High School where she had been a favorite with all of her schoolmates. And the happy couple would leave on the midnight train for Yellowstone Park where they would sojourn for several weeks.

"Myrtle," she cried suddenly and ran toward the house, "Myrtle, look at my ring!"

She went into the kitchen and through to the dining room. Mitchell stood in the doorway of the porch, the morning paper in his hand, his face beautifully smooth, his eyes drawing her to him. She put her hands behind her and went forward.

"How are you this morning, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Quite well, thank you." He turned and went on to the porch. "How about you?"

"I'm very well. You slept so long I thought you might be sick or something." She dared not look at him for fear her cheeks would grow

red and her eyes waver. "I've been up a long time. I couldn't sleep last night."

"Did our walk upset you?"

She flushed. "Oh, no."

"Have you had your breakfast?"

"No, I haven't."

"Sit down and have some with me, won't you?"

When he took out his handkerchief she noticed that it was fine and soft and had an initial embroidered in the corner. And then her hands and feet seemed to swell and grow incredibly large and bulky and a sense of awkwardness fastened her to the chair and brought out perspiration on her face and neck.

"My gracious!" cried Myrtle from the back door. "Mr. Mitchell, what do you think of me? Have you been waiting long? I just run over to Miss Miller's to tell her about Mrs. Smelts passing away and all. Well, one good soul passed out but another was saved. Isn't that the way, though. I guess everything's for the best after all." At this she began to cry and moved on to the pantry.

As Dora met his eyes again her body turned bright and she felt something pull her closer until it seemed that she would fall into his arms. "I'm not hungry," she said very low when he invited her to have some fruit. "No, thank you. Nothing at all."

She moved in her chair and rested her cheek on her hand, looking vaguely at the floor. A haze wrapped her for an instant and only the man and herself existed. Then her body seemed to melt like hot gold and a terrible, quivering joy spread over her.

"I cooked you some prunes this morning, Mr. Mitchell, and here's your coffee and toast. Here Mrs. Smelts was as well as anyone last Sunday in church. Just imagine Mrs. Smelts being taken out to the cemetery in the hearse and she's been to every funeral and supper in our church for the last fifty years. Goodness, it's more than that! But you'll see a wonderful crowd out for her." Suddenly she began sobbing again. "What if it was one of my little girls that was taken? And who knows when I will be? And what will they do without me? Rex'd marry again like as not and my little girls . . ." She hurried out of the room.

"Won't you take a piece of toast?" asked Mitchell, but as Dora looked up he did not meet her eyes.

"No," she said. "No, thank you."

She wished he would speak of their walk through the dark and the moment when he had held her in the shadows by the porch. Then as she watched his slender fingers move about the table, saw the white skin and pink nails, she felt some monstrous inequality between them,

and again she felt despair. She thought of Hester and of the importance she had felt with her. All that had fallen from her with Myrtle and Rex and she was treated as if she were no different from them. Hester had understood her, she had seen what she really was. Suddenly she nodded to Mitchell and went up to her room. From her window she looked down upon Joe, who sat where she had left him, a self-conscious smile on his face, his cheeks flushed and full.

"Joe," she called, and he looked up at her eagerly. "I've got some work, so don't you wait, Joe. See you to-night," she added, and left the window.

2

She lay on her bed and thought of Hester, of the miraculous words that had sprung to her lips when she had sat with her in the arbor after dinner, the leaves blowing, all the murmuring sounds of insects and water. But as the old power spread over her again she drew away from it, remembering the misery of the last few days and the stiff, cold face of Hester as she bid her good-by there on the porch.

But she wished that Mitchell might see how important she was in Hester's house and then he wouldn't treat her as if she were no different

from Myrtle or Rex or the children. He would see that she was of another order, like Hester, and— But how could he have let her leave the room and not stop her? Couldn't he see that she was not like these coarse people whose minds were on food and diseases all day long?

Hester's house was cool and peaceful and one night she had looked at the woman sitting still in her chair and a frenzy of adoration had come over her. She had rushed from the long room into the garden and flung herself against the crooked tree and looked up at the sky, her throat burning with stars, her head light. Over her and through her had spread the rhythm of Hester's breathing and she had felt that she was Hester, she had known that now she was a miraculous angel with spread wings, and even her voice had been different, richer, deeper. Tears came into her eyes as she remembered the times she had wanted to kneel to the woman, serve her, die for her.

Again she heard her calm words, "Go, if you want to, Dora," and she heard herself answer, "But do you want me to go?" and Hester had only pointed to the flowers and said something casual. In a few weeks Myrtle would become irritable and Rex surly unless she married Joe and since she had lived with Hester she feared taking care of herself, even the thought of work and loneliness filled her with terror. She turned

on the bed in confusion and as she stared up at the walls they looked cruel and strange to her eyes. She couldn't marry Joe or Mitchell, even, or any other man. They would touch her and she would wither and grow hideous like Myrtle and all the others but if she kept beyond their touch like Hester she would stay beautiful and young and they would worship her. There was no place in the world for her. She turned to the wall as Myrtle pitched into the room.

"Oh, Dora, are you giving in again like the other day? I want you to brace right up and stop worrying about yourself." She went over to the bed and Dora felt her rough, moist hand on her shoulder. "Shame on you," she cried. "You're all in a fever again and you look like death and destruction. Now, pull right out of it!"

"Do you want me to help you?"

"Where's Joe?"

"He went."

"Can't you be decent to the poor fellow? I'm getting tired of the way you treat that boy—he's the nicest fellow I ever see in my life. I don't know what Rex's going to say when I tell him you haven't made any plans for the wedding yet. Listen, we've both got your good uppermost in our minds, so can't you let us act for you? Do you think your own sister would advise you if she didn't think it was right? And Mama

wanted it, Mama liked him and she wanted to see you happy and raising up a family like others. Dora, are you afraid or something?"

"No."

"Well, it's nothing at all and you'll find yourself happier than you've ever been. Look at me! I've never regretted my marriage for one second. There's nothing better than letting a man show you how to live, I'm all for it, personally, and I look at life a lot different since I married Rex. I didn't know a thing when we married and now I can carry on a conversation intelligently with anyone, I don't care who it is. You need a man to straighten you out, I can see that plain."

"Did you finish the dishes?"

"Yes, Gloria helped me while you were out with Joe. Tell me, Dora, did you two decide on anything definite?"

Dora put out her hand and showed Myrtle the ring. Her sister bent over it and gurgled in her throat trying to estimate the cost. "He's spent a fortune on that," she cried. "Haven't you even made up your mind about the date? Honestly, if a man cared that much for me you bet I'd snap him up. He never bought that in Beaver Falls, that's plain as day. He got it in Chicago or Milwaukee, as sure as I'm sitting here. Is he coming to-night?"

"Yes."

"My soul, he's got a good business and he's far ahead of the other young fellows around here. Joe could have any girl he wanted and now you turn your nose up at him. Dress up to-night. Don't put on one of those plain things you wore to Miss Linden's. Can't you get down your graduation dress? Just look at the whole thing reasonably. Here Joe is your own age, steady, healthy, a fine fellow and a good provider and he'll make a wonderful father, Joe will. I want you to make it definite to-night just when it'll come off."

"Yes, we will."

"But do you mean that, or are you going to put it off?"

"No, I will."

"Well, I certainly hope so. Of course Rex and I love having you with us, Dora, but we can't keep you for good, much as we'd like to. We've got our own to look after and educate and it wouldn't be fair to them. Now, get up, because we're going right downstairs this minute and you're going to stop thinking about yourself."

"I will, Myrtle."

"Come out of that corner, Deva!" cried the woman as they went down. "What are you doing in there? The idea of sitting around moping in the corner. Get out in the open and play like other little girls. Do you want Mama

to be ashamed of you because you're not like other children? Answer me!"

"I'm tired," said the child. "I don't want to."

"Tired nothing. Wait until you have to work the way Mama does and you'll have reason to be tired. Well, Mr. Mitchell, you're back early. Will you amuse Dora and keep her from thinking about herself? The doctor said she wasn't to for a minute even."

"I'll see what I can do," said Mitchell.

"Don't let her say anything about herself, either," warned Myrtle as she went back to the kitchen. "And, Dora, see that Deva keeps moving. She needs exercise. That child is absolutely dying because I can't get her to play like other children. I don't know what's to become of her if she keeps on this way.

"Deva!" she shouted from the dining room window. "Get up from that grass, I said, and keep moving. Don't you start to bawl or I'll whip you good."

Dora felt slow, sullen anger sting her as they sat down on the step and she saw Mitchell's indifference, his calm, impersonal manner and cool way of dismissing her, even though she sat close to him. She felt happier by imagining how sorry he would feel sometime for the way he was treating her. Sometime he'd beg for a look and she wouldn't even bother. Her throat filled and she put her head down on her knees.

"That woman ought to be burned at the stake!"

She lifted her head and looked at him. "What woman?"

"Hester Linden."

"Do you know her well?"

"Yes." Then he repeated it in a rising tone. "Yes. Yes, I know her."

"She's given me everything."

"Nonsense. She makes you think that."

She threw out her hands. "But she's made me. What was I before I went to her? Why, I owe everything to her."

"Yes, you owe your cowardice to her. She's sucked you dry. You haven't an atom of will power left. You're dead from the neck down."

"She is the only one that ever made me feel happy and she told me that the real life is, not this life that these people know, but the real life that they are too common to know about."

"I know that sterile talk. I've thought about it until I could wring her neck a thousand times over. It's a lie and . . ."

"But you don't understand," she put in, "that she lets anyone do as he pleases. She doesn't make demands. She leaves you free."

Her blood ran cold at his laugh. "And are you free, Dora? I suppose it's making a person free to tell him he's an angel and that this isn't the real world. Tell him the world isn't good

enough for him and then he can shrink away and be disappointed all his life, if he's fool enough. No, she doesn't eat a person down. She's a gentlewoman that looks at the stars and talks about Plotinus after dinner."

"Oh, you don't understand!" But while he talked she found herself following, agreeing, until it was as though she spoke and as if her own voice sounded in her ears. A wave of terrible joy went over her as he went on savagely tearing Hester, slaying her until the blood flowed over them both, her blood. "I know. Yes, that's right," and her voice was low and savage like his voice and her eyes flashed as she tried to pierce him with a fiery look.

"God!" he cried. "You can curse her for hours and she never goes and you can never quite believe that you're talking about her."

She felt his eyes on her ankle and then on her knee and she did not move but sat there, bent forward, her eyes on his face.

"You," he began unsteadily, "you've got to get over it soon. She'll eat you up. . . ."

They saw Deva walk around the side of the house wearily and heard her tiny breathless comments, fragments of talk as if she were the mother talking to a naughty child. "Mama's going to give you a whipping if you aren't a good girl," they heard her say. "Mama's all out of patience with you."

Dora heard the same words sound over and over in her brain until she was afraid she would shout them to Mitchell. In a moment she might be saying to him, "Don't you know that I love you?" She felt frozen with fear as she imagined how easily her lips could open and form those words.

"You've forgotten that people have wills of their own. We all forget that when we've been with Hester. It's amazing how powerful a sterile old maid like that can be. Of course, she gets them all in adolescence and that's the trick, but even at that it's amazing. Well, women give some marvelous illusions, even the dumbest of them."

His words fell with the regularity of rain and she did not grasp their meaning. She could only feel the pain of her body and the need of her throat to shout that she loved him. Again his cruelty seemed intentional, his indifference which took no account of her, even his voice which struggled with the image of Hester as if to free himself.

He got up and walked back and forth, his hands clenched behind him, his head thrown back, and it seemed to the girl that, as he circled around her, he was closing in upon her, freezing her in terror. He stopped and sat down and again she felt her body melt like hot gold and her terror dissolve in incredible bliss

as he looked at her, his face torn with misery. And then as he put his hand in her lap she bent down quickly and laid her mouth upon it.

3

She knew that he had drawn away his hand and that Myrtle was standing in the doorway between them. She knew that she was scolding her again and commanding her to stop thinking about herself. "Pull out of it!" and then she felt the woman's breath on her neck as she whispered, "What will Mr. Mitchell think of you? Now, brace right up."

"Suppose I take her for a walk," suggested Mitchell.

"Now, Mr. Mitchell, you've surely got something you'd rather do. Don't put yourself out for me. I'd be quite unhappy if you did."

"Will you go?" Dora heard him ask and without speaking she got up and opened the screen door.

"Dora!" cried Myrtle, "where's your manners? Can't you answer?"

"That's quite all right," said Mitchell, and followed her down the step.

"Just a minute, Mr. Mitchell. What about your lunch? It's almost time."

"I've just finished breakfast," he began.

"But you've got to eat something. Deva!

Does Mama have to speak to you again? Dora, if you're going on a walk come right back and change your shoes. Come on. It won't take a minute and you'll be glad you bothered."

"Just a minute," she whispered to the man, and went back.

"Shame on you," said Myrtle as she passed to go upstairs. "Can't you even answer when you're spoken to?" And while she was hunting through the closet for her old shoes she heard Myrtle urging the man to let her fix a lunch for them. "You'll need it. You can't tell me anything about walking. Never you mind, I'm going to fix you up some sandwiches." She heard her rush to the kitchen and caught the sickening creak of the refrigerator and the clatter of the bread can and the knife.

She took down one of the straight white dresses that Hester had ordered for her and put it on, felt the cool silk against her hot body and thought of Hester's cold hands. But the memory of Mitchell made her body light again and active. She wanted to leave the house and run down the road to Barden's wood and then vanish and have him look and look. She would never return and he would never stop hunting. Then vague images drifted into her mind and she closed her eyes until the realization of him rose again and she sat down on the bed.

When she met him at the foot of the stairs he said, "Where shall we walk?" and it seemed as though she couldn't bear to look at him and yet she could look nowhere else.

"I don't care."

"Do you know of a nice cool road where there's no dust?" he inquired and went casually to the table and opened the morning paper.

"Past Geesner's pond."

"Any trees out that way?"

"Yes."

She saw that Deva was in the corner watching them with her bright eyes, her apron pulled over her legs and her two dolls in her lap. "I like you, Aunt Dora," she said.

"She's strange, isn't she," said Mitchell without looking up.

She nodded, her throat full, her hands caught together in her sash. When she heard his laugh she looked up and as he explained that he hadn't meant it was strange that Deva should like her she felt tears come in her eyes. "It seems quite natural," he added. It was as if she could bear no more, as if another word from him, another look, and she would lock herself in her room and weep for days in that steady, blank joy. As Myrtle came in from the kitchen with her crackling bags, Dora stepped on to the porch. "Here, Mr. Mitchell," she heard her say, "you won't regret your wait."

"Thanks, Myrtle. It's good of you."

"I've got ham and pickle and some of those cheese and pimento you like so well, and I put in some of my fried cakes."

"You're too generous."

"Well, I figured you'd be eating outside and I wouldn't have any dishes. Gloria, you get home here now! Too bad you can't play with your little sister for once."

"Let's hurry," whispered Dora as the man stepped on to the porch. "She'll be after us if we don't. Oh, let's hurry!"

But Myrtle was at the door when they reached the walk. "Have a good time, folks," she called playfully. "And, Dora, don't forget what I told you. It's important to your health, the doctor said so. And get back in time so I can go to Aid. If you'll mind the house and watch after the kids I won't have to pay Jennie Bulgren thirty cents."

"We'll be back soon," promised Mitchell.

"Be sure and take good care of my little sister. Don't let anything bite her or eat her up."

"I promise."

"And Dora! *Dora!* Remember what I told you."

They walked down the street past meager lawns and screaming children who tottered after dogs who would not play. They climbed the hill to the power house and circled down around

the pond which lay still covered with slime. At dusk the frogs would croak and mosquitoes would rise in thin gray swarms like smoke. They heard the engine in the power house beat like a monstrous heart and from the line of willows that bent to the scum came a red bird with sharp eyes and a black beak. They crossed the bridge and turned down the road to Barden's wood.

"It's rather dusty," he said.

Beside them were tall trees with thin trunks and branches that swayed like fans in the breeze and as they walked it seemed to Dora that her body was as high and as beautiful as the trees. It seemed that behind her lay a golden land which, if she turned, would take her eyes and her body and then she would never be herself any more. Even now with her eyes ahead on the hills that rose blue in the dust she could catch the shadow of that radiance and she dared not turn and say to the man, "You are making this all gold for me and my body like gold, too." She dared not speak or turn for fear she would die in his blaze. "Take care," he called as she tripped and almost fell.

They took the path by the side of the road and as she stumbled again she saw that the coarse weeds were gray with dust. A car passed and she put up her hands to shield her face, turned, and found the man cursing.

"It's abominably dusty," he explained and tried to laugh.

As his discomfort settled over her a sudden irritation at the road, the heat, and the sultry air possessed her. "Yes, it's frightful," she managed to say.

"Frightful's no name for it."

"But the woods will be cool."

"Any water there?"

"Yes."

"Lots?"

"There's a spring."

"That's divine news," he cried.

Then she realized that she was thirsty, that her mouth was unbearably parched and dry and that her throat was aching with the dust. "Is it much farther?" she heard him ask, and it seemed that the road stretched on and on into incredible distances that they could never travel. "Lord, this sun!" he cried again and it seemed that the sun beat upon her head so savagely that she put up her hands and said, "How hot it is!" Another car passed and they stopped, shielding their faces from the clouds of dust that spread. "I say," he cried, "this is beyond endurance," and she answered weakly, "Yes, it really is."

Beyond came the turn in the road and the little path that led into the wood. Already she could feel the cool green and taste the water.

"Will there be a place to sit down?" he asked, and she told him about the moss and the thick grass that was always cool and moist and deep and of the pine trees high on the hills that rose above the glade. There were birds, too, she said, yellow and red and black, more colors than she could name, and there were little animals with frightened eyes and tiny frogs whose bright backs were oddly marked. And long snakes both large and small that slipped under dry leaves and made them rustle and who hissed if you disturbed their paths.

"Are you sure the water isn't dried up?"

"Oh, it's always there."

"Are you certain?"

"Oh, yes."

"And is it cold?" he inquired sternly.

"Ice cold."

She trembled now for fear he might not like the place, for fear his eyes might find it mean and meager and without enchantment. But the weight left when they entered the glade, walked through the green and heard the water, saw around them the hills and beyond startling shafts of sun which made the water sparkle. The grass under their feet was cool and deep and ahead a yellow bird sat on a waving green branch and pecked a purple berry.

"Is there anything to drink out of?" he asked.

"See," she cried and pointed to the place

where the water fell over stones and then down to the ledge which held a rusty cup.

He ran up the incline, filled the cup and brought it to her and as she drank the place looked incredibly bright and living. They sat down and she felt his eyes again on her ankle, her knees, and she leaned toward him until he caught her head in his hands and kissed it and then her mouth.

"If I could die now," she said, and it seemed that the ground was her body and the hills her breasts and the sun her heart. It seemed that she was slowly dissolving into the bright green that vibrated in waves before her eyes, into the deep dark earth that beat like her heart. Then she felt his hands on her shoulders pushing her back and when she opened her eyes and looked into his face, heard his short, excited breathing, she pulled away and looked at him. She jumped up as she saw his face turn white and his eyes grow sharp and a gash seemed to open between her breasts until it seemed that her blood was dripping, hot and thick, on the grass. "You frighten me!" she cried, but he made no answer.

Then from the hills came a sound and as she looked up she imagined that behind the pine trees were sharp eyes and that soon shiny black boars with pointed snouts and tight curled tails would come panting down into the glade. Lions might come behind and wolves with hungry

eyes. She could hear the rustling leaves and the sound of crackling wood as the firm bodies passed under dead trees.

"You are so strong," she murmured. "It terrifies me."

"I know," said the man.

She moved away from him and sat looking at the water that ran over the stones, polishing them, bringing out light stains of pink and threadlike markings. She saw a little frog with a striped back hop on a rock shaded by a plant that held five white blossoms which blew in the wind and showed their yellow centers. She closed her eyes and rocked back and forth until it seemed that she was in the arbor under the stars with Hester. But suddenly she wanted to be a lion with a thick soft coat and huge paws and catch this man in her arms and smother him against her heart, breathe her hot breath in his eyes and tend him as she would her young. She glanced up at him and saw him hit a mosquito that was swollen with blood from his cheek and she noticed then that the place was alive with gnats which rose from his head in angry swarms. She saw him jump up and wave his arms about his head and shout, "My God, this is all beyond human endurance."

She was glad that they had to move on, and yet she was loath to go. She looked at him, afraid that she might see some trace of scorn

for her on his face, or anger for her fear, but he hit his leg with a savage slap and said they really must go. Then her body was prickling with tiny bites, raw with the stings of enormous flies and savage gnats and as she saw his frenzy, not at her but at the flies which had settled on his ear, she felt again the wound between her breasts open and send down its blood. She was afraid to stay, afraid of his strength, his hot breath, and yet she wished they might never go.

"This is unendurable!" he cried again and beat his head with his arms.

They hurried away, leaving the sack of lunch on the grass by the stream, half running to escape the swarms that pursued them and lighted on their bodies the moment they stopped to rest. "I love you!" she cried, as they rushed on. "I love you!" But he turned quickly and disappeared and then returned with the bag of lunch and offered her a sandwich. "Not bad," he remarked, biting into one. "But, God, these mosquitoes!" he cried, and threw the bag into the stream.

"I—" she began when they were in the hot, sandy road, "I—" but she could not finish. And then as she watched him wipe his mouth and brush his clothes she stamped her foot in the dust and raised her clenched hands and shook them in his face.

"I heard you," he said quietly. "There is no such thing."

4

She helped Myrtle into her black satin dress that gleamed and clung to her body like rubber. "My goodness!" cried Myrtle, looking at herself in the long mirror; "I suppose I'll have to put on my corsets." She adjusted the frill that hung from her collar, put her hands on her hips, and looked gravely at the image which filled the glass. "My marcel is nearly gone," she remarked. "This hot weather is death on them. Get my purple bag, Dora. Under those stockings in the third drawer. Not that one. Dora, I said the third drawer. I have to put everything decent I've got out of reach of those kids or they'd have it out in the street. What time is it? Half past? Really? I've simply got to run and Rex's got the car and it's so hot and all. Isn't that like him not to think a thing about me? Oh, did you have a good time with Mr. Mitchell, Dora? I guess he's a wonderful fellow when you get to know him." She ran out of the room. "Dora," she called from the hall, "when the egg man comes tell him I'll have to have three dozen this week and get some cottage cheese. Listen, tell him that last was cooked too much. Don't forget now! And make Deva

come in after a while. She isn't feeling well and she's got to sleep. The doctor said so. I'll be back as soon as I can get away. Good-by, Dora. Remember, now."

She watched Myrtle go down the street in the smooth tight gown that outlined her hips and limbs and exposed too much of her overripe legs. She saw her fat red arms and plump wrists and she thought of the wedding ring crammed down on one of her fingers with the flesh bulging out around it and just above the diamond and the ruby set together in a serpent's head. She watched her turn at the corner and then she saw the outline of her face, her massive chin and burst of hip. She thought of the evening that would come too soon with Joe Teeter sitting beside her on the step, and then the memory of Mitchell made her lie down on the bed in intolerable confusion.

After a moment she roused herself and went down to call Deva, who came around the corner of the house dragging her doll by the feet. She gave the child a drink and took her up to the little hot room that she shared with Gloria.

"I like you, Dora," the child said. "I was fooling that other time."

"Let's take your dress off and you'll be cooler."

"I'll give you fifty kisses sometime, Dora, because you don't scold me and you've got that

pretty bow on. You've got lots of nice dresses, too, haven't you, Dora?"

"Now, lie down and go to sleep."

"When I go to sleep I wake up and see things in the dark. Yes, I do, Dora."

"No, no, darling."

"I do. A big thing came out of the closet one night and when I cried Gloria kicked me right here and it hurt me awful. Say, Dora, how long are you going to visit us?"

"I don't know."

"I heard Papa say he wished he knew."

"I don't know, Deva."

"Can't you even guess?"

"No."

"Betty Allen gave her dolly poison, but it didn't die yet," she remarked. "I wish I had some for mine." She sat up and clutched hold of the iron bedpost. "I wish I was fire," she cried "and I'd burn up all the children in this street because I don't like them. And I'd burn this house down and Allen's house and . . ." She sank back. "Let's pretend I'm sick,' she said faintly, "and then you'll have to read to me. You can call me darling and say, 'Mama's going to buy you a new dolly and a little engine with yellow wheels like Jack's.' " She sat up again and began making crooning sounds in her throat, rocking and humming, her hands crossed on her breast. "Never mind, Mama just loves

you, honey, and she's going to read to you and hold your hand before the black thing comes. And she's going to buy you a little tea set like Mady Gooney's and a little monkey on a stick, maybe."

"Go to sleep now, Deva."

"Last night the black thing came out of the closet and Gloria kicked me when I cried."

"I'm going away now. If I don't, your mother will scold both of us."

"When I wake up will you pretend to be my Mama and sit by me and tell stories? Let's tell some now. I can. Once there was a little girl and her Mama was so mean to her and hit her so hard that she ran away and went down to the railroad tracks and a big policeman got her and she ran away from him and the train come and ran over her and her Mama couldn't ever get her any more. Now you tell one, Dora."

"I can't," said Dora, vaguely. "You go to sleep now." She went out, closing the door behind her, leaving the child alone in the hot, close room. Then she stood stupidly in her doorway looking at the bed, the sloping roof that met the chest of drawers, the little rocking chair with the cane seat and the windows that opened onto leaves which hung dry and still in the burning air. She sat down on the bed in a blank stupor and looked at the dust which had

gathered under the radiator. She thought of an evening in Glover when she and her mother had eaten a late supper of waffles and syrup and had gone over to see the minister's baby. It had looked blind and red and little bubbles had come from its mouth.

Suddenly she felt shaken by a monstrous grief which rose about her slowly as she remembered the way her room in Glover had looked, the bed painted green and decorated with moss roses at the head and foot, the rag rugs with pieces from all her Sunday dresses braided in it, and her best dress hanging in the closet under a yellowed nightgown. She could see the flower chains that sprawled over the skirt like serpents and the stiff taffeta collar edged with ivory lace. She looked up and saw Mitchell in the doorway.

"Hello," he said. "Taking care of the house?"

She nodded and felt fastened to the bed, incredibly large again and clumsy. She watched him sit down in the rocking-chair and nodded again when he asked if he might smoke. But it would be dreadful if Myrtle found ashes in her room, and how could she explain? What would Rex and Myrtle say to her at the supper table in front of everyone?

She saw him get up and move about, hunting for an ash tray, and she rushed to him and spread

out her dress so that the ashes might not fall on the floor. "Oh, please!" she cried. "What will Myrtle think?"

"I hadn't thought," he said, and put it out. "I always smoke in my room. Shall we step in there?"

"Oh, no, *no!*"

"You look frightened, Dora."

At the sound of her name she felt her body relax and a warmth of emotion sweep over her. She looked at him and smiled shyly. "I like my name," she said.

"Yes, Dora is a charming name."

"My aunt was named that."

"I see."

"She died when she was a young girl. They didn't know what the trouble was, but she got sick and died when she was only seventeen. I guess she must have been unhappy," she added, and sighed.

"Perhaps."

"I always like to hear my name," she said.

"Yes, and Deva is nice, too," he remarked and glanced out the window.

"Myrtle got it out of a book."

"I wondered."

"And Rex's youngest sister was named Gloria. She's married now and living in Florida."

"Fancy that. Does it seem very warm in here?"

"Oh, very," she cried, and clasped her hands in her lap."

"An abominable day."

"I imagine it's hot everywhere to-day."

"I imagine so."

"Those leaves look ready to fall to pieces," she said suddenly, and pointed. "Look!"

"I was noticing."

"Why do you torment me?" she cried.

He brushed a bit of dust from his trousers and leaned down to examine the cloth for an instant. Then when he turned his face to her suddenly and looked at her she felt the pull of his eyes and arms, and in an instant she was at his feet, her head raised, her hands on his knees. "Don't torment me!"

"Do you want to get free of Hester?"

For a moment she tried to remember who Hester was, and then she cried, "Yes!" and as he drew her up to him and put his mouth against hers again her flesh grew unbearably bright. He left her suddenly and began walking round the room.

"It isn't a trick," he said. "A trick couldn't make me feel as if my body was utterly yours."

She heard a noise in the kitchen and wondered if Myrtle had returned unexpectedly, or if Rex had been taken ill, or if Gloria would plunge upstairs and into her room. It might be the delivery boy or the egg man. If she missed the

egg man Myrtle would never forgive her. She stood up and then again his arms were about her and his mouth was on her cheek. "You mean that you love me?" she asked.

"It's not a question of love."

"But I love you!"

"Forget that word, can't you, or get another."

"I can't!"

"Leopards don't think they love people," he said. "They don't pretend anything."

As she felt his hold on her tighten she caught his head in her hands and set her teeth into his cheek until all the blood seemed to leave her body and she heard him whisper, "Good God!" and felt his lips on hers, pressed hard, until she flung away, crying, "I'm just like food to you."

"What more can any woman expect?"

His words fell away like paper and her body seemed to melt and mix with his and rise up in a terrible golden tree. Yet she knew that downstairs a bell was ringing and that she was listening to it ring. Finally Mitchell said, "Hadn't you better answer?" and she looked at him and said nothing until he murmured, "apparently there is no place on earth for the consummation of desire."

"It's the egg man," she whispered.

"Perhaps it's just as well."

She ran downstairs and to the back door where a man in overalls, his hat pushed back

on his head, was twisting the bell furiously and kicking the door. "Mis' Fry home?"

"No, she isn't?"

"Does she want eggs this week?"

"Three dozen."

"Say, I guess you're deef. I been ringing about five minutes and I was just going to give up. Three dozen? Sure, that pan'll do."

"Oh," she cried as he started round the house to his car, "she wants some cottage cheese, too." As he turned and looked at her she dared not complain about last week's cottage cheese. "She wants a quart," she added miserably, and went into the dining room and stood near the table wondering if her body's brightness could ever go. Then, as if she had no choice, she went upstairs.

"Dora!" cried Mitchell, and the sound of his voice rushed through her until she felt new and cool and fresh like leaves, like grass. She wished, as he took hold of her arms, that she knew some enchantment that would bind him to her for always, and then all but his face and his body dissolved and she felt herself grow fierce and strong. They sprang apart as the front door burst open and Myrtle called, "Dora!"

"I'm here," she answered, and Mitchell went silently to his room.

"I'll be up there in a minute. I'm going to get a drink. I'm all in."

When they heard her footsteps in the kitchen Mitchell came back to her for a moment and said, "I thought Hester had my body, but it's something else she owns." She watched his lips twist in misery and his eyes grow sharp as knives. The screen door banged and she heard Myrtle set the pail down on the stool and go to the cupboard for a cup. Then as he turned and went back to his room she stood there and watched his shoulders and the way his hair grew in the back of his neck and wondered how she could stand there with her hands at her sides.

"I'll be down in a minute, Myrtle."

"No, I'm coming up. I've got to lie down. I'm all in."

"You look terribly hot," said Dora as her sister faced her.

"I am. Worse than that. Come in here, Dora," she said gravely, and the girl trembled as she followed her into her room.

"I'm about ready to give up," she said heavily and lay down on the bed, her arms above her head, her skirt twisted tightly around her legs. "There's always something wrong." She sat up and adjusted her skirt. "I've got to take this dress off. I don't get a new one every month or so like some people, and so I have to take care of my clothes." She put her fat hands over her face but she did not move.

"Shall I help you take it off, Myrtle?"

"I just thought I'd stop in and see what she looked like. He never even told me he had a typewriter, he always said he hated to have a woman messing around his office, and then he let it out by mistake the other day. He never wants me to come down there, either, so I never know what's going on. But to-day on the way home from Aid I went in and surprised them and I saw her and he said he wouldn't be home for supper and that he had to go to Leeds to make a speech for Kiwanis and wouldn't be home 'til late and that I wasn't to worry. Then I went out and called up Leeds and they aren't having any dinner to-night and anyway they're getting speakers from the big cities this year."

"Perhaps he's made a mistake, Myrtle."

"Perhaps nothing. Perhaps he's a weakling is what you mean. There's no perhaps about that. I know him through and through. . . ." She sat up suddenly. "I just wish I'd treated him the way other women treat their husbands. They make them do this and that and wait on them every minute and act just so all the time. You bet they wouldn't dare pull anything like this."

"But, Myrtle!"

"Yes, and if you'd seen the way she looked at me. I can't never forget it. I can't never forget that terrible look she give me over my whole body, my ankles and everything. And everybody

knows. When I walked home I met Mrs. Devine and she looked so funny when I spoke that I knew what they were thinking. And Nellie Ware, too, and the Dow girls. I could hardly keep back, I wanted to cry so bad, and I couldn't think of anything to say. Well, I know one thing, if I'd never treated him so good he'd be a better husband to me to-day. I've never denied him a thing and this is the way he repays me in front of the whole town." She lay back again. "I can't never forget the way that girl looked me over, my ankles and everything."

"But you aren't sure of anything, Myrtle."

"Say, I was sure the minute I knew he had a typewriter. You don't know men like I do. They're all alike. If you treat them decent they give you a dirty deal from the start and if you give them to understand that you're boss and won't take anything from them they can't do enough for you. I started wrong. I gave Rex Fry everything he asked for and now look where I am, me and my two little girls." She turned over on her face and her body shook with terrible weeping, with sobs that were raw and hysterical, yet harsh with resentment and anger. "I can't never forget how she looked me over, my ankles and everything."

Dora saw the door open and Deva rush in and throw herself against her mother. "My poor little baby," cried Myrtle, and almost suf-

focated the child in her arms. "She's the only one that don't forget her poor mother. She don't think her mother's old and ugly, does her?"

Then the child's screams rose sharp and shrill as she turned to Dora, her face streaming with tears, and shouted,

"You leave my mother alone. Stop making her cry! *Stop!* I'll kill you if you don't!"

Dora went downstairs and out of the house. She took the road to Barden's wood where only that morning she had walked with Mitchell, and again she seemed to feel gnats swarm around her head in magic herds, in gray moving auras, and on her arms fell the stinging silver rain of mosquitoes and on her legs were enormous flies with shining backs and incredible wings. As she looked at the line of willows along the old pond she thought of the glade with cool hills rising on each side, the thick, deep grass and ahead shafts of sun on the water. And then it seemed that she must die, but she knew that in a moment she would turn back and that in less than three hours she would be sitting in the dusk behind the vines, with Joe.

5

It was another moonless night and she sat with Joe on the edge of the step in the shadow.

Masses of black shook on the lawn and across the street a child screamed and light spread from a window where a woman sat reading.

"I like it at night," said the boy, and she felt his hand on her arm.

"Yes," she answered.

"Shadows are just fine, aren't they?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Say, Dora, I guess you don't care much about me," he began, and his voice trembled.

She felt terrified for a moment as she remembered that Joe might get tired of her and then she would have no home. "Don't you like me any more, Joe?" she asked, and leaned toward him.

"Oh, Dora!" he cried, and put his head in her lap.

She wondered if she could go away somewhere and work. What would she do? Where would she live? She thought of Hester's face, pallid and cold in the night, in the arbor under the stars turned toward the stretches of black lawn that fell to the brook.

"You don't know how wonderful you are, Dora. You've got something nobody else has got."

"Do you really like me, Joe?"

He raised his head and she saw that the rims of his eyes were red and that the tip of his nose shone bright as his teeth. "Dora," he said

slowly, "you aren't fixing to drop me, are you?"

"I never dropped you."

"I always think of that time I went to Miss Linden's and you hardly spoke to me."

"I didn't mean that, Joe."

"Gosh, that was awful."

"I didn't understand, Joe."

"You won't ever go back there again, will you, Dora?"

"What do you mean?"

"You won't go back to Miss Linden's, even to visit?"

"I don't know."

"When you're my wife I won't let you go," he said slowly, and put one moist hand on her neck and the other on her hair. "You've got beautiful hair, Dora. There's nobody with such hair as you've got, or eyes either. Gosh, I'm not good enough for you. I know that well enough. Say, I forgot all about my news. You know Ned Rickets that married Beulah Dean? Well, they're gone to California to live and he wants to sell their bungalow that he put up new last spring. It's a swell house. They took me through yesterday and it's got a wonderful kitchen with lots of light and a built-in cabinet and they're going to sell the washing machine, too. Listen, Dora, I'm going to have everything easy for you right from the start."

"You're too good, Joe."

"Say, do you like the ring? Did Myrtle say anything about it?"

"She thought it was beautiful."

"Say, Dora, sometimes I wonder if you do care about me. Sometimes I know that you don't, but I can't seem to believe it. Oh, I don't know," he cried. "I suppose I'm not good enough, that's it."

"Oh, Joe! Joe! You're too good for me. You're a wonderful fellow—I'm the one that's not good enough, Joe."

"Why don't you look happy when I come to see you? Gosh, maybe I'm a fool to bother you like this."

"Oh, please. Oh, you don't know how I am. I can't act like other girls and say everything."

Again he put his hot, wet face in her lap. "That's just like me," he whispered. "Oh, you're wonderful."

She thought of Mitchell, his shoulders, his arms, but it seemed that she could not see his face or recall his voice. Then she remembered his words, "I thought Hester had my body, but it's something else she owns." A great rush of pain came over her as she wondered, desperately, what she could do to take him away from Hester, to tear those fibres loose and bind him to her. There was something other women knew that she did not know, something they did and understood that changed everything, but she

was left out. If only there was someone she could ask! "What do they do?" she thought. "How can I get like them?" And then she heard Joe's voice moving on through his description of the fireplace in the new house, the bedrooms and the tile floor in the bathroom.

"You know where it is. Down on Maple and Dunn. I'd have only three blocks to the creamery. And Ned said we could buy the dining-room suite. It's swell, one of those round tables and six chairs with leather seats. And the wall paper's new, so we won't have to pay out anything for that, and I looked at the furnace and she's a dandy. They've got a sifter for ashes and I guess with the price of coal one of them would come in handy. How does it sound to you, honey?"

"Awfully nice, Joe."

"And they've got all the storm windows out in the garage and they go with the house so we wouldn't have to buy those extra, and they've got the screens, too, and—Gosh, I'm not going to tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Nope."

"But what is it? I really want to hear, Joe. I'm excited, really I am."

"Do you want to know real bad?"

"Sure I do."

"How bad?"

"Please, Joe. Awfully bad."

"What'll you give me if I tell you?"

"I don't know," she said faintly and drew back against the porch rail.

"Will you give me anything I want?"

"I don't know," she repeated weakly.

"Well, guess what I want?"

"I can't."

"Listen, Dora, do you know you forgot to kiss me this morning when I gave you the ring?"

"Did I?" she said in fear, and turned her face away.

"You sure did. Will you now, Dora? Come on, please."

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried.

"Don't get scared of me." She felt his arm cross her breasts and his mouth touch her neck in a soft, weak blur. "Don't be scared of me. I won't hurt you, because I know how you feel. I was like that at the picnic—it just came over me all of a sudden and I was scared stiff of you." He bent her face back slowly and as she felt his moist mouth touch her forehead she pulled away. "Feel sick?" he asked sharply.

"No. I thought some one was coming. Oh, I can't now."

"You mean when we're married it's different?" he asked gently.

"I suppose so."

"But why? I'm just the same then as I am now, Dora."

"Oh, I know that!" she cried.

"What's the trouble then?"

"It's so public, that's all."

He laughed. "It's dark as pitch. I can't hardly see you. But," he said in sudden anger, "if you don't want to kiss me I'm not going to force you, I've acted like a dog in front of you for over a year and I'm about through. If you don't like me around, for Gosh sakes tell me so."

"But I do! I do!"

"Then why don't you want to kiss me?"

"You don't understand me."

"You never wanted me to touch you from the first. The other day at the picnic it was different but it felt like you were thinking of some one else, not me."

"Oh, I was."

"No, you weren't. You've never cared for me, I can tell, but I never want to believe it. You never let me do anything that a man expects when he's engaged to a girl. I've been a fool, that's all, and you've just tramped on me as if I'd come to fix the piano or sell something. I'm tired of it and I don't care if the whole town knows it. I'm through, I tell you."

"Joe, don't say those things, because they aren't true."

She wondered what she would do if he should

stand up and walk away for good. "Joe!" she cried and put her hand on his arm, but he made no reply. "Joe!" She moved closer and leaned toward his face until she caught the moist odor of his hair and saw his teeth shining between slightly open lips. "You've been good to me and I appreciate it, Joe. You know that I love you."

But he made no sound and she saw that his eyes were turned away and that his jaw was stern and determined. "Please, please," she cried in terror, and put her arms around his neck, closing her eyes so that she might not see the way his hair grew above his collar. He sat there solid as stone until she brushed his cheek with her lips and then he caught her so tightly that she choked in her throat and cried, the instant he released her, "Is it late?"

"Say, you're the limit!" He stood up and shook himself, jerking his trousers, but they fell back around his shoes. She knew the great flat tucks into which they had sunk. Then as she saw him start down the walk she ran after him and threw her arms around his neck and tried to draw him back.

"Gosh," he whispered, as he felt her tears on his cheek, "I didn't know you felt like that." He helped her back to the porch. "Dora, I'm a brute. I don't deserve you." His moist hands pressed the hair back from her forehead until

she kissed him and begged him to let her go. "Myrtle isn't feeling well," she explained.

"Is that so? I'm awfully sorry. Anything I can do? I hate to have Myrtle down and out. You tell her I'm mighty sorry she's under the weather and to call on me if she wants anything. Will you?"

"Oh, Joe!" she cried. "You're so good." A wave of pity for him went over her. "Thank you."

"Say," he cried in irritation, "please don't always be thanking me every time I turn around. It doesn't mean anything. And I don't intend to thank you, either. I don't believe in all that foolishness."

"All right," she said, and turned her face away.

"I understand when you're grateful and that stuff isn't necessary. Gosh sakes, I offer to do something and before I've done it you're thanking me as if I was a stranger; yes, just as if I was no more to you than some fellow selling stuff at the door. I'm not going to thank you, so you'd better cut it out, too."

"All right, Joe."

"What's the matter? You look as if you're going to cry? Say, did I do anything to hurt you, Dora? Oh, I made you unhappy," he cried happily, and caught her in his arms. "Dora, you're so—so little."

"Good-by," she murmured. "I hear Myrtle."

"I'd ought to be stepping along. Well, sleep good and get rested up so's I can show you the house to-morrow. You got to take care of yourself, honey, I can see that, but when I get looking after you, you'll pick up. Go to bed right now!" he commanded.

"All right."

"Good night, honey girl. Say, I can get off to-morrow morning, because we're churning at noon. Now, you remember what I told you about going right to bed so's you can be ready when I come for you. We'll look at the house."

He opened the screen door and took her in his arms again. "Gosh, I hate to leave you. Come on, sit down just a few minutes longer, just five, Dora, please. Listen," he whispered, drawing her down on the step beside him. "I don't know what'll happen some other night. Maybe it'll be all different again, like it was before. You've got to make me believe you really love me, Dora."

"I do, really I do."

"Do you mean that?" he asked huskily and bent his head as if to escape her answer. "You've got to be sure, Dora."

"I am, Joe. You're wonderful."

He caught her again in his arms and buried his hot, wet face in her breast. Then he threw open the door and bolted away in the dark.

When she turned on the light in her room she knew that he had paused at the corner and was watching her window so she put off her light and undressed in the dark. When she got into bed she heard Myrtle groan and turn heavily in the next room, and she thought she heard Deva cry out, but she did not go to her. The dark pressed upon her, growing more intense and more dreadful, until she closed her eyes. She knew that Mitchell was not in the house, but something of him seemed in her room and she wanted to catch it in her hands and put it under her pillow so that it could never get loose. She wondered what she could do to hold him forever, to make their bodies bright and shining, like gold, melted together into a golden tree. But even if their love withered and got dull and dry she would endure it; even that would be a kind of pleasure, a dead joy.

Perhaps other women did something she didn't know about. Even ugly ones had husbands and houses. There must be something no one had told her about, a secret that would change everything and make it right. When once he was caught in all the solid things of a home he would never leave her any more than Rex would leave Myrtle. But she shuddered to recall Rex and Myrtle. If Mitchell would only marry her and buy a lawn mower or even a washing machine; if he had been talking the

way Joe had, it wouldn't have sounded so dreadful. She raised herself up as Rex came in and she heard him throw down his coat and then unlace his shoes, coughing lightly. There was silence until Myrtle's voice, rich with anger and wrath, rose.

"I suppose you think you can come in this room and go on as you have before! You think I'm some rag that will put up with everything just because I have in the past. I've slaved to make our home attractive and dress our children and bring them up decently and I suppose you think I'll go right on, don't you? A lot you care about breaking my heart and throwing me aside like an old rag for some one younger. I suppose you figure that I had ought to be grateful to you for letting me slave for you all these years, eh? What do you intend to do with me now you've got all you wanted?"

"What's eating you now?"

"Yes, I suppose it's nothing at all . . . "

"Say, do I have to come home to dinner every night of my life? Can't I ever stay out of this house and get a taste of someone else's cooking?"

"What about me slaving in the kitchen all day and never setting down to a nice restaurant meal but always eating my own cooking. It's not your way to ever see my side, is it?"

"Oh, damn it!"

"I've been unhappy from the moment I married you, but you've never heard a word out of me about it. I've stood through all of it and never broken down once or paid any attention to how I felt. I've slaved and worked to get this little home and now you throw me aside for a common little typewriter that wouldn't even bake you a loaf of bread if you were starving for it. If you were married to her you'd learn a few things about what I've always done for you, Rex Fry, and you'd see that you couldn't have everything your own way the way you have had it with me. You'd have to give her every cent you earned and it'd go right on her back and you'd have to have a hired girl because she wouldn't soil her hands scrubbing, you bet, and you'd think a whole lot more of her than you do of me. You'd lap all that up like cream, and you'd never get through petting her and thanking her for making you wait on her."

"Say, pipe down!" he screamed.

"What have you ever given up for me, I'd like to know? Not a thing. You like those old cigars you pull on a lot better than me. If you could choose, you'd take them instead of me."

"My God, I certainly would be a fool not to."

"Rex Fry, do you think you can talk to me like that? You've never appreciated one thing I've done for you and you never will, I see that. I've learned a bitter lesson. No, I won't make up

with you. This is the end. Don't you dare put your filthy hands on me again! Get out of this room!"

Dora heard him slam the door and go downstairs in his bare feet. Then she heard the davenport in the sitting room creak and in a few minutes she smelled a cigar. Again she heard Myrtle's terrible weeping and again it seemed to her that Deva cried out in her sleep.

She turned over on her face and lay there, caught in the pain of his words, "I thought Hester had my body, but it's something else she owns." If only she could strike down Hester's image from his mind. No, if only she could die. And then as she whirled in pity for herself, and terror, she heard Myrtle's step on the stair, soft and cautious.

6

She sprang up and looked into Myrtle's face, into the gaunt eyes and red, hanging flesh. Behind her were leaves that were so crisp and dry that it seemed they would fall like dust at her touch. She heard Myrtle ask her to get up and dress, and she sprang out of bed.

"It's too bad to get you out so early, but Deva's sick. I guess she must have cried all night and Gloria's been acting so mean to her that I thought I'd better put Deva in your bed, if you don't mind."

"Bring her right in, Myrtle, and I'll get my clothes on."

The woman went away and Dora heard the child's screams, stifled now, and weak, and then her steady, piteous crying began and brought tears out on the girl's face as she listened. She stood at the window for a moment and watched a woman at work in her garden, the early mail train whistled, and a hot wind shook the leaves. Then Myrtle came in, carrying Deva.

"Hasn't Mama got enough trouble without her little girl giving her more?" She laid the child down on Dora's bed and tried to pull the sheet over her. "She cried her eyes out all night," she said savagely. "I don't know why she can't sleep like other children. But that's the way when you get trouble. Just let me feel like dying and my children get sick and I have to take care of them. I don't know what I've ever done to people except good, and this is what I get for it. You hadn't better wear those stockings, Dora. You know how the hot weather gets them. Put on your cotton ones. Cotton's good enough for me. I'm lucky if I get silk for Sunday. Stop that crying or I'll spank you!"

Dora went to the bed and looked down at the child, who lay with her hands over her face, sobbing. "She looks feverish, Myrtle. What's the trouble with her?"

"Oh, she had to make her Mama more trouble

and worry, that's all, by being a bad girl. Stop!" she cried, as the child's screams rose. "Do you want Mr. Mitchell to hear you bawling? You'll raise the neighbors and next *they'll* be against me." Dora bent over the bed and put out her hand to comfort Deva, but she drew away and cried: "I hate you. You made my mother cry. I'll kill you, maybe."

"Bless her little heart," murmured Myrtle, and lay down by the child, shaken again by weeping. "She's the only one that ever thinks of her mother. She's the only one in the world that cares. Bless her little heart, and her mother was cross with her." The woman drew the child against her, pressing her into her flesh, and then she wrapped her enormous arms around her and moaned while the child whimpered weakly and shook.

Dora picked up her clothes and went out of the room. She found Gloria in the bathroom looking at her hands and sniffling. "Lookit, Aunt Dora," she cried, and spread out her wart-infested fingers. "Just lookit! I went to Mrs. Hogan to get her to charm off my warts and not one of 'um's gone. I thought she'd get the big one anyway but she didn't get a one of 'um. I paid her a quarter, too, and I know Papa won't give me another." She broke down and ran to her mother. Dora heard Myrtle's voice rise in an angry roar and then drop into sobs again.

Outside Rex tinkered with the lawn mower, shouting from time to time to his neighbor, Mr. Fink.

"Well, what do you know?" she heard Rex call.

"Too much about this here black lice," answered Mr. Fink. "The durndest things I ever see. They're eating everything up."

"Ya, your plum tree's dying."

"Sure, everything's dying."

"That cherry over there's dying, too."

"Sure, the whole place is dying."

"Can't you get after them?"

"Naw, the wife won't let me pull up that nasturtium bed. They're making the mischief."

"Ya, I know about that."

"Lord, they've all gotta have their way or there's no peace."

"I'll say they do."

"They're eating this whole place up, but the wife thinks it's gnats." He went to a bed of sprawling, poisoned nasturtiums that fell in sickly sprays to the ground. "You dirty lice breeders!" he growled, and kicked viciously at them.

"Ed! Ed! You let my flowers alone. Don't you dare touch those."

The man strolled back to examine his corn and potatoes.

"Say, Fink," called Rex, "if that dirty stuff

spreads over to my yard I'm going to have it out with your wife."

"Go to it!"

Mrs. Fink, her strands of oily hair coiled and resting like an onion on the top of her head, stepped into the yard. "Good morning, Mr. Fry." She walked toward him, shaking her finger coyly. "I heard you talking about me, so I came out. I want to tell you that I've spent over thirty dollars on flowers to make this place attractive and I'm not going to have them pulled up. My husband wants the whole yard in corn and potatoes and just because I've got to have flowers to look at he says they're lice breeders. Ed!" she called sharply, "I know that blight comes from gnats. They're all around here thick. We had them back in Ohio."

"They come from your durned nasturtiums."

The woman turned suddenly and went into the house and then after a few more minutes of uneasy strolling the man followed, and Dora heard doors slam in the Fink house and feet rush on the stairs. Then she heard Myrtle calling her.

"Aren't you dressed yet, Dora? Listen, I've got so much on my hands I don't see how I'm going to do anything. Can't you slip down and get breakfast? Don't you ever think about anyone except yourself? Imagine how I feel with my baby sick and all!"

"I'll hurry."

"It seems to me that since you came from Miss Linden's that you can't do a tap of work. You don't seem to know how any more. What about Joe? I've been so upset I forgot to ask you before."

"I'm going to look at the house this morning."

"That's right. You won't make a mistake if you take him. He's good as gold and he'll make a fine provider. What house was he thinking about?"

"Ned Ricket's place."

"Say, that's the nicest house in town. You sure are lucky. There's a beautiful kitchen and all the conveniences. Aren't you happier, Dora? Deva, leave go of Mama! I said to leave go! Say, Mama's going to run away and never come back."

"Don't, Myrtle, please, she looks so sick."

"It's her own fault, too. She's cried herself into a fever and I'm real out of patience with her. Gloria! I said no. Well, you hadn't any business to go to Mrs. Sweeney in the first place. If you'd asked me I would have told you and it serves you right. You always know so much more than your Mama, of course. Stop that scowling at me, Gloria Fry, and go downstairs. Oh, what's to become of me?" she cried, and lay down on the bed.

"I'll put the coffee on, Myrtle," said Dora,

and went down. But she found that she had forgotten how to make coffee and when she was hunting a recipe Rex came through the kitchen, stamping mud from the garden on the clean floor. When she spoke he made no answer and pounded on through the house. She tried to remember how her mother made coffee, and then instead she set the table and put the dry cereal into the dishes. Then Myrtle was in the kitchen, her eyes swollen and her flesh hanging red and helpless from her body.

"Isn't the coffee ready yet?"

"I've forgotten how to make it. I'm so sorry."

"Well," snapped Myrtle, "I must say Miss Linden's ruined you in more ways than one. I think it's too bad a girl of your age can't get a meal and help around the house so's to relieve her sister when she's about ready for a nervous breakdown. One day all of you'll be surprised. I won't come down and fix your breakfast. I'll be in the canal where I should have gone years ago . . ."

"Say, have a heart," interrupted Rex. "I've got to get down to the office."

"I suppose so. The earlier the better. The sooner you can get back the sooner . . ."

"Say, for God's sake, let up on me."

"I'll say what I please and when I please and as often as I please. If I'd said more years ago

I'd be better off now. You've fooled me all these years and laughed at me behind my back and I never knew. Don't think you can come around me now, Rex Fry, because I won't permit it. I've got some decency left."

The man swung around and left the room. "I'm going to eat at the bakery," he called from the front door.

Myrtle looked frightened and started toward the front of the house. Then she came back and began grinding the coffee. "Let him go if he wants to. I've learned my lesson. Once I'd have run after him and made him come back and cried and made a big fuss over him as if I was the one to blame and not him. He'd have me thinking that I was the culprit and apologizing and he could go off chuckling to himself. I've petted him all these years just like a child, and I'm sick to my stomach of him. And when his common little typewriter insults me he stands there and lets her. He looked me over the same way she did. That was the worst."

"Shall I make some toast?"

"Dora, how can you say something like that when I'm so unhappy? Yes, make some toast. I didn't mean to be cross, but you don't know the half of my life. No one does. Listen, hand me the rest of the coffee and I'll grind it all. If something happens to me and there's no coffee ground you'll all lambast me for not having it

ground. It don't pay to be a good woman if you want to keep a man and have him respect you. You've got to knock around and be as bad as they are. Look at Mrs. Fink. Why can't she comb her hair different, she's a sight, and yet Ed Fink just worships the ground she walks on. He follows her around out in that garden of theirs as if she was an angel. I won't be friendly with such trash. Put this on the stove now and I'll go up to see what Deva wants to eat."

She was back in a moment, wringing her hands. "I know she's dying. She's hardly breathing and all feverish and she didn't know me when I asked what she wanted to eat. I suppose she'll die and then I'll be all alone. Call the doctor and tell him to come right over. Deva's very low. No, don't call Rex. He don't care what happens to his little girl."

While they waited for the doctor, Dora gave Gloria her breakfast. The child glared at her hands and slobbered her cereal. "I guess I won't have to practice to-day, anyway. If Mama asks where I've gone, tell her I'm to Bulgren's. I want to see if Cleo's warts went." She ran out the door as the doctor's car appeared. The man rushed upstairs and in a moment Myrtle was calling for a glass of water. When Dora went up she found Myrtle listening to a description of an appendicitis operation.

The doctor, his back to the child, rubbed his hands together and swung back and forth from heel to toe.

"Very serious. Waited too long, do you see, and she was in a bad condition to start with. Good morning, Miss Weck? How's my other patient this morning? That's good, that's fine." He took the thermometer out of Deva's mouth. "Mmmmmmmmm," he said. "I'll look in some time this afternoon. Well, Miss Weck, your sister tells me you're soon to be a bride. Joe's a fine boy. Proud of him. Now, Mrs. Fry, keep her quiet and let her sleep."

They followed him downstairs, Myrtle begging that he keep nothing from her, that he conceal no hidden disease that might take her child off suddenly or cripple her for the rest of her life. "I've got to know! Tell me, doctor!"

"Nothing serious, Mrs. Fry. I'll watch her carefully."

"Are you sure it isn't scarlet fever or something?"

"We can't tell yet. It may be almost anything."

"What shall I feed her? Nothing but *milk!* Why, the little thing hasn't a pick on her as it is. She won't sit up and eat a good meal of meat and potato—I can't make her. Good-by. Heavens," she said to Dora, "it's always some-

thing. What next? Wasn't I saying just yesterday that you can't never tell what'll happen or when it's going to, Dora?" Then she was whispering mysteriously about Mitchell. "You'd never suspect him, but that kind always drinks. I bet he goes at it up in his room by himself. I've smelled it time and again, and I find bottles every so often."

"I don't doubt it."

"And Rex isn't above it, either. None of them are. They can throw away enough on drink and cigars to keep their wives in clothes, but when it comes to paying out something for music lessons they're too poor to afford it. But Joe's different. That boy's never looked at another girl. That's not like other men. They'd have married someone else to show you you wasn't the only fish in the pond. Or else they'd get a grouch and never go with a decent girl again and tell nasty jokes about wives and all. I know the whole rotten crowd of them, and Joe's not like them. He's as clean as a girl."

"I guess I'll ask him to take me through tomorrow instead of to-day. You've got so much with Deva sick that I don't want to leave."

"You go right along, Dora Weck. I'll never be the one to keep you two apart. Oh, that's right, I forgot about Mr. Mitchell. It's terrible the way I forget about that man."

"We can see it just as well to-morrow."

"I hate to have you disappoint that dear boy. But he'll forgive you when he knows the reason. Deva don't eat right. Now, Meenie Puffer's little girl sits up at table and eats like grown folks, meat and potato and everything they've got. But why should I worry my head off making people eat? Nobody appreciates a thing I do."

Dora felt a dullness in her blood as if her flesh had turned brown and old. She thought of her few moments with Mitchell, but they seemed to have dissolved into nothing. She felt no emotion toward him and yet buried deep in her, buried like a dream which would rise again and again to torture her, were their moments together. If only they could be together, she and Mitchell, even if both of them were solemn and dark, caught in a black spell which would hold them speechless.

"Call Joe right away. I'm going up to Deva. You get Mr. Mitchell's breakfast. And tell Joe to rent the house without your seeing it. That'll tickle him to death. He'll be happy that you rely on his judgment—they all like that—and if you do that you'll have to be married soon because you won't want to pay out rent on an empty house, or if he buys it you'll want to get settled. Go on, I wouldn't urge you to do anything that wasn't for your own good, Dora."

She went to the telephone and when she

heard Joe say, "I knew you were going to say that," she said that Deva was sick and that the work was left to her. "But will you take me to-morrow?" she asked humbly, and heard him answer, "I sure will, honey girl. Did you sleep the way I told you to? That's good. Always do what I tell you and you'll come out right in the end. I'll be around this morning and to-night, too. You learning how to cook? That's right, that's good."

She put down the telephone and began clearing the table. It was as though her eyes were closed and she walked in a black world where thoughts stirred in her like plants with long roots that held all her life.

She lighted the oven so that she could dry out some crumbs for Mitchell's breaded chops, and then it occurred to her that when she was married to Joe she would be donig things like that all the time.

A fragment of pain stirred in her as she wondered why she couldn't keep the great gash between her breasts that would bleed all her life, keep some hidden happiness deep in her blood that would wash her from day to day in its miraculous, unknown secret. But that moment in the glade when the wound had opened and blood had seemed to drop on the grass was faint and frail and only the spoons on the wall had meaning.

When she saw that Mitchell was standing beside her, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on her face, she wiped her fingers on the towel and set the coffee pot on the stove. Then she asked him if he had slept well, if he minded the heat, and if he knew that Deva was very ill.

"Too bad," he murmured.

"She's wretched, poor little thing."

"Are you going to have breakfast with me?"

"I don't think so."

"Of course you are. Come along!"

It amused and angered her that he should think that since she had been his willing slave the day before that she would be it every day, that because yesterday it had delighted her to have him tell her what she must do, that to-day it would be the same. He stood there looking as if he expected her to throw herself into his arms or at his feet. He acted as if he would be cross if she didn't repeat all the gestures of those other times, the cries, the words, the sudden passion. He seemed prepared to put up with anything, she observed grimly, as she turned to the toast.

"You had better go and eat, Mr. Mitchell."

"Not unless you'll come, too."

"I don't want to come."

"You must come," he cried lightly.

"No!" she said and flashed him a look of hatred. "I won't come."

"Why not?" he asked calmly, and lighted a cigarette. "It's cool on the porch."

"I'm busy."

"Tut, tut!" He took the plate of toast and pushed her ahead of him through the dining room and out to the porch. "Now," he said, "make yourself comfortable."

"You spoil a man," she remarked bitterly, "by being his slave for even a day."

"Slave?" he questioned, and leaned to examine the table linen.

"Yes."

"What do you know about slaves?" A small coffee stain on the cloth appeared to fascinate him and hold his entire attention.

"I know enough."

"You're pretending to be as austere as Hester to-day, aren't you?" He looked at her quickly, sharply.

She stirred at the name. "Perhaps I am."

"Not such a good imitation. But you carry it off better than Amy. She's rather a bore at it." He leaned toward her. "Dora," he said, "there is nothing in this world I wouldn't do to set you free of Hester."

"Why?"

"She's draining you the way she did all of us."

She turned her face away and dropped her head.

"She's going to find out that I'm more powerful than she is. I've got power even though I don't use it on myself. I'll show her. Dora, why don't you leave this town?"

"I'm going to marry Joe Teeter," she said, hoping to taunt him.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes!"

"You only want a place to live, Dora."

"I know it."

"Get out and make your own place."

"How?"

"They all do it now, even if they don't have to. But it seems as if the ones that don't have to are better at it and more eager to do it, for some reason."

"Who does it?"

"Girls your age."

"But I don't feel like a girl," she said.

"My God!" he cried. "You aren't. You're a leopard, and if I were a man I'd make a cage."

"I would like that," she said.

"I'm only half here," he began, and she interrupted with, "Why are you so proud of that?" He took no notice of the interruption. "The rest of me is off there with Hester. She's feeding on me and all the time I rebel I'm making plans to fasten myself tighter and tighter. The more I curse her, the more beautiful and death-

less she becomes. The more my body craves you, the more I see her face and arms and those chaste breasts until I'm sick. Perhaps I can save you, Dora. You're young enough to want to be saved."

"Save me? From what?"

"From rotting."

"Is your toast all right?" she asked.

"I suppose you are observing, as Hester would observe, that men eat under all circumstances?" he inquired.

"I knew that before," she said.

"Really."

"How about some more jam?"

"Not another thing."

"Then may I go back to the kitchen?"

"No. I forbid that. You are here to be saved from Hester. You look very white," he said.

"It's so warm. I wish we'd have rain."

"We undoubtedly will in time."

"I suppose so."

She wondered if he knew that even this death which shook them with a dismal joy, that even his brittle words, made a gloomy garden of bare earth and leafless boughs struggling in the dark.

"Do you want to be saved?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

"Not even by me?"

"If that cream is turning I'll get some fresh.

It's stood quite a while. How about a little jam?"

"No, thank you."

"Would you like some bacon?"

"How could I set you free from Hester with my stomach full of bacon? I must be on my guard when I fight that woman or she beats me. But I think I'll take a drink if you don't mind." He slipped a flask out of his pocket. "I suppose you never touch it. Dora, I can see you back in Glover signing a paper handed out by the W.C.T.U. pledging you as an abstainer for the rest of your days. And you wore the little bow of white ribbon they pinned on the lapel of your astrakhan coat."

"I always wanted such a coat," she said solemnly.

"Did I say I wasn't a real man?" he asked.

"You were quite happy saying it."

"Well, I'm a real one now. And I never felt better in my life. Tell me, how is a leopard ever going to get into Joe's kitchen and make him gravy and find an apron to fit and a dusting cap? And how would a leopard look in church holding the hymn book and singing with the other good people? Dora, you've got to face the hard, cruel world."

"Why don't you, too?" she asked.

"I've always been unfortunate enough to have an income. Dora, I tell you no one has escaped

Hester yet. When she sprays her poison over you, you're a dead one from the start. God, why do I talk like an ass? She's nothing to me."

"She was good to me," murmured Dora.

"Then why are you helpless now? Why can't you go out in the world and earn your living like other girls? Don't you want to escape?"

"I don't know," she said dumbly.

"Can't you clerk in a store?"

"No."

"Can't you be a waitress?"

"Would you be anything like you're suggesting to me? Then why, if you're too good, is it all right for me?"

"It's not a question of superiority, Dora. Come on, be a telephone operator and get paid while you work. Or how about ushering in a theater? I have it. You'll get a job in a flower shop. They always do."

He looked at her so sharply that she knew she must make some answer, and she began to speak as if her words came from another mind, another mouth. "I am beyond this plane of animal existence. I'm made of different stuff. I lived all this ages ago and I'm through with it for good."

He jumped up and stared at her and she stared back at him as if he had no life. Then she walked past him to the kitchen.

7

When she had finished the dishes she swept the floor and went upstairs where she found Myrtle holding Deva's hand and reading to her. The child lay, white and still, her eyes closed, and Dora saw the shadows of dry leaves hanging on drawn shades and felt the burning air stream in on a hot wind. Then the memory of the crackling grass and the black lice on Mr. Fink's vegetables made her want to sink down. The child opened her eyes and when she saw her she screamed, "Go away! You made my mother cry and I'm going to kill you." She threw herself against Myrtle in a fresh agony of weeping.

"Oh, bless her little heart, her's all for her poor Mama, isn't her?"

"What shall I get for lunch, Myrtle?"

"What does my baby want to eat?"

"Myrtle, I thought the doctor said she shouldn't eat anything."

"I guess Mama knows best what her little girl wants, doesn't her? Oh, cook up that veal for Mr. Mitchell, Dora, and fry some potatoes. Rex won't be home this noon," she added sharply. "I suppose he's got another Kiwanis speech on." She laid her face on her child's stiff back and cried, "They've all left me alone except my baby. She never forgets her old

cross mother, does her, bless her little heart."

Dora went into the kitchen and took the veal out of the refrigerator. She stood looking at the pink flesh sunk on a plate. Then she was terrified as she tried to recall Mitchell's face or his hands, his voice and step on the stair, his eyes. But even his name, when she spoke it aloud, sounded unfamiliar. Then a slow quiver went over her body and a peaceful blankness like sleep dropped upon her. She heard herself hum as she poked the meat with an iron fork, her eye on Mr. Fink's vegetables. She set out the potatoes, found the pie, and took it up to Myrtle, still half humming a little song.

"It turns my stomach," said Myrtle. "Take it away. Look, she's sleeping now, poor baby. I'll be down in a minute."

They went down to the kitchen and Myrtle kissed her sister when she saw the crumbs she had prepared. "Well, I guess you'll make a good housekeeper in spite of Miss Linden. This living with us has done you a world of good already. I hate to say it, but you really didn't act normal when you came home. Stay here while I run over to Miss Whipperman's, will you? And if Deva wakes up just holler and I'll hear you. It's only through the yard, that yellow house there, and next time I'll take you along. Miss Whipperman's awful nice,

even though she did come from a trashy family."

Dora stood by the table, humming again, and then as she turned the meat with her iron fork, tears fell slowly down her cheeks. She watched them wet her apron. After a time the bell rang and she heard Joe call her name and run through the house. When she saw his radiant face, softened again and insecure with bashfulness, she was stung with pity and ran into his arms.

"Don't cry, Dora," he urged gently, smoothing her hair. "I knew you weren't yourself last night. Never mind, Dora. Gosh, that cuts me up, girlie; it's all over, anyhow. I know how it is when you don't feel well."

"How can you like me?" she cried.

"You darling! Say, I went home and didn't sleep a wink. I felt like shooting myself but I was sure it 'ud be all right in the end. Everything works out for the best, honey girl, all my suffering worked out that way. I've forgotten it all now I'm with you again."

"Oh, *Joe!*"

"Say, it sounds great to have you call my name." He patted her shoulder and then turned away. "How's the kid?" he asked after a moment, huskily.

"Better."

"Scarlet fever?"

"I don't think so."

"Lots of it around. Come on, Dora, we'll take a look at the house now. Come on, girlie. There's a carpenter bench in the cellar where I could work evenings and make stuff. I like working with wood." He moved close to her again and held her face between his hands. "Say, honey," he whispered, "you can have an electric stove if you say the word. They're all the go now. Honest, you can have anything you want."

"Let's wait . . ."

"You're always wanting to wait!" he half screamed. "Say, how long do you suppose I'm going to hang around you, anyway? I'm making a fool of myself in front of you and the whole town. How much longer do you think I'm going to put up with it?"

"Oh, please don't be cross like last night. I really love you, Joe."

He took her closer in his arms and buried his face in her bright hair. "But I have to be cross when you don't mind me, don't I?" he asked tremulously.

"I suppose so," she answered.

"Gosh, you're so sensitive I'll have to watch my step all the time when we're—we're married," he burst out. "But I'll never scold you unless you need it, Dora, and then you'll want me to, won't you? *Won't you?"* he repeated.

"I suppose so."

He looked at her closely and ran his hands into her hair, overwhelmed by tenderness and pity, and it seemed to her that he was delighted with the tears which hung from her lashes and the humble, submissive look in her eyes when she raised them to him. "Don't cry any more," he ordered softly, and took out his harsh, enormous handkerchief and wiped her eyes roughly. "There. Oh, Dora, can't you smile for me? Please. . . . Listen! Oh, honey, that's right. Listen, I'm going to tell you about the surprise. You were too disobedient last night to hear it."

"I'd forgotten," she said dully, and then smiled.

"Any day you'd forgotten," he said, and shook his finger in her face. "Don't pull that stuff with me. You was crazy to hear it last night, I could see that, but I guess you had something else on your mind. I've about decided, dearie, that you don't like it here and that's why you act so funny all the time." Again he folded his arms tightly about her and put his cheek to hers. "Bad girl," he murmured with closed eyes, and again patted her back paternally. Then he held her away from him and shouted, "Guess!"

"I can't!"

He shook her arms in an ecstasy of delight

and leaned toward her, whispering, "Pa and Ma are giving us a Buick limousine for our wedding present."

"Joe, that's wonderful!"

"I'll say it is. Of course they'll expect you to drive our relations around some," he added, "but that won't be bad, will it, honey girl?"

"I'll be glad to."

"That's right."

"We'll drive the whole town around, won't we, Joe?"

"Lord, I like to hear you say 'we.' Don't it sound great, though? Say, we're almost like a married couple already. Just wait 'till we get settled and there won't be a happier couple anywhere than us. *Will* there? That's right. And you're going to have everything you want, honey girl; I mean everything that's within reason, of course." He put his lips to her hair and bent her head forward, holding her tightly again, his hard, blunt hand pressing her back. "We're invited to our place for Sunday dinner every Sunday after we're married, and that'll give me a change from your cooking," he said winking enormously. "I bet I'll need a change, too. Oh, I don't mean that, honey girl, I'm only joking. You know how men are. I don't expect a girl like you that's been brought up like you have to know everything at once, and I'll put up with a lot, Dora," he said

eagerly. "Listen, dollie, I'll put up with almost anything."

"You're too good to me, Joe. I don't deserve it. Perhaps I'm—maybe, Joe, you'll find out that I—I mean, Joe, I love you, but maybe something . . ."

"Just never you mind," he interrupted. "But I'm not the way I used to be. I used to think I wasn't good enough to touch the hem of your skirt, but you can't get along with a girl and treat her like she's an angel, I've learned that. They all like the rough stuff. You never cared about me until I showed you I was boss and could make love. Don't look so surprised, now," he ordered, half laughing, "because I know you, honey girl; I sure do know you if I know anybody." He pressed his warm, moist face against hers, his hand patting her shoulder. "Don't try to fool me any more because I understand you, Dora. Imagine," he whispered, his voice shaking, "us two in our own place. . . ."

"Don't!" she cried, as his mouth pressed hard on hers. "Oh, stop!"

"Well, who's looking at us now?" he inquired jovially. "Say, if anyone did see us they wouldn't think nothing of it. Aw, Dora, you won't be like this then, will you?"

"I've got to fix the meat. Oh, Myrtle's going to scold me. Oh, she'll be so mean and everything's going to go wrong—Oh, where shall I

go? Please! Please! No, don't touch me, don't!"

"Never mind about the meat, Dora, and come back here where you belong." He rushed toward her and caught her in his arms. "Now, you mind me. I'm not going to let you get away again, do you hear?"

At that moment Myrtle came in the back door.

"Don't be fussed," she cried. "Nothing embarrasses me and I like to see you two acting as if you're alive for once. Greetings, Joe!"

"How are you, Myrtle?"

"Fine and dandy. How's Joe?"

"Swell. Say, Myrtle, what'll I bring the kid from town? I'm going to run up there now and I want to bring her something back."

"Isn't that just like you, Joe? Say, if all the men acted like you I guess women would be different. You're a lamb. But don't you dare bring her a thing. Did you hear me?" she cried, coming close to him. "Look out, Dora, Joe and me's getting a case on each other, aren't we, Joe?"

"Sure are," said Joe, and winked at Dora. "You'd better watch out, little girl. Say, Myrtle, perhaps if we'd start something she'd liven up."

"You sure know women, Joe. They always want a man that looks good to somebody else."

She lowered her voice and cupped her hands about her mouth as she said, "I've heard a good lot about women this morning to Miss Whipperman's. This town is full of scandal. I could tell you about a certain woman here that is thought well of by everyone and is a member of our church and my reading circle and the Shakespeare Club and the Gastronomic Girls, in the best society, and well, I've heard something about her this morning . . . I won't tell it out in front of you, Joe," she added; "it's not for gentlemen to hear, and I promised not to breathe a word of it, anyway."

"Sounds dangerous."

"It's scandalous. Joe, tell your mother that the woman in our reading circle that burned up the book I donated has got what's coming to her. She'll know who I mean. Imagine her burning up my book before any of the ladies got a chance to read it! She puts in some terrible book every month about how to change poverty or the care of the blind or something about travel and I wanted to get in some good literature for once, and if she didn't get it first and throw it in the furnace before any of the others got a holt of it. And she said it wasn't fit for a married woman to read and now her own daughter! Well, I guess she'll feel different about books after this. When Miss Whipperman told me I couldn't help but laugh

right out, I thought it was such a good joke on her."

"Shall I cook the meat now?" asked Dora.

"And she told all over that I didn't know how to cook anything fancy and that the pie I made for the bake sale was tough. Won't she be ashamed, though, in front of all of us that she's turned her nose up at? And her own daughter carrying on all the time something terrible right in her own bedroom, they say, *right in the house!* Can you imagine getting away with that? They say they're sending her out on a farm to work until just before and then after I suppose they'll send her to the city until it's blowed over.

"And the joke of it is they can't make it all right because they're so many men in it. Imagine! Isn't that the dirtiest thing you ever heard of? I was just sick to my stomach when I heard. At least five, they say, and maybe more. Don't that make you sick, though? And that woman said my book was indecent and not fit for ladies to read. Yes, fry the meat, Dora. No, Mr. Mitchell isn't home yet. No, you don't need to yet."

"Don't she look fine, Myrtle?" asked Joe, proudly.

"Now, Joe, I don't feel any hatred toward anyone in the world, but when I see all that woman's done and the unhappiness she's caused

in this town from her snippiness I must say I don't feel sorry for her now, and I think she's getting her just deserts. I really do, and I'm not one to hate people, Joe, and I've never talked mean against anyone in my life and I never intend to, and I don't feel vicious about people, no matter how much harm they do, but I must say that woman's getting hers and the whole town's just tickled to death. Say, Dora, you do look dandy."

"You bet she does."

"We don't need to worry about Dora now you're taking care of her."

"We sure don't, do we, honey girl?"

"Say, Joe," said Myrtle, "I'd ask you to stay but I haven't got much because Rex isn't coming home. He's got lots of work now at the office," she explained, "and the poor fellow can't lay off like other people and take a rest. That man just goes all the time as hard as he can, just like you'll be going, Joe, when you get some kiddies of your own."

"Thanks, Myrtle, but I've got to beat it back right away."

"Now, look! Our Dora's blushing. Bless her heart. Just look at her, Joe!"

"Say," cried Joe, hands in pockets, legs far apart, "you haven't told me what to bring that kid of yours from town."

"Forget it, Joe. She's got so much now she

can't play with it all. Bring yourself. We're always tickled pink just to see you."

"So long. Bye, bye, Dora."

"Wait," cried Myrtle, "I'll get out so's you can be alone."

"Aw, never mind, Myrtle. We got lots of time for that. I'll be back before you know it."

"That's right, Joe," called Myrtle. "Say," she said to Dora when he had gone, "I wish all men was like Joe. Imagine him thinking about Deva and asking what he could bring her. And her own father hasn't given her a thought. When she gets sick he goes off as far as he can until she's well and leaves me all alone with her. He don't like her crying, and sickness upsets him. So I have to bear it all alone until she's well. I'm sick of all this and myself, too, and doing nothing but stay home all day and slave. What's it all for? Say, did you salt those potatoes? That's right. Heaven's, I don't dare think what it's all about. I'd jump in the canal if I got to thinking about it. Right on the shelf in that cup. Put a lot in. I guess when it gets around she'll wish she'd treated people different and now they'd be standing up for her instead of maybe making it worse to pay her back. It's hard on the girl, but she'd ought to be held up to shame, carrying on like that; I never in my life heard worse. Imagine, at least five men, they say, and one of them her own uncle. Yes,

sir, Jed Hawkins. Yes, sir. No, I wouldn't believe it when I heard, either, but it's true. Ya, beat that egg a little. No, not much. That's right."

"Shall I use lard for the meat?"

"Sure. No, those drippings on the shelf there. I always use them. They're just as good and don't cost as much. Yes, sir, her own uncle. And him in church every Sunday looking as good as anyone and taking up the collection, too. And all the time that dirty business going on right in their own house and Mrs. too pure-minded to think anything was wrong. I suppose she thought hers couldn't do no wrong. Serves her right. She's no better than anyone else and now she knows it, and I for one am glad of it. Mr. Mitchell'll be right down. Ya, have it good and hot. Chops are different. You'll never regret marrying Joe, Dora, as long as you live. He'll provide for you like a king and I bet he won't act like most men when you're in the family way. He'll worship you then, he's that kind, and he won't growl when it keeps him awake in the night. You see. Oh, I love that boy, Dora, and I'd rather see you married to him than anyone I know. He isn't thinking of himself night and day like most of them. Most men are selfish and if you treat them good they give you a kick for your pains and trouble and if you treat them rough they

can't do enough for you. Sure, that's done. Turn it down until Mr. Mitchell comes. I know how they treat the women that slave for them year in and year out, they haven't any use for them, that's the answer. Sure, he's coming now. Well, if Rex Fry wants to stay down to his office with that girl he can for all of me only he's got to pay and he'll pay heavy, too. Ya, pour the grease right back in the can, that's right. It's nice to know these tricks about cooking. It sure makes a difference in the grocery bill. He'll find out that I'm through for good and that you can't play those tricks on your wife and get away with it. We have to pay and I guess he's no exception even if he does think he's so smart. He'll pay, all right."

"But, Myrtle, you haven't found out anything yet. I mean you don't know for sure anything about it, do you?"

"Say, don't fool yourself. I knew when he said he had a typewriter what was going on. I bet right now he's—. God, God," she cried and covered her face. Then she left the room and Dora heard her go upstairs heavily.

She picked up the platter and went into the dining room. Mitchell stood there with his back to her and she felt that if he turned his face she would die. When he came toward her suddenly she looked down at her shoes that were specked with flour until her legs grew so weak

that she sat down. Then she saw that he was not eating and that his face was sharp with misery and she caught hold of the table so that she might not go to him but it seemed that already she was in his arms and that only a husk sat in the chair. It seemed that he was slowly enclosing her and that her blood was his, her arms and her throat, but she held tighter to the table so that she might not move. Then she saw him come toward her and she rose and felt his arms on her shoulders. Now her body was bright again, miraculous and fresh, so new that it seemed as if she had risen from the dead.

"If we spent the night together," he said slowly, "we would wake up and eat our breakfast and be filled with contentment and warmth and commonplace satisfaction."

"No! Oh, no!" she cried.

"Celestial nights always end like that."

"Don't say that, please."

"You expect the stars to fall and pile up on your bed and the moon and the sky to open and reveal all the hideous monsters and ravishing angels and the secrets of life and death. You want space to ring in your ears, some cosmic rearrangement, or scuffling among the globes, or an earthquake so that nothing could be quite the same again."

"Nothing could be the same again!"

"But it would be in just a short time and the

sun would be in its place and the seasons would arrive with their depressing regularity. Nothing would change except your mad notions. But it would hardly be a pleasure to take advantage of your innocence," he remarked. "You're too naïve."

"But I want to be different. Tell me what women do? Why can't I be like them? Tell me, tell me, so you'll love me."

Again he was at her side whispering a burning stream of words that she could not understand. "But your hair," she heard him say. "Your hair is not innocent. It's a net and I'll never get loose." He drew aside as the screen door banged and when Joe Teeter wandered into the dining room he was cutting his veal chop, his face flushed and indifferent.

"Sorry to interrupt you folks. . . ."

"Well?" inquired Mitchell coldly.

"Can you come here a minute, Dora?"

She followed him into the hall as if he were a shadow and she the sun and she knew that her face was blind with light and that she was breathing quickly and that her blood was hot and swift. She fastened her gaze upon him but he was barely visible, as unreal as the house or the town or the world, as perishable as all other bodies except hers and Mitchell's.

"I've rented the house," he gasped, "and I bought the license so we have to marry after

five days. It'll be in the paper to-night."

She felt his lips on hers and his breath on her face but it seemed that he had not touched her, that he was a shadow, a figure come from the dead, and she knew that neither his words nor his arms could ever pull her back to his world of sleep, of sodden, habitual death.

"Gosh, Dora, you're beautiful! I've never seen you this way before. God, we'll be happy." He knelt down and pressed his head against her legs. "Dora. . . . Dora. . . ."

"Joe Teeter down there?" called Myrtle. "Hi, there, Joe! Come on up here right away!"

He stood up and took her hand and they went to Myrtle who was at the head of the stairs beaming at them. "What's the good news?" she asked and giggled. "I bet you got some."

"I'll say we have," said Joe. "I'll make your hair stand on end." He put his arms around Dora and drew her closer to him. "To-night the notice of our wedding license is coming out in the paper and after five days we're going to get married and live in Ned Ricket's house for life!"

"Dora! But I never suspected you'd take her off so soon, Joe. This is awfully sudden. Isn't it too soon? We've got so much dressmaking to do for her." She gave the boy a loud kiss on the cheek. "I guess I can do that now we're almost brother and sister and take good care of

her, Joe. Dora, I guess you can wear one of those white dresses Miss Linden gave you and nobody'll be the wiser with the veil and all and the flowers."

"Here's what I brought to Deva," said Joe bashfully and handed Myrtle a tiny box.

"You're a darling, Joe, but what did I tell you? Oh, she'll be tickled pink." She opened the box instantly and took out a gold chain with a locket which held on one side a butterfly under glass and on the other D.F. She ran back into the bedroom shouting, "Lover, just see what Joe brought you. Look at the butterfly. It's a real one that Joe caught for you and put in there. Come on in here, kids."

Deva examined the chain critically, with worried eyes, and then let it drop on the bed. "Jodie Puffer's got one with a ruby in it."

"Deva, for shame! Why, you naughty girl, the idea of saying such a thing after Joe brought you this beautiful present."

"Do you want me to change it, Deva? There's lots more down there, honey."

"I wouldn't hear to it," said Myrtle. "The idea!"

"You get well, Deva, and then we'll go down town and I'll let you get right up to the counter and sit on a little stool and pick out what you want. How's that?"

"All right."

"Deva Fry, I'm ashamed of you. I thought you'd be tickled pink. I just wish I could have had a pretty chain like this when I was a little girl like you but I didn't have pretty things, no one gave me anything when I was your age."

"Say, Myrtle, I guess she's sick. Come on, don't tease her."

"She's going to behave whether she's sick or not."

"Naw, don't scold her, Myrtle. She don't feel good."

"Deva, thank Joe for that beautiful present."

"I want one with a ruby in it," she wailed.

"Are you going to thank Joe the way I said?"

"Listen, Deva," he began, "I'm going to be your uncle. How'd you like to come and visit me and we'll give you ice cream?"

"Cake, too?"

"Lots of it and candy and . . ."

"Friedcakes?"

"Sure."

"And dollies?"

"Fifty of 'um."

"You couldn't."

"Sure, I could."

"You couldn't!"

"Why not?"

"No, you *couldn't!*"

"You better leave me alone with her, Joe. Bless her little heart, she don't feel good and

nobody looks good to her except her poor old mother."

"I've got to get back to the creamery."

"Well, come back real soon, Joe."

"All right, Myrtle, thanks."

"Say, Dora," he began, "we'd been married a year ago if I'd known how to handle you. Think of all the suffering I've been through and you, too, I guess just because I didn't know you wanted me to go ahead and fix it all up. I was waiting for you to urge me and all that and I didn't know you wanted me to do it all, honey girl. Honest, I never expected to see you like this. You're a regular vision," he whispered and turned blood red. "I couldn't imagine you better than you are. Gosh! And I always thought maybe when you were quiet you didn't like me or something and I used to know real certain sometimes that you didn't love me. That's how we can fool ourselves, isn't it lover?"

He lingered at the door, twisting his cap and talking in a low throaty voice. She tried again and again to focus her attention upon him but he slipped away into unreality as space seemed to unroll before her, as stars revolved and her head seemed filled with comets and blazing fire. She fixed her piercing gaze upon him, held him in her breathless ecstasy, but she could barely catch his words which came now with

difficulty as he stood awkwardly before her, his cheeks puffed and red, his eyes soft with feeling.

Suddenly he enveloped her in his arms and put his hot, wet face against her shoulder, whispering brokenly, "I can't bear to go but I'll be back soon. Oh, honey girl, don't get lonely for me. I'll be back soon as I can. I'm not good enough for you. . . ." He made a queer sound in his throat and then ran without looking back.

She went into the dining room and found Mitchell gone and when she looked in the hall she saw that his hat was not there. Then she stood against the hatrack and felt her blood burn like fire until it seemed to her that his heart lay in her hands.

8

She sat in the parlor in the blood-red glow of the Fry parlor lamp and thought of the evening with Joe which had pressed on in gloom while she sat in shadows waiting for the sound of Mitchell's feet on the walk. From time to time Myrtle had come down and had always been recalled by Deva's screams. A moment before Joe left, Rex had hurried past them, barely speaking, and now she could hear the angry roar of Myrtle's voice, softened because of Deva, and yet audible, "You'll have to pay. You see, Rex Fry, you can't get off like this.

God will punish you if no one else does and believe me I won't be sorry. You've made me suffer until I'm half dead and I'll be glad to the bottom of my toes when He starts on you. You're going to pay, do you hear me? You won't get off easy like you think you're going to."

Early in the evening Gloria had come home guiltily hanging her head because of her eleven hour absence and had paused to show Joe her wart-infested fingers and to explain that Mrs. Hogan would not return her quarter and that her father wouldn't give her another for a long time. She remembered Joe's eagerness as he gave the child a dollar and Gloria had run to her mother, delirious with delight, asking if she might keep it. Then Myrtle came telling Joe that he shouldn't have done it, that a dollar was too much to give a naughty girl that stayed away all day and worried her mother sick hunting for her and when was the wedding to come off? Then nothing but Joe's heavy breathing and his weak, moist kiss on her cheeks.

She looked at the lamp, the ugly figures on the rug, the lines of grotesque faces on the mantel but it seemed to her that she could never again be forlorn or lonely. Never again would she throw herself down and lie limp and weak and wretched. But it annoyed her that in spite of her ecstasy she should get up and straighten

a picture and then pick up the evening paper, her eyes looking straight at the notice of their wedding license. She threw it down and felt the same sick fright creep over her that had come on her first night in the house, as if she were a prisoner, caught at last. But she could not believe that after five days she would really be married to Joe and live with him in Ned Ricket's house for the rest of her life. Then Myrtle appeared in the doorway.

"I can't get Deva out of your bed. She won't go."

"That's all right, Myrtle."

"Do you mind sleeping down here?"

A wave of fright and anticipation passed over her. "Not at all. But I don't feel tired and I think I'll stay up."

"Nonsense! You open the davenport and you'll sleep as good here as up in your own room and it's a lot cooler. My, I've got so much on my mind I'm near crazy." She sat down and began rocking complacently. "I want to get some information about the wedding. I think Deva'll be well enough by then so's we can have her for ring bearer. I thought I'd borrow Meenie Puffer's cushion and we'll make a pink satin dress for Deva and she's got her best white slippers so that'll be all right and no expense. I wondered what you thought about an arch of flowers right over there, Dora."

"Please don't bother, Myrtle. Don't . . ."

"I just told Rex he had to buy me a swell dress for the wedding and he didn't dare kick up a row about it. But I know why and so does he and believe me that's not all he's going to buy me before I get through with him. I'm going to get a whole new outfit like I haven't had since I was married and I'm going to have me two pairs of silk bloomers and shirts and if he makes one murmur I know what'll happen and so does he. You can't be fooled all your life by a man and not make him pay for it sometime, you know."

Dora glanced at her sister's face that had sunk from anger into idiotic placidity. She shuddered at the smug smile that crept around her mouth and then at the sneer as she said, "They hang around other women but they always come back to their wives in the end—if they'll have them."

"Why do they?" she asked suddenly.

"And we'll have to think up something for Gloria to do. She'll be mad if we don't and I can't have her crying all over the place and bothering me every minute. Could she be a bridesmaid? She's tall for her age and she looks old. It's too bad all your girl friends are back in Glover. But we could write to some of them, I suppose. Let's invite Miss Linden even if she did act mean. Well, I thought I'd

send her an invitation anyway because then she'll feel obligated to send a present and you want all you can get, believe me. Oh, I wish Mama was here to see it all, she'd be so happy. Just open this out, Dora, and it's all made up ready to sleep on. Has Mr. Mitchell come in yet?"

"Why did you ask me that?" cried Dora. "How should I know about him?"

"Don't be so snappy. I thought you might have seen him. I wish I knew where he puts in his time so late nights. I hate to ask him but why don't you, Dora. He'd take it from you where he wouldn't from me."

"I don't care where he goes at night! And, anyway, I—I—"

"Well, Dora, don't act so silly. I thought you'd be interested just like I am. Heavens, it's a shame to ask you to give up your bed but it's much cooler down here." She leaned over and kissed her. "Bless her little heart," she whispered, "before we know it she'll be a bride."

When she had gone Dora sat down and stared about the room grown hideous and desolate. It seemed to her that she sat there for hours until Myrtle again appeared and asked her if she wasn't ever going to bed.

"It's so much cooler just sitting here."

"Why, it isn't, either."

She saw her sister's huge nightgown which fell in stiff yellow folds to her bare feet and as she came closer she saw the pink lace yolk and under the short tight sleeves Myrtle's loose red flesh. She was not old so it could not be age which made her so loathsome.

"Deva's hungry and her fever's gone down so I'm getting her a lunch. Mama said she was coming," she shouted. "Honest, that kid's going to have me crazy before the night's over. Listen, Dora, do you think it's fair to Joe to sit up like this and not get your sleep out when your wedding's so close by. You want to rest up for it and be feeling fine when the time comes round. Your sleep's more important than anything else now. Oh, stop being moody, again, Dora. Stop it! Dora, pull out of it!" she cried and stamped her bare foot on the floor. "Oh, that child's going to have me in my grave before this night's over."

Again it was silent and she rocked back and forth alone in the darkness until Mitchell came up the walk and onto the porch.

"Hello," he said softly.

"Hello."

"I've been with Amy," he explained and sat down, throwing his hat on the table. "That woman is an ordinary fool. She doesn't have any idea what I'm doing to her. I'm keeping her away from Hester and of course she . . ."

"I suppose she wants to marry you!" she broke in.

"God, no!" he cried. "She's got better sense."

"Why do you bother to keep her from Hester?"

He laughed, "It's no bother for me."

"I can't see why it interests you."

"Can't you?" he asked. "Hester . . ."

"Please don't mention her name. I can't bear it. Please, I can't stand it when you say her name, even, please!"

"Then promise me you won't ever go back there."

"I won't go back."

"Are you going to marry Joe?"

"No."

"Do you mean that, Dora?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"Are you going away somewhere?"

She felt her throat close in suffocation. "Go away," she heard him whisper. "It will be the best thing in the world for you, Dora. Get free. Be independent. Get into a position where you can scoff at Hester and her cowardly philosophy. Just because you're sensitive you don't have to sit off in a corner of Beaver Falls and talk about pretty shadows on the lawn and remark on how lifelike they are and how much more real and more beautiful than the thing which cast them. My God!" he cried, "a

shadow is real and lifelike compared to her. I guess she's right."

They sat in silence for a time until it seemed to Dora that all that would ever happen to them had happened. She was oppressed by a sense of completion, as if after that night she would never again see him, or else see him in a different way, as a stranger or an enemy. She shuddered at the thought of leaving the warm enclosure of his feeling, his words, and his look. And how could she go away to a different town and work? She had read that girls washed their clothes and hung them up on the backs of chairs to dry while they slept.

"You are very important to me, Dora. I might even say precious but I mustn't get silly. I could, you know, but I'm not going to and neither are you. In the end if there's any love in us it's for ourselves."

She was enraged at him for talking about himself, always in his indifferent voice, never turning his face to look at her and never once putting out his hand to touch her when she sat close to him, when she was in him, part of his blood, his life.

"I suppose this knocks you out but it's better that way."

Again they were silent until she turned on him in anger and said, "What do I mean to you, anyway?"

"Very much," he answered.

"Then pay some attention to me!"

"I am, my dear."

"You aren't!" she said shortly and lowered her head.

"Women always think they aren't in your thoughts unless you are kissing them or holding their hands or telling them how beautiful and irresistible they are."

"Please stop talking about women!"

"That's right," he said. "I really must."

"Oh, how can you bear to torture me so?"

"I don't know," he answered miserably.

"Can't you see that you're hurting me all the time?"

"Now, now, don't let's go into that, Dora. It bores me very much. Tell me, are you very dependent upon your surroundings?" He looked at her intently and she shuddered at the cold, impersonal look in his face, at those eyes that reminded her of Hester's for a moment. "Did you feel wonderful at Hester's and enjoy it a lot?"

"Oh, yes, and I'd like to go back there and stay all the rest of my life."

"I thought so."

"She made me feel wonderful and I loved her house and all the beautiful things all around and the peace and . . ."

"Oh, forget it," he said testily, "she's stifled

you with her fine lady trappings. Underneath Hester's nothing but a beggar." He put his head in his hands. "A common beggar. . . ."

She felt that if he mentioned Hester once more that she would go insane, if he said another thing about love and freedom that she would scream or faint. "Oh, stop thinking about her!" she cried and drew her body tense and rigid. "Never mention her name to me again. I hate you and I hate her and I want to die. And I will die, too!"

She gasped and waited for his answer but none came and it occurred to her that she would not die, that she would never make one move to kill herself or drop down into— She paused in intolerable suspension. There was no cliff anywhere near and below no raging sea where one might plunge at dawn. There was nothing but Geesner's pond covered with slime and infected with frogs and mosquitoes. There was only one beautiful place in town and that was Hester's house where she had lived in peace and Hester's garden where she had gone at dusk and felt the stars burn her throat and the moon cover her like a blanket. But she felt a shudder go through her as she remembered the woman's cold face and her cold eyes which barely took notice of her devotion, her warm thraldom which had once made her kneel at the woman's feet and look up at her remote smile until she

was blinded with adoration and had rushed back to the garden.

"Oh, stop thinking about her!" she cried to the man. "I know what's in your mind."

It seemed then that her pain would break through her body. "Why are you always trying to set someone else free? Why don't you start on yourself?"

It seemed that she must go to Hester and cover her wounds in that cool, peaceful house and speak and laugh at table as if she had never felt pain or despair, as if she had always been frozen with her blood still and her heart faint and cold as her body. When she stepped into Hester's garden all of this would be a dream, the hatred and the love, the cry that had rent her at his words, the blood that had washed her body in its cruel rush and hurt. All would be gone, gone like a dream, like a shadow. The blood-red lamp would be a dream, Myrtle in her hideous yellow nightgown, Rex, the children. And she would lie in her room with the light coming in through flowered shades and falling on tiny amber perfume bottles, touching the silver and lace and the bed with its ruffled white cover which touched the dark, polished floor.

Then she would go down to dinner and gasp at the roses in a silver bowl and the long candles and she and Hester would laugh lightly about

the weary ways of men and chat about their amusing babyhood. And it seemed to her that she heard herself say, "Men mean nothing to me. They are shadows." And she could see Hester's quiet smile of approval and hear the soft footsteps of Agda as she came with her tray into the dim, mysterious room.

"Oh, stop thinking about her!" she cried and pressed her hands together so that she might not take hold of his head and let her fingers sink into his face and make him bleed as he had made her bleed. What did he care for her love, for the warm life she was spreading over him, for her breasts and her hair, her whole body that felt like a field of green shoots, rich, warm and vast? "I shouldn't have been so humble before you."

"Don't quote that sterile old maid to me, please!"

"It's true."

"It's a damnable lie that women use to protect themselves and their self esteem. They want men to spend all their time sniffing at their skirts like puppies. You're like all the rest of them. You think that I should be content to scrape my eyes in the dust before you."

"It's always her. You hardly know that I exist. I'm nothing to you but Myrtle Fry's sister from Glover."

He sprang up and caught hold of her so violently that she was terrified. But she did not push him away or scream, she tried with her eyes and her flesh to bind him to her so that he could never get free, so that they might stay enclosed in their dream even when it was dead and dull. But as she took his face in her hands and looked at him she saw for the first time that they were different and separate and that never again could she imagine they were the same; one flesh, one great golden tree with monstrous branches.

She knew now that she would fight to keep him, and that he would struggle against her and curse her for his thraldom but her eyes and her coils of hair, the slope of her breast and thigh, would disturb his sleep until he would never belong to himself or to Hester any more. The wound between her breasts slowly opened and she felt that she must sink down and die in her own blood so that she might forget the cruelty of her body and that deep, secret heart that opened and sent up its poison. But as she heard a sudden scream that pierced and cut her flesh he leapt back from her like an animal. Again it came with intolerable shrillness and then Rex called her name.

"Don't go," he whispered. "Don't let anything separate us now." But as the screams came again she pulled away from him.

She went upstairs and into her room which was ghastly in the bright, unshaded light. She saw Rex pacing the floor, his fists doubled behind him, murmuring in desperate incoherence, and she saw Myrtle bent over the bed where Deva lay with a half eaten friedcake in one hand and her face smeared with sugar and grease. She leaned closer and saw that the child was dead. Her body shook and her flesh grew cold but she knew that she felt no genuine pity for the child nor sorrow for the parents nor agony for the brief, terrible lives of people. It seemed that never again would she look in the glass and see the white face and the coiled hair and the red mouth but instead the short, spotted skin of a leopard with cruel eyes and hungry jaws. A sharp cry came from her but at the same time a deep happiness opened as if she had at last found her identity. Then she watched Myrtle lift her face that was veined and raw like tomato pulp and scream at her husband, "You killed her!"

"Sure. Sure. Sure!" he shouted and stood above her with his fists clenched. "I suppose I nagged the life out of her, didn't I, and fed her the wrong stuff all the time. . . ."

"Stop it! She saw the way you treated me and she died on account of it."

"It's a wonder she's lived this long . . ."

The woman put her head down on the white

spread and sobbed in anger while the husband paced the floor, growling and cursing, until Dora saw that neither of them could believe that their child was gone. And then Gloria came into the room peering at the bed with her sleepy eyes and her father sat down and caught her in his arms.

"What's the matter with Mama?"

"Never mind."

"What you all up for?"

"Never mind."

"Say, can't you ever tell me nothing?"

"I said, never mind."

"My gosh, Papa, you're all making such a racket it woke me up. Deva looks awful funny," she remarked.

"She's . . ." But it seemed to Dora that he could not form the words and suddenly he closed his bright small eyes and laid his cheek on the child's head.

"Ouch!" she cried. "Oh, Papa, your head's awful hard."

Then the room grew still and the figures deathlike, each held gaping in the unintelligible silence, the bright, unshaded light throwing the mean room into sharpness and falling viciously on the bodies until Dora knew she could never forget the ugliness of the stupid, dumb faces bent in blank wonder and fright toward the bed.

9

Mr. Dillon, the undertaker, was in the parlor and Myrtle was in the kitchen ironing a little white silk dress with a ruffled skirt and a sash. All morning she had said no more than "yes" and "no" and when neighbors came in to see her she looked at them blankly and sat with her hands in her lap, her feet straight before her, and stared out the window as if she saw nothing and heard nothing and would never speak again.

They all knew from the sudden amazed looks on her face when the child's name was mentioned that she had either forgotten that her child was dead or had not realized. But once she said, "And I'm all alone now," and looked up in terror and then blankness seemed to relax her features and tears fell down her cheeks into her unclasped hands. Once she spoke of Dora's wedding and said that she knew of a cheap piece of pink satin down at Kimball's store that would do for Deva's dress and then they were frozen by her low giggle as she went quickly upstairs and for hours they heard her rocking chair creak and grind on the bare floor. Then she came down and when Meenie Puffer insisted upon ironing the dress that Mr. Dillon was waiting for she shoved her away as if she had not heard and began ironing slowly and care-

fully, fluting the ruffles and stretching the sash so that the hem might not pucker.

Then Gloria rushed in to tell her mother about the big wreath of white rosebuds that Deva's Sunday School class had sent and the woman nodded and told the child to be careful of her good dress and keep it clean, that she couldn't be buying her clothes all the time. And when her friend, Meenie Puffer, gasped, she turned to her and said, "Well, you know how hard children are on their clothes." Next Rex came into the kitchen carrying a little black rubber doll with a white cotton shirt to its knees and Myrtle set down the iron and looked at it and then she took it from him and went into the parlor where Mr. Dillon impatiently awaited the dress. She laid the little doll on Deva's arm but it rolled off and Mr. Dillon asked pleasantly if the dress wasn't almost ready and took out his watch and said that he had an appointment in three-quarters of an hour. She went back silently and found that Meenie Puffer had finished ironing the collar so she took the dress back to the man who thanked her gravely and made a little bow.

Again Gloria rushed in and announced in a whisper that the flowers were beginning to come and that Mr. and Mrs. Fink next door were going down town to order some and that the little girls all along the street were going to send

some together and that Deva's Sunday School class was going to march to the funeral in a body. But the woman turned away and looked at her husband who said nothing and then they went back to the kitchen and Gloria caught Dora around the hips and hugged her.

"That's better than the one Gladys Jones's sister got," she whispered and pointed to the rosebud wreath. "Hers wasn't near so big. And Don Goltz says they're going to use the new style hearse that they just got from Chicago last week. This will be the first time. Lookit, here comes some more flowers."

It seemed then to Dora that the child in the coffin was the only one who had not died. She remembered Mitchell's anger when she had returned to the porch and explained her absence but she, too, had felt irritation that anything could break their moment, that any blow from the outside was strong enough to send them apart. And they had talked on as if nothing had happened and he had once lifted her in his arms and laid her on the davenport but the house had suddenly become so barren and so dead that they turned away from each other and then he had gone. She knew that now he was upstairs in his room, sitting there without life, and she wondered if the child's death had caused their death or if the cruel insistence of her body had killed them. Again she heard

the cry that had gone through the house just as the light was coming, red and gray in the windows, and again she turned to hunt a place to hide, covering her ears, crying in terror as the moan, like an animal in labor, tore her. She ran up to Mitchell's room and found him lying face downward on the bed.

"Hello!" she cried.

He raised up and came to her and as his arms went around her and she heard his short, excited breathing she thought of nothing except his heart which seemed to be in her hands, and the curve of his shoulders and the smell of liquor on his breath. They stood there stupidly until she heard Gloria call her. Then he pushed her away in impatience and staggered back to the bed.

"The telephone!" shouted Gloria.

As she went down she paused to take two large boxes from a messenger boy and stopped to find Mr. Dillon a pair of scissors. He explained that he had mislaid his own. And then she told Gloria not to play in the front yard but to go in the back where no one would see her and picked up the receiver. At first no one answered and then she heard a voice that lifted her out of the meanness and cruelty and the blankness of herself and her life in that house.

"You wanted to talk to me? Oh, yes! Yes, I could come."

She put up the receiver and helped Mr. Dillon unpack the large wreath of forget-me-nots and roses and agreed with him that they were perfect and that the room would never hold all the flowers if they continued to come in so fast. And then she went out the door and down the street to Hester Linden's.

WE ARE INCREDIBLE

III

Hester Linden

1

Hester put out her hands to Dora. I would have her always like this, she thought, with the sun in her hair, her skin bright as gold, and those arcs of light widening and moving all around her. Those deep brooding eyes, the white wrists. . . . But why does she wear that little bow at her neck, it is too pathetic, almost tragic, beneath a face like hers.

She took the hands but their warm, limp passivity made her drop them quickly. No, she thought, let her stand always like this with the flowers around her, under trees, and near the marble bench with the sun over it.

"Dora, I'm glad you came back."

The girl stood motionless but she was like a column of stone that had been carved in ripples that seemed to move and move, a pillar of stone in a tangled deserted garden. Those deep sad eyes were looking at the pear tree perhaps or at the basket of quinces on the step or through the arched door to the dark Tibetan tapestry on a dim wall.

Oh, I must make up my mind to take care of her always, she thought as she saw the futile awkward hands hanging in the folds of her

skirt. "Look at the roses," she said, turning away. "Aren't they wonderful this year? Slater tries to tell me it's the fertilizer but I don't believe him. I'd like to see what they would do without any at all." She felt warmth and hope come through her, opening her pores to the light, moving away the hardness in her mind, opening the curtains before her eyes, the doors in her ears. She bent down and looked into a pink rose. "I could make you grow. I could do more than fertilizer." Her fingers held the stem. "I ought to make you more beautiful if I can."

She lifted her eyes to the patient slopes that lay in the sun, the rise of hill, the massed green and black in the distance. She took Dora's arm and led her to the pansy bed where velvet faces stared with single golden eyes, she took her through the petunias, all lavendar and ruffled, to a hoary tree with waxy, yellow-white stars, large and motionless on prickly stems. Close your eyes and all about you, she thought, are smooth rich yellow-whites, clouds of phlox there near the path and behind them the larkspur with those tiny flowers shaking on the stalks like dragon-birds. The sky is bright, the grass is bright, and everything is still.

I must not hurt her feelings. She went to Dora and unpinned the little bow and tucked it into the girl's pocket. "Isn't it cooler with it

off?" she said and slipped her arm around her for an instant.

I must not lie. I must not be so sensitive of her feelings. "You look better this way. The bow made it all wrong."

Let the voice be cold but not too cold. Let the eye have a spark of kindness and understanding. Eyes look out at her with compassion.

"Everything here is beautiful, Hester."

She led her back to the marble bench under glossy bush-leaves, the house before them rising white and still from the green, surrounded by flowers, the pointed foliage of branching plants and fern trees. There was a tree near the porch with its old firm roots clamped over a smooth brown stone. The roots were deep in the earth and the stone was slowly becoming earth.

"Everything seems so contented," said Hester. "See that rock and that tree. They talk about the cruelty in nature and one thing existing at the expense of another but I don't see it. Everything is right."

"I feel so still."

They walked onto the terrace, over the cool flat stones where the old grape vine had wound its tough, beautiful body around the crossed framework of wood. They walked over the shadow pattern and Hester stopped to touch a leaf that hung down, its tendrils swinging

strangely in the air. She lifted it carefully and twisted it around one of the wooden spokes, her fingers smoothing the rough stem of the major vine, a small humming in her throat.

"Dora, can't you feel how happy that vine is? Look at it! Oh, there's always something—flowering trees—grapes—pears."

Under their feet the grass was pushing up the stones, green tender sprouts finding the light, struggling through crevices. There was a vine with closed, heart-shaped leaves, infinitely minute and trailing, that was crawling up the side of the house in a small line of green, spreading delicately, rising. Some pears lay on their sides on a pewter plate, their smooth red cheeks toward the sun. A yellow gourd, like a banjo, stood in the corner, leaning against the wicker leg of the table. Over it all was the pattern of leaves and stems, shaking now in a light wind.

"Hester, my eyes are closing, I can't remember anything, I am falling fast asleep."

The eyes slowly closed, the head went backward on the white shoulders, and those futile hands clasped together and moved up the chest and stayed there pressing into the breasts and throat. There was the long line of her beautiful body, body of a girl new in life, strong, full of expectation.

Oh, I must take care of her. No harm must come to her. She thought of another young

girl, a small delicate figure with large eyes, bunches of violets in her hair and breast, a long rich dress of satin and net and ruffles with edges of ribbon, long white arms of another girl new in life, long easy breathing in that breast, firm soft eyes of expectancy. Another girl fresh in life, waiting, generous, with white skin and tiny pointed fingers and all the breathlessness of curiosity in the breathing. Girl who ran over grass with her arms out, girl who died, who slept deep in her with her white arms straight and those eyes closed and the long peaceful breathing all gone, dead with that dead body that had died just as the child had died in that girl, the child who had run over these green slopes and imagined herself a girl, walked like a lady, seen herself a princess in a vast train.

Too much of this, she thought. It is inaccurate and untrue because tears are in my eyes and I am letting pity seep in slowly through my pores. She looked at Dora and now she saw an exaggerated attitude of poignancy and wistfulness and mindlessness.

"Come inside, Dora. I want to show you something." She touched her arm and gave her a little push when she did not move or open her eyes. "I want to show you something."

She did not turn to look back at her but moved forward strongly as if only that moment had ever existed, this clear definite outline of

immediate sensation. The crisp paper of the evening before was in her hands, her sharp eyes were following the notice, her mind was poised, prickling behind her forehead. The curtains blew into the room, the heavy corded drapery at the sides still and dark against the panels, the looped cords and the velvet tassels motionless, too. There was a vase of lilies in the corner, their white open throats with the yellow pistils soft and definite at the same time. Vines spread their bodies around the pillar of wood that could be seen from the south corner of the room and at the window, over the screen, like a delicate imperishable net, were tendrils of vine spreading. And yet from the largest window that faced the placid slopes of green, the ravines and the civilized orchard, was an endless expanse of free vision, past the meeting of sky and hill, on and on until the eye lost all relation to the brain.

"Dora!"

Voice, lose that sharpness and yet be austere. Make this girl rise from her false emotional world that is meaningless into the towers of the mind. Make her live behind her eyes in the cold, vast world of choice and freedom. Eyes, look softly on this unhappy girl. You mountains of justice and impartiality, rise in me, I need you; rise high.

"I don't know what this means, Dora."

The girl stumbled forward toward the table, her head bent, thrust forward, the eyes trying to accustom themselves to the massive shapes of furniture, the sharp surfaces and the gleam and gloss. Her foot caught on the corner of a rug and she fell against the table. Hester put her hand on the arm that trembled and looked hard into the bewildered face where emotion was breaking through the marble stillness of peace and sleep.

"This isn't you?" She drew Dora to her and let the other hand rest lightly on the page, the forefinger on the name—Dora Weck. Then she let it travel over Joe Teeter, up over other names of girls and men to the heading. There her hand swept the faces of the words, Marriage Licenses Issued.

"Men . . . men," said Dora suddenly. She put her hand over her eyes and the corners of her mouth pulled.

"Is this you, Dora?" She tapped the name.

"How cold your voice is. . . . I don't know you."

"Don't be absurd."

Chin, when you lift this way, eyes when you gaze hard, as if there are no folds of imagination to be seen through, everything is clear and simple.

"I'm asking you if this is some other Dora Weck."

Dora sank down sideways into a chair, her arm on the back of it, her head pressing the white helpless flesh. Her body was relaxed as if she could take no part in any battle, either for herself or for another. She lay there white and bloodless.

I must not feel sorry for her. She must not compel pity this way. I could be sorry if she didn't expect it or if she tried to hide her misery.

"Are you going to marry Joe Teeter?"

"I don't know."

She closed the paper quickly and walked to the large open window where the land stretched on and on. Behind her was the tangled garden where wild flowers and roots grew together. There, vines closed over the roots of trees and trees closed the faces of stones and stones pressed hard on the earth which cracked sometimes in long jagged crevices. She wanted to forget the name Joe Teeter. Its gawkishness upset her. She dimly remembered the stupid boy. He had wriggled in his thick clothes one day on the terrace.

"Vega is leaving her husband," she said suddenly. But the girl did not move. "She was so happy here, always so peaceful and exquisite, and then he came along and she changed absolutely. I can't understand a civilized person like her turning so primitive. She left one

night before she gave me any massage."

It was humorous that she should still remember with rancor the detail of the massage. But it pleased her that she should be conscious of her absurdity and so quick to condemn herself. New currents of blood seemed to flow. She laughed aloud. Then the image of Vega swept into her mind, Vega's face that she had watched in its slow change, the body, the voice, all these parts of Vega that had gradually become like herself. She had hung angel pictures on her walls so that Vega would unconsciously be influenced by the sweet sexless faces. And in Dora's room she had hung the Angelo dell' Annunziazione, the woman with golden hair and wings, a knotted satin cape on the shoulders, and olive branches in her hands and hair. There was Dora's look in the small, ecstatic mouth, the eyes that seemed to see nothing on earth, the sure plunging feet.

"The world is mad," she said sadly. "I can't understand . . ."

She saw Agda in the doorway. She looked at her coldly and with irritation when she saw that the woman was wearing her glasses. They made her like a goose, she reflected, as she went toward her swiftly. They made her stupid and long necked. I mustn't speak. It will hurt her. Be quiet, you meddling woman.

"Oh, Miss Linden," she said humbly, her eyes

apologetic and her mouth defiant. "The doctor says I have to wear them. He told me that I might go blind if I don't take care of my eyes at my time of life."

"Nonsense!"

"He did, Miss Linden, and I have to listen to him. I paid him . . ."

"Yes, they always get the money. It's a shame, Agda."

"But, Miss Linden, if you'd only say it was all right—I don't want to hurt you by wearing them—Oh, I can't wear them," she said hopelessly, "if you don't want me to."

Tenderness rose in her. She put her cool hand on Agda's. The roughness of the fingers, the old cracked skin near the knuckles, gave her a twinge of pain. "Agda, it's been so hot lately. I want you to sleep in the guest room during this weather. And take to-morrow afternoon off."

Her cousin lives in Barth. Let Slater take her early to-morrow morning and she can spend the day there. But then the cook will have to serve me. Those hands, that voice. Be brave. This is the right thing to do. If you should die in the night, Hester Linden, if you should be struck down now, this is the thing you would do.

"Agda, I want you to go to Barth to-morrow. Slater will take you early."

"Oh, Miss Linden, I couldn't go. I couldn't leave you alone for the whole day. I appreciate it," she said with a shake in her voice, "but I can't accept it."

Relief went through her and sweetness. She felt hope and a sense of her own worth. "Oh, do," she urged, knowing that now Agda would never go. "It would give me so much pleasure to think of you. Please . . ."

False. Oh, ugly, hypocritical. Once you would have meant that sincerely, Hester Linden. Now when your skin is changing and you are growing old, yes, old, your mind is changing too. No, you dare not control me, Body. I am master of Hester Linden.

"Slater will be ready for you at seven. Is that too early? And now, Agda, I want to tell you something about glasses. They will only weaken your eyes. I've never worn them and I never shall. You're so beautiful without them."

She watched the bewildered, half ecstatic look of renunciation in the eye, the surrender in the hands that unclasped and lay against the white apron. The mouth spread in a tender, misty smile.

"I'm thinking of you, Agda," she said and reached up and took them off. "I'm going to have Slater bury them. They absolutely spoil the contour of your face."

"No, no, Miss Linden," said Agda weakly.

"Oh, you always get me thinking I'm good looking."

"You are. You're lovely. You're like Mona Lisa. I'm going to get you a picture of her, Agda."

"Nobody else thinks I'm beautiful."

"They don't see the real you, that's all."

The woman turned her face away, her cheek against the thick portière. "You make me feel as if I really am somebody."

Again that poisonous drenching of pity, as if she must do something to satisfy the look of wistfulness in the woman's face, as if she must restore her dreams, the faith that had been in her, the bright eyes of childhood.

"Oh, Agda, you're wonderful. You've taken such good care of me and what have I ever done for you . . ."

"You—you aren't like anyone else, that's all —you . . ."

"The thing to do is to question things," she said suddenly. "Don't have faith in doctors. A long time ago they actually thought bleeding people was the proper thing and they used all sorts of barbaric devices for treatment, but the horrible thing about it is that people believed. Science had a way of being wrong but people are always ready to be fooled. They never question anything. Here they go, round and round, always dead. Sometimes I think the

world has gone mad. They're insane, that's all."

Sex, she thought, men turning women into beasts, destroying them, making them helpless, in slavery. Men, men . . . What must God think of his children? How must he feel, struggling in each to come into the light, to shine through the eye, to speak through the mouth, how must he feel?

"Yes, we're crazy believing doctors," cried Agda. "What do they know? Taking out tonsils and appendixes just for the money they can squeeze out of poor folks. And the same with the eye doctors. I can see better now than before. Really, I can see . . ." She looked round the room ecstatically. "I can see everything . . . more than's here even."

"That sounds reasonable, Agda. Now you're thinking for yourself. We all have to work for that. The truth is in us and it has to come out sometime."

She laid her fingers on her chest and suddenly she was Hester Linden, the little child who had gathered leaves for plates and platters to serve her dolls, it was the Hester who had tiptoed into the room in the early morning to see if anything from the queerness of the night might still be there. Now one hand was in her father's. Now her mother was combing her hair in her pink dressing jacket with the nasturtiums on it. No, little girl, lie down again and fold your hands

under your cheek. You would not know me now. You would be lonely and scream and bury your face, so go back, lie down, fade, fade away.

"Miss Linden, you're more to me than . . ." Her nose began twitching.

How idiotic Agda looks and I can't tell her. She would never forgive me. I wanted to laugh this way when Agnes told me about her heart attacks and when Mr. Murray explained about his gastric ulcer. I must not pretend to be blowing my nose and give way behind my handkerchief. I must not laugh outright the way I did when Mr. Boyle slipped for no reason at all and went down. Mouth, refuse to laugh. Mouth . . . mouth.

"Is Agnes making chocolate cake?"

She heard the woman's gasp and she knew that she was rearranging her face and coming back to normal.

"I'm going now to tell Slater about your trip to Barth. Oh, please don't thank me again, Agda," she said almost in irritation and hurried out.

Perhaps when I come back Dora will have decided to be a human being. I must telephone Mrs. Jeffries and I've forgotten about the check to Adrian. Perhaps the best thing for him to do would be to work. Or perhaps not.

"I want you to be here to-morrow morning,

Slater, at eight. You're going to take Agda to Barth. How's the baby?"

"Pretty cranky. Mrs. has been up with her two nights now."

One thing that she remembered about Slater's large wife was the odor of warm milk that came from her. She always smelled it when she worried about economic conditions. And why should Slater live down there near the swamp while she had all this and was idle? Why should he be cutting her grass in order to live while she did nothing? His child was as good as another and yet how would it get to the best schools? My house. . . . The odor of warm milk in my rooms, heavy voices, awkward feet, fat red hands.

"Slater, why don't you take the tent out of the garage and pitch it down in the orchard? Then you could bring your family up here for a month or so. I've wanted to get acquainted with your baby."

"I'm afraid Mrs. wouldn't like it, leaving her house and all. I know she wouldn't want to camp out."

"But it would be a vacation, and she wouldn't have any cooking to do. No, I've made up my mind, Slater. You are to come." She looked up into his eyes, smiling. "I want to speak about the roses again. They never have been so lovely. You're a wonder."

It delighted her to see the humble, helpless look come on him, the sagging in the shoulders, the happy shy glance and then the bar of music humming in his teeth as he pushed back his hat.

"I was always one for flowers, Miss Linden. I'm always experimentin'. I tried sheep manure this time."

"Oh, please!" she cried, half laughing.

"It comes to me so natural."

"But how could anything gross be responsible for that exquisite texture and color?"

Eyes, eyes, look at Slater so that he will know I am speaking the only truth. Oh, I want him this way always, with his hat that way and his hair ruffled and those eyes looking into mine so helplessly.

"I never heard of anyone objecting to fertilizer until I came here, Miss Linden."

"That's because the world is insane. They're mad. Can't you see it? Look at people's eyes and then at the rest of them. They're slaves. They're willing to live as masses instead of letting the truth tell them."

Over those green slopes Indians once lived and moved and now I am here. These trees were young then, those branches have made shadows for the living and the dead. But I shall go on and on. I shall always be here. Beneath my feet are the bones of the dead, the bones of

firm warm bodies that lived and meant nothing, but I shall go on. Sky, stars that come at night, you will always see me here. Bones that grow old, skin that changes, you cannot command me, you cannot tell Hester Linden when to stop because she lives beyond you, she is safe.

"Sometimes I think you're right, Miss Linden. The way folks run around and never save for the rainy day and then before they know it the time of reckoning is here and where are they? It's better to work hard every day and do more than your share and let God reward you as he sees fit."

"Mrs. Jeffries is running for mayor. She's left her husband, I'm so glad, and she's promised to run for mayor. She's a remarkable sort of woman. I'm so impressed with what she's doing and at her age. Most women have lost all their spirit and independence after they have lived with a man for thirty years. But she doesn't let you pity her and she doesn't stop to pity herself. Agda is voting for her and I think perhaps Agnes will. But Agnes is so unintelligent compared to Agda. I've had a hard time with Agnes. In the first place she can't see that it's necessary for women to vote. I've had the same trouble with the women around the town. The men laugh them out of their rights. They tell them it's much more important to think about their husbands than to think of their own

progress. It's the old thing over and over and women are always taken in."

"Sure," said Slater, grinning. "Sure. I know it, Miss Linden."

"But I wonder if you've noticed the change that is taking place, Slater. Women are becoming larger and more aggressive and men are shrinking down. This vicious equilibrium between the sexes is passing. Women are demanding the best in men and if men can't give it"—she threw up her hands—"we let them alone."

"Sure," said Slater. "A man has to support his wife or she's a right to go."

"Not that, Slater. Use your head. A woman supports herself and the thing she has been giving in exchange for her keep—she needn't give it any more—she's free. Do you understand that?

"That's the way men have controlled women and the women have had to submit because of their training. They've been taught no relation to the world and so they *have* to be kept. Men have always belonged to the world, sex is a casual thing with them, but they've made it another thing for women. But it's changing . . ."

"Maybe it's one of those things that can't be helped. We were made that way maybe."

"No, no. That's way off. It's all in sociology and environment. Women could control this whole world and be humble about it and do it

in one fourth the time it takes men and have a perfect result . . ."

"I guess you're right, Miss Linden. Nobody respects women more than I do. I've always said one good woman was worth the whole shooting match of men."

"That's more profound than we realize, Slater. Everything comes from women. Think it over some time. Have you decided how you're going to vote?"

"I'm thinking it over. Maybe that Mrs. Jeffries could do a better job of it than a man. Anyway, I'd be willing to give her the chance. She couldn't do worse than what we've had already."

Admiration and pity for him went through her. "Slater, you have such good judgment. I can always trust your reaction to things."

"I had a good mother, Miss Linden."

"Your friends. Will you tell them about Mrs. Jeffries? And I want you to meet her sometime. She's a wonderful woman. I told you how pleased I was with the roses, didn't I?"

She walked slowly back to the house, studying the short grass as her feet sunk into it. How slowly it had come, this change from the soft girl, unsuspicious, generous and naïve. How slow it had been, the rise from female softness and passivity, the pull up and up into free air. The beauty of that girl, the love given

without desire for response, the love, the love. . . . I am exaggerating again. That girl was human, too. That girl was like other girls, no better, no worse. But here I am where none can hurt me and there she lies in me dead.

2

Dora sat with her face against the window panel, the sun on her lips, before her the green slopes, the distant hills, the waving rise and fall. Sun through the fierce crawling vines made her coiled hair blinding and vast, turned the skin a light gold so that the partly closed eyes were a brighter, stranger blue. But all over her, through the fallen arms, the dropped head touching the shoulder, the outstretched feet, was that marble stillness.

Looking at her Hester felt tender and silent, softness came into her mind, she sat down breathing slowly, no plans in her head for any one, no voices to be softened or angles to be curved or attitudes of mind to be changed. Peace flowed through her, stillness, she was deaf with the stillness.

"At night I thought of this," said Dora. "I can't remember much. I know I was unhappy. But now I feel so . . ." she raised her head and leaned forward, her arms around her knees, the eyes straight on Hester, the lids partly closed.

"I feel empty, cleared out of everything. I can't remember why I was ever disturbed. It's all easy and simple."

"Yes."

They heard the sudden indescribable sound of rising bodies as a flock of pigeons flew up from the grass, turned over in the sun, and disappeared.

"Empty—empty—" said Dora, facing the green. She put her hands under her chin and leaned forward looking through those half closed lids at the distant sky. "I could do anything now. I'm not afraid."

"I know."

"I'm so still."

"So am I."

Dora stood up, one hand between her breasts, the small ecstatic mouth spread in a smile. She pressed her hand closer. "I feel hope in here," she said. "It's bright."

Let her always be like this with the sun inside her and her eyes staring out at the distant sky. Let those flames of hair curl round her head. Keep her a girl with hope bright between her breasts and the world still and good in the towers of her mind, safe and pure in the depths of her heart. Let her remain complete in the world she has made. Oh, let no hand touch her and leave its print on that golden skin.

"We need not die," she said. "We have the

truth." She felt a movement in her body, as if her flesh were falling down, going farther from her, uncovering that sharp small light that burns.

Agda appeared in the doorway. "A Mr. Mitchell is here. He wants to see you, Miss Linden."

Dora's eyes opened in terror. She clasped her hands tightly. She turned from the wide window back to the tangled garden and then to the windows netted with tendrils and roots. She seemed to plunge from her chair toward the garden as if she were going deep into the wilderness of trees and grass to cover her eyes, to press quaking hands over her ears and bend to the earth, her cheek against it.

"Don't be absurd. It's probably an agent."

"It's not an agent," said Agda.

"Are you sure? Those magazine agents have all sorts of tricks."

"It's Stephen Mitchell," said Agda. "He used to come here."

They heard a groan. Hester hardened herself against the cry. "But I don't know a Stephen Mitchell."

"He came with Miss Amy and the others."

"Stephen Mitchell. . . . Isn't it curious, I can't remember anything about him."

"I can recall a little about him," said Agda. "He was tall and thin."

"But so was Mark."

"This one had a kind of sickly face. I always thought he needed something or someone to give him a push from behind and start him going."

"But why is he here? Dora, you know him," she cried in exasperation. "Help me. Please . . . Dora shook her head.

"He was the one that used to argue," said Agda.

"But we all did that."

"He came one morning . . ."

"But I don't want him to know that I've completely forgotten."

"Why?" cried Dora, facing her.

"Oh, come, Dora, you're being intense again. What am I going to say to him?"

"Tell him the truth!" cried Dora, her eyes narrowing.

Hester turned in surprise but the girl stared straight ahead.

"What are we all so tense about? Why, Agda, even you look queer."

"Ask about his health, Miss Linden," stammered Agda. "He looks sickly."

"Tell him to come in."

She heard the woman's feet going over the rugs to the hall. Now she would be telling Mr. Mitchell solemnly, now he would be starting to walk toward the room. Mitchell, Mitchell, a boy with gold hair. No, that was Mark. A

boy who argued. "I don't think Plato's so much . . ." No, that was Amy. A boy with hair on his wrists. Mitchell, that was Mitchell. His feet, sharp, definite on the polished wood, coming closer to her. Mitchell, Mitchell, come out of me, come out, come out. Mitchell once ran into one of my fine vases. Hair on his wrists. Mitchell's feet on the hall floor coming nearer, stepping on the last rug now, soon that sound of footsteps in the room, soon she would look up, in an instant she would look up into Mitchell's face and perhaps the lost boy would rise in her. Now, an instant more. Dora's hand was on her arm, she was pushing her over the rugs, out of sight. They were in the garden under a shower of moon flowers, closed now in the sun, their feet were deep in the damp moss and ferns.

"Hester, will you let me stay here with you?"

The desperate white face, the lorn mouth, the eyes in terror.

"Take me away to a wonderful country. Oh, hide me, save me . . ."

"Of course you're going to stay here."

The girl sank down at her feet. "I don't dare love him until you tell me I can." She caught hold of Hester's hand and laid it over her cheek. She leaned against it, her eyes half closed. "Tell me I can be a woman. Tell me it's right."

"I don't like this," Hester commanded sharply. "Get up!" She tried to pull her to her feet. "This isn't real. Only quiet things are real. You're in your imagination now. Get up. Now, look in my face!"

She put her hands on the girl's forehead. "Look in my eyes. Are you calm? Are you ready to tell Dora what to do? Can you say to her, 'Dora, obey me!' Can you make her stop trembling?"

"I can't live without you . . ."

"Are you ready to say to yourself, 'Dora, I am your master.' "

"Yes."

"Say this after me. The Dora who trembles and cries bears no relation to me."

"The Dora who trembles and cries bears no relation to me."

"I am master."

"I am master."

"This weak soft Dora must do my bidding."

"This weak soft Dora must do my bidding."

"Where did you meet Mitchell?"

"He lives at my sister's! I met him there."

"But he can't take you back to your sister if you choose to stay here. Remember that."

"Let me stay close to you. Oh, like me best. Let me be the only one in the world you've really liked. I'd die for you. Oh, God, it all comes back . . ."

"Oh, yes, he had little tufts of hair on his wrists. Once they made me shudder."

"He hasn't—his hands are beautiful."

"Perhaps it's not the one."

"You make him sound common and he isn't."

"Come, we're going in to him. It's indecent to keep anyone waiting so long."

"Hester, I couldn't stand it if you were disappointed in me."

They walked toward him slowly. He stood with his back to the side window, his hands behind him, the delicate head raised and the eyes on them as they moved forward. He too came slowly, as if they must come more than halfway, and took Hester's hand.

"And I believe you know each other. Miss Weck, Mr. Mitchell."

He nodded without looking at Dora and moved restlessly to the table, glancing at a bright binding among the books. The cool drip of water was heard and then the sun came brightly through the leaves and the green was more intense and smooth. For an instant everything was still and strange as night.

"We might go outside," he suggested.

Hester smiled at the assurance in his tone. "Not yet," she said. "I rather like it here."

He moved to the windows that opened into the garden and ran his hands through his hair. Then he faced them.

"The roses," he said sharply, "how are they?"

"We'll see presently. Sit in my new chair." She raised her forefinger toward a large gray chair whose spotted velvet arms and lap were low and deep.

He inspected it. "I believe I won't," he said. I'll take this one." He sat down on a stiff, high backed chair with absurd glistening legs.

"It's been a long time, Mr. Mitchell." She leaned forward, her hand on her chin.

"Yes."

"How is Amy?"

"Quite well. She's been back only a short time."

"Oh, yes. And Mark?"

She saw him twitch. "Oh, very well."

"Mark always was such a nice boy."

"Charming."

"And who was that boy—let me see"—she tried to recall the face—"his last name was Bowood, I believe. How is he?"

"They took him out of the canal about ten years back."

"The canal," she repeated without realizing the meaning of the word. "Oh, yes. They were all such dears. And such nice pupils. But I really wasn't a teacher because I learned more from them than they did from me."

He has the stubbornness of a man, she thought, and the weakness and selfishness. His

lower lip has something vulgar about it. The eyes are good except they are so indifferent they're practically sightless. And his hands are all right. I don't see hairs on his wrists. She looked suddenly at Dora, without knowing why. The girl sat as if frozen to her chair, bolt upright, her hands tight together between her knees, her head lowered dangerously so that the line of hair made a superb arch from neck to forehead. There was fright and defiance in the face, even in the awkward position of the feet and legs.

"Were you the one who thought Plato wasn't so much?" she asked him, laughing.

"Probably," he said.

"How is Amy? She was a charming girl."

"Quite well."

"Here's something that will interest you, Mr. Mitchell. Mrs. Jeffries is running for mayor." How can I make him want to vote for her? How can I make it seem as if I don't care? "Who are the other candidates? Do you remember? All I can remember is that reactionary—what is his name?—but you wouldn't know—he's the sort the older generation always votes for. Mr. Boggs is like that, too."

"I don't vote."

"That's extraordinary. Why?"

"One vote and one mayor—one is as bad as another."

"One vote has the opportunity of giving hundreds of people a better chance."

"For what?"

"Better living conditions, wages, schools, factory conditions . . ."

"And what does that do?"

"So many people nowadays are taking that attitude of futility that it convinces me it's not worth while."

"Artificial."

"What's artificial? I said, what is artificial?"

"Conditions, schools, wages. Everything's artificial. I mean everything we're taught."

She laughed lightly. "And that's absurd too." She met his eyes, intent now and serene, and as she looked his mouth stretched into a somber smile. "Let me see, how long is it since you used to come here? I can't seem to recall it."

"I haven't anything accurate to contribute, either," he said.

"What has been happening to you? Anything interesting?"

"No."

"Do you live here all the time?"

"Yes."

"And your work?"

"I have none. I am fortunate enough to have no parents and an independent income."

His eyes beat against her in terrible penetra-

tion for a moment and then she turned away from him appalled. "I prefer an understatement to an overstatement. It's impossible to define real emotions."

It pleased her to have dissolved his superficial cynicism. She broke into a laugh as she felt deliberate antagonism spread from him. "I seem to remember—we used to have serious disagreements in the old days." She raised her eyes to him. "You were very sure of your position then. Are you now?"

"I am so sure now that I'm obnoxious."

There was certainly something extraordinary between Dora and Mitchell, something deliberate and sinister in the way they evaded each other. The angle of the girl's head was stubborn and protective, her eyes evasive. Mitchell was protecting himself, too. But the attraction was subtle, unconscious, in the cells and blood. She shuddered. If I leave this room they will be drawn together.

"Shall we look at the roses now?"

They went into the garden, Mitchell following a trifle too inattentively, she thought, for one who had professed a passion for roses. She decided that he was like other men in his disliking too great a preoccupation with fine things, with roses and sunsets and moon flowers. But she felt an evil pleasure in assuming that he was delighted with her comments.

"This lovely thing almost died during the winter. The climate is so bad. But Slater is remarkable. He's superb." This will irritate him. Let it sink in. Speak loud, make the sentimentality ring in his ears.

"I like a man who can make flowers grow. It makes me sure he has something good in him."

He shaded his eyes to look at the hoary tree with its waxy, yellow-white stars motionless on prickly stems.

"Isn't it charming? I love that little tree."

He swung around, and she saw his forehead draw down.

"Now you must see the birds. They come here to bathe and I know you will like watching them. The bath is new," she added. "I didn't have it when you used to come. I suppose I'm incorrigible but ten years is nothing to me. It might as well be ten minutes." She gave her little laugh and led them over the gravel drive toward the green slopes. As she hurried forward she wrenched her ankle on the gravel. Mitchell's hand was on her arm, his cheek near hers, his hot breath on her mouth. That was Dora's little scream.

"Don't—I'm all right. Oh, I have a pebble in my slipper. Ooooo, it hurts. But I rather like it. It aches just enough to give me pleasure."

"You seem to relish being punished," said Mitchell.

"On the other hand this is too satisfying and pleasant to be a punishment. And after all what is pleasure and what is pain? Oh, see the birds!" she cried. "Look! There's the goosiemonks. A small boy who comes here named that one the Goosiemonks."

"They used to be sixteen. Now they seem to be younger."

"Whom do you mean by they?"

"Your admirers."

She turned on him in quick anger, looking up at the shoulders that were curving toward her as if he were about to spring, his eyes beating into her, the hands held fixed in the pockets.

"I grow more and more drawn to children," she said sweetly, looking deep into his eyes and ignoring the fierce smile that came to his lips. "I find that they are more human, more sensitive. I have thought of adopting several."

She could feel emotion from Dora creep up her back. She looked at her and was amazed at the cold, bleak face turned to hers, the stark eyes gazing at her as if she were no more than a shadow, and then it came to her that Dora was protecting the man, that the hurt look about her mouth was for him and that those helpless hands would like to be in his hair. What if Dora had been sent to her, what if Dora was in

the plan, to show her that the way of haughty exclusion was never right? Hadn't she herself always said that all people were one body, one breathing body, without real barriers?

"Mr. Mitchell, for some reason it is fine to see you again."

She lifted her eyes to his and smiled that rare, appealing smile which admitted her wrong and seemed to bring all the humbleness of her deeper life into the raised chin and clasped hands. In that instant remorse swept her clean and she felt a dazzling, tremulous smile come on her lips as their eyes met. She thought a shudder passed over him and she glanced quickly at Dora. The girl was looking at them both in undisguised pain, her lips parted. And now her superb, defiant hair gave her face a look of sullen warning as the head lowered and the eyes lifted ominously as a cat's.

"It's gratifying to be even slightly remembered by you, Miss Linden," said Mitchell.

She gave her happy laugh and bent her head to examine a tiny fly. It was the gratitude in his voice that made her say: "You must come often." And again she felt the strange, gray shudder pass through her. She dared not look at Dora. "I'm going in to order some lemonade. Oh, do stay with us, Mr. Mitchell. It's been such a long time . . ."

Then as she left them she heard Dora say with

terrible distinctness, "So, you've forgotten all about me."

3

When she put her foot down heavily the little stone gave a sharp, pleasant sting that twinged through her instep. She would hesitate and then suddenly press her foot down, a little laugh starting in her throat. Bushes with glossy pointed leaves spread out luxuriously and as she looked at the fine veins in each leaf and followed the perfection of stem and stalk a flood of tenderness came over her. Once her little tea table had stood here, her dolls had sat straight in their chairs, their stuffed legs in patent leather boots with purple lacings and furry tassels, lifting the table a trifle from the uneven ground. She had stood here in the evening, her hand on her cheek, bunches of violets in her hair. Dora's face came to her. It was strange the way she had found Dora one morning on the street corner with her vague hands wrapped around a bundle of meat.

"Miss Linden," said Agda, "Mrs. Fry telephoned and wants to speak to you. She said that she sent Mr. Mitchell round here—"

"One moment. Who is this person?"

"It's the woman who came after Miss Dora."

"And what did she say she wanted?"

"She said she sent Mr. Mitchell to bring Miss Dora home."

"I see."

"She spoke about needing her to write something for the paper."

"For the paper. Isn't that absurd?"

"She said they'd had something terrible happen, I couldn't make out just what, she got crying over the phone."

"Perhaps we can do something for her."

"I told her I'd give you the message."

"She was crying?"

"Yes. She put up the receiver all of a sudden."

"That's strange."

"She kept saying Dora would have to write something up for the paper."

"The paper! Well, I'll telephone her. Oh, and I must phone Mrs. Jeffries. I spoke to Slater and he's coming for you at eight tomorrow. And I've arranged for him to put up a tent for his family—over there somewhere."

"A tent?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"She'll never come."

"But it's all arranged."

"She'll never come, Miss Linden. She'll think you're trying to make a fool out of her."

She sat down and took off her slipper. "I

wish I could find one pair of stockings somewhere that would fit my heel right."

"Vega's in the kitchen."

She looked up quickly. *"Vega?"*

"Yes," said Agda sullenly.

"But—does she want to come back?"

"I suppose so, now that her husband's left her."

"I wonder why Mark ever married her. I knew it couldn't last."

"I told her that, too. When she left you I said to her, 'Before long you'll be crying to come back. You'll appreciate Miss Linden after trying to live with that selfish fellow. You'll see that Miss Linden knows how to treat a person even if she is a servant better than any man could if he tried all his life."

"Now, Agda, you'll spoil me. There are good men in the world."

"Yes," said Agda. "Show me one."

Hester sighed. Then she laughed aloud. "I haven't time just now. Tell Vega to come in here."

Yes, where was that "good man." Did he lie in darkness with a young girl who had violets in her hair? Did he die when she died? Had even the memory of him gone, the sound of his feet, and his voice, the steady truthful look in his eyes? And now in death did those arms close over the white shoulders timidly, were the

eyes humble at last under the dropped lids, was the restless heart in that white closed hand?

"Oh, Vega, I'm happy to see you."

"It's fine to see you, Miss Linden."

"You can see that I've missed you. Look!" She pointed to her cheeks, her hair. "I tried to do it alone because you were the only one who could do it right." But she remembered how she had rationalized at the time. 'I am glad Vega has gone, now I can be independent. A personal maid is barbaric in this age. Perhaps she was sent away to release my body from this bondage.' "I rubbed the lotion in and Agda used to do the rinsing when I washed my hair."

"I worried about it." She leaned toward her. "But we'll have it all back where it was. Don't you worry about that."

Were Mitchell and Dora slowly being drawn together, as if lighted, sparkling wires were between them, pulling them without their consent? Would they both have vanished when she returned? Mitchell childish and cynical. Dora beautiful and rare. Would she descend into the body and be destroyed by it? Would she let Mitchell drain her, take all her life?

"Shall I send Slater for your trunk, Vega?"

"But I'm not planning to live here, Miss Linden."

"Why?"

"I'll come for as long as you want me but I'm planning to keep my own home just the same."

"I wonder if that's going to be practical, Vega?" She examined her nails for a moment. "I'm distressed about those arrangements. I had hoped to have you here where I could call you at any time. You see, after all, you would be my personal maid again and I really need you close by."

"I'd just go home to sleep."

She felt a shock go through her. "What if I wanted to call you in the night?"

"Agda and Agnes are here."

"I know but they've never been as intimate as you."

"Oh, Miss Linden . . ."

"I couldn't bear the thought of another maid." She saw the woman's eyes soften in that beautiful liquid look. "You have been a friend to me, Vega."

"Miss Linden . . ."

"But I don't want to influence you, Vega."

"Oh, he's nothing but a little boy. How does he know what he wants and she won't do for him, she'll get flighty after while and where'll he be?"

"Who?"

"Mark. He—he went off with Miss Hem-

ingway. But it's only temporary—" The woman did not cover her face as tears filled her eyes, the lips did not move, she sat motionless, her hands folded in her lap.

"I don't understand—Why should you with all your exquisiteness be treated this way?"

"He don't know what he wants. I told him he could come back when he was ready," she said weakly.

"He hasn't any notion of what he wants."

"I know it."

"Then why?"

"I have to—I want to—"

"Vega, it seems incredible to me that you, with your mind and breeding, could bother with anything as stupid."

"But I want him if he'll have me."

It was as if her stomach turned and a bolt of lightning had shot through to her mind, setting fire to it. Steady. Quiet . . . Everything has its own life.

"It's not what *you* want, Vega, it's what you ought to want. Try to remember that."

"I don't understand that kind of talking. Where does it get you?"

"Isn't there some difference between a pig and a faun, for example? Or a rose and a radish, or the ground and the sky? Wouldn't you rather be a faun, Vega, than a pig?"

"I wouldn't care what I was if I was happy."

"That's simply not true."

The woman sat cowed and dumb, gazing into her lap. Something broke in Hester as she looked at the tired hands and meek face. I must do something kind.

"Vega, how can I make you happy?"

She saw her cover her face and she heard the raw, abysmal sobs. A sense of dependence came over her as she watched that initiated face lift to hers, the lines of despair, the marks of living. I didn't need to go through that to know it. All experience and life is in me. I needn't act it out, I know. But she felt herself growing small and sad as she looked at the woman. Stay, Vega, take care of me. I need you. But she did not speak aloud.

"Vega," she said firmly, "I want you to do whatever will make you happy."

The woman gave her the old look of tired renunciation. "I'll come back."

"Can't you see this is the way to keep him, Vega? Make him want *you.*"

Vega rubbed the back of her hand tenderly and then got up. "I guess—Well, I'm going now, Miss Linden."

She caught Vega's hands. "None of it is real, Vega, except this—this peace. We're all the same person playing different parts. Vega, Vega . . . It will all dissolve like a dream. I promise you that you will forget."

"But I don't want to."

"Mrs. Jeffries is on the telephone, Miss Linden," said Agda.

Vega went away with her head down and her meek feet pressing the floor lightly. Hester caught her breath. "Let me tell you something, Agda. Everyone is doomed until he stops wanting this life and trying to be contented with it." She looked far into Agda's sad eyes. A frightened look came on the servant's face as if she must understand the words and dared not fail, and yet knew she could only strain to look knowing, and nod when the pauses came.

"I know it, Miss Linden."

"Agda, I must make you understand me."

Agda held herself rigid, the small bright eyes straining wide, sparkles of moisture on her forehead and around her mouth, the flat breast stiff, one hand caught on it.

"If I could make you see what I see, Agda. Instead of a world full of children, or savages, we could have— Oh, perhaps you'll understand me if I say angels."

Agda began nodding her head, the lips closed, pressed white, the eyes turned grayish like a blind dog's.

"Oh, it's so stupid. And perhaps it's wrong to want to change the world before it's ready. But when we can be civilized and walk along all dressed why should everyone choose to be monkeys hanging from branches. Why does

everyone resist growth? They all *prefer* to be hyenas when they could be gods!"

She went into the hall trying to remember why she was going in that direction. She looked through the open door and wandered out to stand with her cheek against the cool pillar. She closed her eyes and heard the low humming of bees in the flowers, and then Dora's voice so low and desperate that she shuddered.

"You have to tell her I'm the one you love! That's why you came here."

A quiet voice moved in like a wave. "I can't remember anything. You sound outrageous."

"You're shaking me the way a dog shakes a bone."

"She makes me feel so peaceful."

"You have to tell her I'm the one you love."

"God, God, I feel so still . . ."

She came on them standing near the corner of the porch. She put out her hand to them both. "Come, there's going to be lemonade on the terrace."

She heard them following. "How exquisite this is," she said mechanically and turned her face to the sky. "It couldn't be lovelier." She sat down, glancing up at the roof of dark grape leaves. Then she turned with deliberation and looked at Mitchell. His gaze was so open, so ecstatic that she looked away quickly. She brushed her fingers over her eyes and glanced at

him again. The face was startling, radiant and changeless. She could feel his flaming light enfold her.

"I feel so still," he said.

Agda came with a tray and spread a pale green cloth over the table. There were cherries in the lemonade, slices of orange and pineapple. The sun shone through the amber glass."

"We used to sit here in the dark," said Mitchell.

"Yes," she murmured trying to recall it. "It's always lovely then."

"I remember one night in the spring when the fruit trees were in blossom . . ."

"Yes."

"And once I read you Marcus Aurelius."

"Oh."

"It was always still."

"Yes."

"I think the stillness comes from you," he said distinctly. He leaned toward her, his face peaceful and shining. "But none of us realized then that you were the ultimate experience."

"I don't follow you."

"I didn't know that nothing else in the world would bring this happiness and peace."

She drew back under the inexpressible intimacy in his voice and eyes, but he went on talking, revealing scenes she could not recall, mentioning details too small to be remembered.

He told her about the book she had loaned him from her private collection upstairs, and he remembered some casual comment she had made about Persian lilacs.

"But I never quite forgot the time you saw me kiss Amy. And another thing has bothered me for years. Mark Johns used to boast that he once kissed you."

"Oh, everybody knows that you love her!" cried Dora. She sprang up, facing Hester, her hands grasping the edge of the table, her head low. "You're glad he loves you best. You pretend not to be but you're glad—you want to keep him until he dies."

"Why, darling!"

"Yes, everyone is darling to you—everyone in the whole world. You don't know what it is to live for one person, to die just because of one person. Everybody pretends. You pretend to love me, so did he!"

"That's putting it too strong," he answered faintly.

"Then why did you come here?"

"Your sister sent me."

Hester put out her hand but Dora sank down, dazed and humble, all the brightness gone. The man drank his lemonade and looked off across the lawn. When the girl said, "Stephen," very softly he shaded his eyes with his hand and appeared to watch the pigeons rise from a distant

roof. He followed their circling and coiling, watched the bodies turn black, then silver, fall back to the roof and then rise higher in a breathless spiral.

"You're a coward. When you get away from here you'll be cursing her just the way you always have. Now you're taken in—you're no different from any of us or anyone else. But you made me think you were."

The man turned back to the table. He made a tiny heap of crumbs with his fine fingers. "Dora, you bore me with this talk."

Dora was on her knees before Hester, her head in her lap. "Oh, you're the one who never changes. You're the only good person in the world. You are faithful. You are worth loving." She looked into her face. The eyes were suddenly bright and direct. "Hester, he'll do anything for you. Make him love me."

"Why, darling! . . ."

"Do this for me. I trust you."

Mitchell got up and began walking over the stones, his impatient hands and head moving threateningly. He turned on Dora, his eyes stern and hard.

"Don't be an ass. And don't try to tell me what I ought to do."

The girl's mouth fell open a little and she looked at the man's shoes and then at the grass, her head to one side, a finger on her cheek.

Then she seemed to force herself to sit up, her chin raised, her eyes fixed.

"Mr. Mitchell, did you come here to take Dora back to the Frys?"

He nodded.

"I don't see how you can be in possession of your senses."

"Why?"

"That's no place for a girl like Dora."

"Why not?"

"She'd mean nothing to them. They have no perception."

She saw an angry flush spread over his cheeks and he took out a cigarette and lighted it, striking the match impatiently. Then he settled back in his chair and she saw the old bitterness come around his lips, the drooping sourness. "The Fry family," he said suddenly, "is a good sort."

"It's not a question of being a good sort. Are they the proper people for Dora?"

"Anyway, they're alive," he said distinctly. He drew down his upper lip and let smoke pour out of his nostrils. Then he stared at the grass, his eyes narrowing. "They're alive and they're honest. Everyone can see what they are. They don't masquerade as superhuman, only cowards do that." He jumped up. "Let me tell you something, Hester Linden. You don't know the meaning of modesty. If you

did you'd permit yourself a few vices. You'd dare be a human being. God, God, you'd let others be human. Yes, I'll say it over. I'll rub it in. They're *alive!*"

She fixed her eyes on him. "Are they?"

"Yes."

"And are you alive?"

"No."

Agda came in slowly, her mouth drawn down and announced with distended nostrils that Mrs. Jeffries had given her the message and that Mrs. Fry had called again.

"She keeps talking about the paper and how she can't write anything."

"The *paper!* Really, that's becoming irritating."

"She's got something on her mind and nothing can change her."

"Tell her I'll call her in about an hour. No, later. Tell her I'll call some time this evening."

Mitchell shook the ashes from his cigarette and moved angrily in his chair, a hard, bitter expression on his face. His eyes narrowed as if he were examining a robber. "You've managed to sterilize Dora."

"That's vague, Mr. Mitchell."

"You've turned her sterile."

"I don't follow you."

"Perhaps I can give you an idea of what I mean," he said gravely. His upper lip lifted a

trifle over his teeth and a queer smile came at the corner of his mouth. "When I was eighteen I was in love with you. You stuffed me full of all the silliness you could think of about not having desires and being pure and noble." He stopped deliberately and smiled for a second, then proceeded. "Well, all of it turned me insane, as you can't imagine, and once I confessed to you that I thought I was sterile, impotent," he brought out harshly after a moment. "You very deliberately and gravely told me," he stopped again to smile and deposit his ashes in the grass, "that impotence was a superior state of development. You made out that it was a triumph of spirit, an overrefinement, or something of that kind. That's dangerous stuff."

"I can hardly have said that, Mr. Mitchell. I don't even know what you mean."

He jumped up, his hands thrust in his pockets, and leaned over her chair. Her calm eyes and cool face looked into his. "We're your handiwork, Hester. Aren't you pleased? Or I might say we're your fancy work, a new kind of embroidery for unoccupied ladies who want to be immortal."

He began to walk up and down the stones, his mouth drawn, his forehead tortured. He seemed to be speaking to himself. He moved more rapidly, holding his shoulders high and stiff. Sud-

denly he went over to a stalk of flowers and broke it off near the roots. He stripped off the leaves and one or two of the blossoms, then he slung it over the grass.

"Hester, for God's sake let go of us."

"Mitchell, Dora, all I wanted was to make you good."

"Set us free. You know how. Make it so we can forget you and grow up and live this life."

"I wanted you to be gods."

He stopped in front of her chair, looking into her eyes, leaning close, his voice low. "I see what you'll never see. I could bring you to life. Let me save you, Hester. Trust me."

They heard Dora's cry.

"And you've turned *her* into mud," he cried. "She can't breathe. She can't know what she really is. You've got to understand me now!"

"When people moan about knowing life they always mean one thing—sex," Hester said quietly, smiling to herself.

"That's exactly what I mean."

"My idea of life is not so narrow." She turned her serene gaze full upon him. "I suppose you are in this plan to make Dora marry Mr. Teeter."

"Teeter is out of the question."

"May I ask you a personal question? Are you planning to marry Dora?"

"No."

Dora's hands moved up to Hester's and caught them, held them as if they were ropes. Her head sank back against her shoulders and then she crawled away and laid her cheek against the ground and laid her arms on her breast and those feet were pressed against the earth and within those closed eyes was fixed a white, deathless face.

"What is it *you* want for her?"

"I want her to get away from you for good. I want her to find out that there's no ideal experience or big experience in this world. At least not the kind you've taught her to save herself for. What you talk about never comes."

Oh, Mitchell, let me hold you in my arms, you lost, you helpless. Dora, let me hold you. All the same, we three, playing different rôles, all one burning fire.

He turned his face away from her, his hands gripping the chair, his eyes on the distant hills. "You possess every part of me, every cell of my brain, whether it's loving or cursing you, every inch of my thoughts, every part of my damned, lost body. I've needed you all the time even when I knew what you were and hated you. I've heard your voice, I've smelled your skin, I've lived inside you. I remember everything. And along with it I know what you are. Remember that."

All this because I am a star far beyond you, Mitchell. You know that no man can possess me, no man can touch me, I am far away in the sky, safe from you all. No man can move my thoughts or change my path or feel me softening. I am myself. I mix with none of you. I am your quest because you dare not possess me. I am as far as the stars and until you reach me you can have no reason for existing. You will strain and suffer because the foot is on your head, instead of your foot being on the defenseless heads of women and women who would give you everything they possess and hang to your heels. I am beyond you, Mitchell. All you can have of me is my pity. This time I am free and you are bound. Now it is I who refuse to give up that last spark. I am beyond you all. I am untouchable.

She saw the eyes flicker and the face whiten. She knew that she need not speak aloud. The love that he could not conceal spread like guilt over his face and he turned away from her. Then he said, "Only a man like me, a fool like me," he corrected and paused, that strange smile again on his lips, "could ever be held for long by you."

He got up and stood before her, the eyes proud now but the body yielding. Then Dora was between them, white and still, but the man did not look at her or speak. His eyes were

fixed on Hester in terrible, penetrating fire. He turned and walked away. But it was Dora who stood as if turned to stone.

4

"I set a place for Miss Weck," said Agda with vicious emphasis on the ugly name, "but I don't believe she's coming."

"Likely she's decided to run over and see her sister. Oh, that reminds me, I forgot to telephone her."

"All she could talk about, Miss Linden, was that paper."

"Isn't it extraordinary," she said unfolding her napkin, "that Dora never told me she wrote."

"I wouldn't worry about that. I guess she won't set the world on fire."

"Agda!" She felt the woman recoil from the sharp reproach in her tone but she had no desire to soften it. "Please bring my soup."

She saw Dora hidden in some remote corner of a field, crying in her hands, her body bent and arched in the falling darkness. She saw her going to Joe Teeter, shame in her cheeks, heavy hearted, false words on her lips. She saw her going to Stephen—Stephen whose eyes turned always upon himself, whose thoughts, like Dora's, were deceptive with imagination.

She might find him but that body would soon be arched and bent in the gloom of fields, the gold washed off that skin, the mouth lorn. Or she was sitting at the Fry dinner table discussing the mysterious writing she was to do for a paper. Dora in a hideous room under a red lamp, perhaps, and purple and gold sofa cushions on the piano stool. She put her hands over her eyes. She saw herself walking to the Frys and asking for Dora and Mitchell. She saw herself leading Dora back, watching her expand in love and peace, watching her with the sun on her lips.

When she had finished her meal she went into the library and opened a book. She stood looking at it, one hand pressed lightly against her cheek. Then she went up to her room and glanced at the letters on her desk. Suddenly she telephoned Mrs. Jeffries. Then she looked up the Fry number in the book but she did not call it. She called the Perrys down at the poor farm and invited some of the old ladies to luncheon.

"I particularly want old Mrs. Ellis again. Is she well enough to come? I'm so glad. And did they like the sweaters? How dear of them. Yes, their letter was adorable. I'm coming down soon to see about the man they just brought in. I can find work for him somewhere, perhaps on my place. He shouldn't be there. No. That's obvious. And Mr. Bain—

I'm making plans for both of them. Yes, the latter part of the week will be a good time for me. . . ."

She examined the letters again and found a small circus poster among them. Little girl between parents going to the circus. Big tent blowing under the sky. The sounds of horses plunging in their stalls impatiently. The strange sinking of feet into straw. Fright around the heart at crowds of hot people crowding into the big tent. Cries. Air of expectancy. She thought of the children who had not gone to that circus, who had stayed at home, crying in the barn, holding tiny hands over ears. She thought of children in orphanages with scant dresses and laced shoes, their hair in braids, fatherless and motherless or abandoned. Little children. . . . She looked up the orphanage and telephoned the superintendent. "I want them all to go. I'll send a check. *Everyone* must go. I don't believe it. Every child likes the circus. No, all of them must go, that's final."

But she was stung by innumerable small pains like the stings of insects. She tried, for discipline, to go over the events of the day but soon she got up and went to the window and looked down into the garden that was thick now with darkness. She thought she heard a sound, like feet moving softly over the grass, a voice, white

shoulders bent in the dark, white arms coiling around something black that moaned and moved.

Shall I stop them? Shall I say again that the world is insane, that people are mad? Shall I rush down, outraged, and assure them that they can never know love that way? She gathered up some books and moved to a room on the opposite side of the house where she could look out on the civilized slope of hill which fell into a ravine where sheep had once drunk, their tiny black hoofs deep in mud, their sharp, mindless faces in perplexed concentration. But she could not read and after a time she went to bed, feeling tears drop and brushing them away coldly. Suddenly she sprang up and looked out at the dark shapes, she leaned on the sill, her face between her hands, and as she listened to the silence and let her eyes rest on the curved outline of wall and trees, emptiness and peace filled her.

5

She wakened early, her mind thick with warning, and got up. She looked out, her hand above her eyes, at the green fields and the distant ones off where the sky was vast and shot with red. The wooded stretch lay black and still at her right and a cloud of butterflies descended to a bush, their wings opening like blos-

soms on green stems. Down in the orchard, the purple grass netted with webs, heavy and sparkling with dew, moved like vapor and with it all was Dora's face. Dora's white shoulders. Her white arms clasping something black and strong. Dora being destroyed in the night.

She went into the closet and began taking clothes off the hangers and throwing them on the bed. "I won't be burdened with so many clothes," she explained to herself. "Vega and Agda will have to take them. And the season's almost over anyway."

Would Dora be waiting at the door? Would a baby come? One day would she be sitting in that chair with Dora's baby in her arms, Dora ripe and mature, embroidering flounces? Or would they go somewhere together, Mitchell a new man, Dora a woman. Had they awakened there in the blackness?

She saw suddenly, without any connection that she could fathom, Slater's large wife who smelled of milk. Dora's face. Mrs. Spellman's bridge work that was always coming out. She bent to examine a small run in her stocking and rang for Vega. She remembered the trip to Barth, the tent for Slater's family to be pitched somewhere. Was I too romantic about that, perhaps? I'm going to have my stockings made to order. These heels are driving me insane. She began writing a letter. Vega knocked.

She came in and closed the door, holding herself stiff against it, one hand on the knob, the other on her chest.

"Oh, Miss Linden," she began in the old, intolerable voice of twenty years before.

"Vega, your tone. How could you forget like this?"

She put her hands over her cheeks that had gone yellow, her mouth standing open.

"Vega, don't be idiotic!"

She turned her back and groaned, her body tense, the stiff white ends of her apron quivering.

"What's the matter?"

"They're in the garden . . ."

The woman moved to the closet door and leaned against it, her hands pressed on her cheeks, her eyes turned up in sick fright, the whites gone yellow.

Hester knew that she was barring her ears to anything she might say, that she was going to spend as long a time as possible thinking how hideous Mrs. Spellman was without her bridgework, and how the children at the orphanage would shout about the circus, how they would join hands and dance on the tables and break all the thick gray plates and platters, and she would think of a place for Mr. Bain, it would come, it usually came when she was falling asleep, the right place for a man to work.

"Vega," she said slowly. "Compose yourself. Say to yourself, 'Nothing can disturb me!' " A great shudder went down her. "Who is in the garden? Oh, must I go and see for myself?"

"God no!" cried the woman.

"What has happened?"

"Miss Weck and Mr. Mitchell—They must have been there all night."

"I've told you, Vega, the world is insane. People are mad. They haven't the faintest inkling of what life is or love or anything else. They're mad."

"Slater found them—he could hardly talk."

Hester turned to her dressing table, numb, frightened, holding herself back from some deadening shock. Now it will come. Now she will say it. She picked up the mirror to look at the back of her hair and forgot what she was doing.

"Vega, you must tell me what happened!"

"They're dead."

She laid the mirror down with a crash and looked at the woman.

"He was coming through the garden to take Agda to Barth and he stumbled over something there in the flowers and he thought it might be the calf had got loose and died in there and then he saw it was them, lying together, and he said their faces looked so terrible he couldn't even

take it in, he said, and he got sick on the steps and Agda and I ran to look and we saw . . . I couldn't take it in. I never knew there was anything in the world could make a person look that way. They were . . . there was blood on her dress."

"Vega! What are you saying?"

"Oh, my God!" she cried and ran out of the room.

She went to the window and looked out at the stretch of woods, the tall trees so thick and green, and in a moment they would be thin and gray, dotted with leaves like flocks of scarlet birds, and beyond them would be gold turning to deep brown and then the rains would come and drive them to the ground in wet piles and snow would finally cover it all.

One winter day she had put her ear to the trunks to listen to the real life inclosed there, and she had heard it humming, as if change were no more than the difference between night and day. And when snow fell she would remember the sap and the buried seeds beneath the snow. What hard skies in winter, how remote and blue, the white hills rising and meeting the sky with a last distant arch set with stark trees.

The body of Dora running after Mitchell. The body of Dora in his arms. Girl wanting to be made woman. She covered her face and

as tears wet her fingers she took up a handkerchief and slowly polished her nails, looking down at them with infinite concentration while grief rose in her and spread.

Dora following, deaf to his words, his wishes, a stranger to his mind, following his heels in a dream. Then the night, the dark that made her face and arms whiter, stranger. Her neck bent back for him to kiss, her body soft in his arms, her mind already immovable with purpose. Then footsteps over the stones, over the road where willows spread, soft steps entering the garden. Oh, my children.

They had been coming for years, these boys and girls, men and women, to kneel and adore and finally to denounce, and what they had adored were their dreams, they had knelt to them, and what they had denounced were themselves for dreaming. They had never looked into her face or known her.

It seemed to her that they were standing beside her. Dora still and strong, those futile hands quiet now, the eyes that had looked on two worlds, loved two images, been lorn with fright and shrinking, opened far with light, the mouth that had drooped and stung and bled held now in a smile as if all secrets were known. And Mitchell beside her, a young, still face gazing on her, the mask of fear and anguish gone, the lips firm at last, the eyes opened from

dreams, from the image that had blinded, cleared now from all the marks of earth. And there were the hands that had brought them death, white and still at his sides. The eyes of both shone on her and as she looked, held now by fear and pain, she knew they were in her forever. Mitchell and Dora, forever young, now forever beautiful.

Her eyes closed as if she must sleep and she seemed to be looking at tides of snow that rose vast and smooth and swept away toward the cold sky in waves that were intolerably still and complete and unknown.

THE END

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