



memo to
timothy
sheldon



A NOVEL . . . by
MARIAN SIMS

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Title: Memo. to Timothy Sheldon

Date of first publication: 1938

Author: Marian McCamy Sims (1899-1961)

Date first posted: Apr. 13, 2018

Date last updated: Apr. 13, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20180409

This ebook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

MEMO. TO TIMOTHY SHELDON

The problem which confronts Lynn Sheldon is a problem with which most of us have in a greater or less degree contended: the duality of human nature. For twelve years she has been happily married to Timothy Sheldon, but the price of happiness has been the suppression of half of her being—the half which appreciates beauty, quietude and thought.

In Duncan Rhodes she finds the complement for that other side of her nature, and she falls deeply and passionately in love with him. Her memo to Timothy Sheldon is a record of the conflict which ensues; of her attempt to weigh and evaluate two loves and thus arrive at a decision. She is intelligent enough to recognize the potency of twelve shared years; she is human enough to long for the color and intensity of a newer and more articulate emotion. Marian Sims handles the subject thoughtfully and delicately, but with an uncompromising honesty.

BY MARIAN SIMS

MEMO. TO TIMOTHY SHELDON

CALL IT FREEDOM

THE WORLD WITH A FENCE

Memo. to
Timothy Sheldon

by Marian Sims



PHILADELPHIA NEW YORK
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
TORONTO

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MADE IN THE
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Part I

THE MOUNTAINS

THE MOUNTAINS

I AM NOT YET SURE, TIM, WHAT THE FATE of this document will be. It may find a resting place upon the coals of my study fire, or it may reach you at last, to be read by you in pain and bewilderment and anger.

But if its destiny is uncertain, its purpose is quite clear to me. I shall try, within the narrow limits of my ability, to put on paper two portraits: your own and that of Duncan Rhodes. And when I have done that I shall, I hope, have clarified my own emotions and learned wherein my future lies. If it lies with you, the letter will be destroyed; if it lies with Duncan, I leave this as my apologia.

(I can hear you saying, with the rueful grin I have always loved: “What on earth’s an apologia?” Unusual words have always hampered and irritated you; you prefer action, or—failing that—simple, concrete words that a man can get his teeth into. Whereas I have loved and revered them; used them, to my shame perhaps, as a substitute for doing. And so I’d better tell you that an apologia is an apology, but beyond that, a defense and a justification.)

You’ve never guessed the importance of Duncan Rhodes: it’s part of your value and your dearness to me that you are not the sort of man who would guess. You’re so direct and simple in your mental processes that the more complex emotions are outside your comprehension. You deal, in your mill, with the elemental hungers; hungers that are appeased by violence and not by finesse. You see every problem in personal terms: your anger at government interference in industry, for example, is directed against its effect on you and your mill, and not against its violation of a time-honored concept of individual responsibility. And your success is proof of your ability to meet action with action.

I say this in no spirit of disparagement, but rather in envy; for you and your kind are the fortunate ones. Your resolution is not sicklied over with the pale cast of thought; you recognize the other side of a question with clarity and fairness but without a fettering sympathy. You have convictions, while I and my kind have only opinions. You chart a straight course and guide your ship

with an unwavering hand.

It may be that I am describing all men—all successful men—in thus describing you. Certainly few women have that gift: a straight line, for them, is rarely the shortest distance between two points. They survive by reason of their adaptability and emerge victorious in apparent defeat.

In that I have been completely feminine. For twelve years I have fitted my life to yours and made your tastes and interests my own. But by this superficial surrender I have paradoxically conserved my strength and kept intact another, more complex personality that you have failed to recognize.

And that is the part of me that has learned to know and love Duncan Rhodes.

If half the surrenders and compromises of our marriage had been yours, perhaps Duncan would never have happened to me. And yet I'm not so sure. The universal idea, of course, is that the male is polygamous and the female monogamous, but like most universal ideas it seems to me fallacious. My observation within my own class has been that one business and one woman are usually the sum total of a man's need; all he has time for if he expects to survive. He may nibble briefly at the greener grass of another pasture, but rarely does he allow his excursions to imperil the fences of his own; and still more rarely does he fail to return home and lock the gates securely behind him with the fall of a figurative night.

But the wife of a successful man has servants to manage her house and share the care of her children. Her task requires only a fraction of her time and energy, and the rest must find another outlet.

I don't mean that she is immoral: among all my friends and acquaintances I know of no one at whom I could direct that charge. But she is—unsatisfied, and her husband rarely suspects it. He's too busy supporting her, bless him, and asking What We've Got On For Tonight. He forgets—if he has ever known—that women are extremists, and that the changing standards of a changing world are heady wine for an extremist.

(I can see you scowling, Tim, and hear your pleasant, careless voice grow rough with anger as you dismiss all this with a contemptuous shrug. "I don't understand half of what you're saying, but it sounds like tripe to me." It's a long and involved preamble, I confess, but it had to be written before I came to Duncan.)

I met him in the mountains last June, when I spent two weeks at Altamont.

We had a long argument, you may remember, about Altamont. I wanted you to spend half your vacation there with me, after which I would go with you to the coast for another week. But you dislike the mountains and you insisted that I should go alone, and spend your whole vacation with you at Ocean City.

I didn't mind; I love the sea almost as deeply as you love it. But the mountains satisfy another side of me, and I have hoped that one day you would come to recognize their beauty and be glad to share them with me. I know better now, and if I stay with you I promise that I shall never drag you there again.

But you were very sweet and generous, even in your refusal.

"It'll be hot as hades here," you insisted, "and there's no sense in both of us suffering just because I can't take but two weeks this year. You go ahead and enjoy yourself; it'll help me just to know that you're comfortable."

I left on the morning of the twentieth; reluctantly, almost tearfully. An imminent departure always endows even the most commonplace possession with a greater value—particularly in the female mind. The value may be specious, but for the moment it is very real, and I saw my house and garden—and especially you—as treasured objects from which I was being ruthlessly torn.

You shared the feeling, I think, because your grin was too cheerful, and suggested a little boy whistling in the dark. Sandy McNasty was beside you; a small disconsolate shape with his tail at half-mast, knowing the significance of luggage and fearful of being deserted. Even Laurette stood on the stoop and waved, her good brown face parted in the middle by an affectionate and admiring smile. She was greatly impressed by my proposed feat of driving two hundred miles alone, and the stern maternal authority with which she has always intimidated me was for the moment in eclipse.

I remember the feel of your mouth on mine, Tim, as if it were yesterday. It was a husband's kiss; hearty and affectionate, with a quality of friendliness. If the memory suffers by comparison with another sort of kiss the fault is mine and not yours, for no sensible man can bestow that other caress after twelve years of constant association.

I remember, too, the feel of Sandy's rough black coat, and the alchemy of sunlight on the golden arbor vitae that stand guard beside our flagstone walk. I wonder, now, if I had some sort of prescience that etched all this so indelibly on my mind; if I knew, even then, that another force would soon jeopardize the familiar security of my ordered life. I find that theory unlikely; rather, I think that every scene is thus engraved upon the subconscious, and that a subsequent

significance produces it intact from the warehouse of one's memory.

We exchanged parting admonitions, as husbands and wives have done since the beginning of time as we know it.

"Be careful, sugar," you said with a grin. "And if you've got to admire scenery, stop the car first."

"I will," I promised. "And please take care of yourself, and don't eat steak every night while I'm away." To Laurette I said, "You'll have to manage him, Laurette—" knowing that there is nothing she likes half so well as managing, "and Sandy too. Make 'em both eat their vegetables if you have to starve 'em into it."

Laurette nodded vigorously, conscious of her increased importance in the household scheme. "Yes'm. I aims to."

"And tell Philander to spray my roses and pinch back the chrysanthemums."

(How we laughed when we first heard Philander's name! You've threatened several times to kill him for his laziness, and it was you who dubbed him the Bronze Statue. "Other people may have marble benches in their gardens," you grinned, "but we've got a bronze statue in ours. A standing offer of five dollars to anybody that can see him move." But he's an engaging scoundrel and his strongly biased accounts of his brushes with The Law are the highlights of my Tuesdays and Fridays.)

You stood bareheaded in the morning sunlight, with your hand on the car door, and asked one more question.

"Have you got plenty of money?"

I nodded, loving you for your generosity. "I think so."

You chuckled. "That doesn't spell anything; you always think so. I'll put an extra hundred to your account today: you don't want to run short."

I started my car, and Sandy made a dash for the running-board and had to be forcibly restrained. Feeling tearful and rather forlorn, I leaned out to kiss you once more, but your mouth barely brushed mine. Yours is an affectionate rather than a passionate nature, and one kiss at parting is enough for you.

"Have a good time," you urged as I moved away. "And I'll see you in two weeks."

During the first hour my thoughts clung to home and you: I was enmeshed in the myriad tiny fibres that bind us to our possessions. But gradually the increasing distance stretched those fibres to the breaking point, and I began to think of Altamont, and of the beauty and serenity I should find there. Several of my friends were there, I knew: people from Argyll, and people I had known

and liked during other summers. Altamont's magic has a durable quality, so that its subjects return again and again, and eventually build homes for themselves.

(I suggested once that you and I might have a cottage there, but you were very definite in your answer. "If I ever put any money into a summer place," you said bluntly, "it'll be at the beach and not in the mountains." And so I let the subject drop.)

By noon I had driven out of flat country and into the foothills, and the mountains were as dim as wash drawings on the horizon. I watched them take on form and color and texture; slowly they became three-dimensional, and the pale velvet of their slopes deepened and roughened until the sense of illusion fled. The air grew thinner and clearer, so that I began to know again the familiar intoxication of altitude and to feel a more intense awareness of my own personality—a sort of ecstasy of Being. Complete intoxication numbs and eventually obliterates perception, but the outer fringes of its realm induce a mental state that is almost clairvoyant in its acuteness. Or so it seems to me, and so—I learned later—it seemed to Duncan.

I reached Pinnacle Inn soon after two, and was told that my cottage was ready. I have always loved the sprawling old Inn, surrounded by its cottages like a mother hen by her brood, and I choose it because the cottages supply a measure of privacy without the responsibility of keeping house.

There were three or four notes for me, and I took them with a sharp pleasure. Telephones, which have always seemed to me the deadliest of our modern instruments of torture, are almost unknown in Altamont, so that the charming custom of writing one's messages and invitations has survived there. An invitation written and sent by hand takes on an added warmth, I think, because of the effort involved.

A fire had been laid in my sitting-room and the air was crisp and sweet. I opened the notes before I bathed, in case any of them should require an immediate answer.

Three of them were irrelevant to this letter, which I shall prune to its essentials for the sake of your patience. The fourth was from Aileen Hillyer, asking me to come in the next afternoon for cocktails.

"I'm having a man you'll like an awful lot," she added. "At least I hope you will, because you're the only person I know who's smart enough to interest him. He's a professor or something, and his name is Duncan Rhodes."

Perhaps I should be able to say that I went to Aileen's in a sort of trance, mystically endowed with a foreknowledge that I was going to meet my destiny. Actually I did nothing of the kind; I speculated rather gloomily upon Mr. Rhodes and visualized him as a wizened individual with a bald and bulbous head. Intelligence is no rarity among our kind, but its manifestations are, and the person who gives away his secret is inevitably suspect in a group of average Southerners. We distrust any deviation from the norm, and conceal our minds as carefully as an old-fashioned Turkish woman conceals her face. And a "professor or something" invariably evokes the picture of a distraught little man in spectacles and baggy trousers.

(I say "we" advisedly, because my pessimism about Duncan was proof of the fact that I too am guilty of being influenced by a mass opinion which I do not actually share. I too have concealed intelligence—so successfully that few people know I possess it. So successfully, in fact, Tim, that you probably will not recognize me in these pages. I never use such language as this with you: I slur my words, and salt my sentences with profanity and current slang, and suspend the rules of grammar. More than that, I derive a perverse satisfaction from the deception; I am like an actor who revels in giving a convincing performance in an uncongenial role. But I shall write this letter in another language—and one equally my own—so that you may believe me when I say that you have known only a part of me.)

There were a great many people in Aileen's living-room, and I knew at a glance that the party was one of those noisy, patting affairs that you love—and that I have learned honestly to enjoy by the simple expedient of getting mildly drunk as soon as possible.

Aileen was not in sight, but I saw several acquaintances I had known in other summers, and I stopped to talk with them until she should appear.

A few minutes later she screamed my name across a dozen heads and began to forge towards me with outstretched hands.

"Lynn! I didn't see you come in! It's grand to see you and you look perfectly *marvellous*! That's the best-looking outfit I've seen this summer. . . ."

It was a "good-looking outfit." I may have had misgivings about her professor, but being a true female I had taken no chances and I knew I looked well. It's absurd for people to pretend ignorance of their own appearance: I can be beautiful or drab, in about equal measure, and I'm quite aware of it in either case.

I took her hands and laughed. "Thanks. You're looking pretty snappy yourself, and it's grand to see you."

We exchanged the necessary information with machine-gun rapidity, as women do. She was staying the summer, and Tom would be up for weekends and for the month of August. The children loved it so, and she had found two good ponies for them to ride. . . . In return I told her that I was staying two weeks and that you wouldn't be up at all. We promised each other innumerable games of bridge, and I experienced the familiar sensation of being beaten down by her inexhaustible vitality and vivacity. I am always fond of Aileen in prospect and retrospect, but after a few minutes in her presence my facial muscles grow stiff and weary with the effort of registering appropriate emotions.

Eventually she remembered Duncan. "By the way, there's a man you've got to meet. I think he's in the dining-room. Anyhow, you've got to have a drink. . . ."

He was just leaving the dining-room—alone—when we entered. And even then my preconception was so definite that I thought: There's a man I'd like to know. What a pity he isn't Duncan Rhodes. . . .

Aileen said, "Duncan!" and he stopped.

"I want you to meet Mrs. Sheldon," Aileen said. "Mr. Rhodes, Lynn, and I know you'll like each other. Lynn," she explained helpfully to him, "is *terribly* intelligent."

I could have strangled her for that. I said, rather nastily, I'm afraid: "Yes. I usually wear a placard about it, but I didn't have time to put it on this afternoon."

He chuckled. And Aileen, having done her good deed in a naughty world, drifted away to confound another victim. When she had gone we stood perfectly still for a moment, appraising each other as frankly as two boxers.

I wonder if I can make you see him, Tim. I should like the picture to be unmarred by hatred or jealousy on your part but that, I suppose, is impossible. He is younger than you, and very different: of medium height, with a slender, swordsman's grace; while you are tall and loose and rangy. Your hair is rough and dark and beginning to thin a little; his is pale gold and very thick. He was wearing the casual sports clothes that you associate so contemptuously with idlers, and he seemed to give them a special charm and value.

But those are superficial and trivial differences; the real contrast lies in your two faces. Yours is simple and good; your crinkling blue eyes indicate quite plainly that you are as indiscriminately gregarious as a collie puppy. Adults, children and animals trust you at a glance and lay their troubles or their tributes at your feet; knowing instinctively that yours is an intensely personal nature; that you are interested in what they do rather than why they do it.

Duncan's face is that of a thinker; of a man beautifully disciplined both in body and mind. He could never be called handsome, I suppose, but the bone structure of his face is very good and his head is finely shaped. His eyes are gray and speculative; seeing everything and betraying little. His mouth is sensuous (not sensual, Tim; perhaps you'd better consult my dictionary for that distinction); but even the sensuousness is disciplined. He has, as I discovered very soon, a delicate precision and economy of gesture that fascinates me; while you're apt to wave your arms like flails if you become angry or excited.

In a word, his preoccupation is with the world of thought and yours is with the world of action.

When we had measured each other for an instant he reverted to my remark about the placard.

"Surely you don't let that particular kind of inanity worry you?" His mouth was grave but there was amusement in his eyes.

I shrugged. "I'm afraid I do, when it's hurled at me like an accusation. And it's such a hopeless challenge, like: 'I hear you're very witty. Please say something funny.'"

He laughed aloud at that, and I was ridiculously pleased. "Well, I won't hold out a lump of sugar and beg you to be intelligent; I'll get you that drink Aileen forgot about. What would you like?"

"Scotch and soda, if there is any. If not, rye and plain water. Only one pony, no matter what it is."

His eyes twinkled. "Not very feminine preferences, but you seem to know your mind."

I returned the twinkle. "On simple things like a drink: yes. Otherwise—I doubt it."

We were going to get along well, I realized. I hadn't counted on a sense of humor; that seemed too much to hope for. But he liked to laugh as well as I—and at the same things, I suspected. He pushed through the crowd at the bar and emerged with two glasses of scotch and soda.

"Now let's get out of this bedlam. I noticed some benches in the yard; we'll hope Aileen's guests like her scotch better than her scenery."

His directness surprised me a little, but I learned later that he had, in a greater degree than anyone I have ever known, the faculty for cutting through the amenities and the conventional opening gambits and arriving at what he wanted to do or say.

His wish was granted and we sat for a time in silence, letting the beauty sink into our hearts. Aileen's cottage clings by its toes to the rim of Red River

Gorge and the view is breath-taking. Mist had filled the bottom of the gorge, and here and there a tree emerged, seeming less a tree than a reef rising from an immobile pearl-gray ocean. The silence—after the babel inside—had an orchestral quality; it beat upon our ears in great, inaudible chords.

At last I said gratefully: “I’m glad you didn’t feel impelled to comment. . . .”

His smile was very quick. “I was thinking the same of you. Do you remember the poem of Rupert Brooke’s about the man in the forest at dusk, revelling in beauty and thinking of the girl he loved?”

“Quite well. She mouthed banalities about beauty, and how the days were drawing in a bit. . . .”

“And he ended it: ‘By God, I wish that you were dead!’ ”

We laughed—quietly, in order not to violate the stillness. I studied him covertly and saw that he was gazing straight before him, with his head resting against the back of the bench. His hand holding the glass was really beautiful: fine-skinned and thin and sensitive, but still an intensely masculine hand.

“You’re very young to be remembering Rupert Brooke,” I mused. “He was the major prophet of my earliest adolescence, and I feel sure I must antedate you.”

“Not much, if any. I’m thirty-two. And then I teach English, and being merely an Associate I draw most of the Minors.”

“They’re usually more interesting than the Majors, don’t you think? Today anyhow, when genius seems to me to have become synonymous with verbosity and dullness. When I went to school I was taught that the first principle of art was selection.”

He turned his head without lifting it from the bench and looked curiously at me. He had a trick—which I learned then and later came to love—of lifting his right eyebrow when he was amused or interested.

“I’m afraid you really are intelligent, Lynn. (It’s a beautiful name; I hope you don’t mind my using it.) And if you are . . .”

I finished it for him. “Then may the Lord have mercy on my soul.”

“Exactly. But He probably won’t.”

“No. I haven’t observed that mercy is one of His outstanding qualities. But I don’t expect any special consideration, and that gives me a slight advantage.”

He continued to look at me and I met the look with an effort. His gaze was so intent and penetrating that I knew he was seeing me naked—mentally if not physically; stripped of the poses and pretenses with which we attempt to clothe ourselves.

“Where are you staying?” he demanded abruptly. “And how long will you be here?”

The questions were not so irrelevant as they seemed, because my thoughts were keeping step with his.

“In one of the cottages at Pinnacle Inn, and I’ll be here two weeks.”

Another man would have uttered some polite banality, but Duncan merely nodded and was silent again.

Across the gorge the sun was deepening from gold to copper, and wordlessly we watched the ceremony of its abdication. When it touched the trees on the horizon the orchestra surged—or so it seemed to me—into the Siegfried Fire Music, and I shut my eyes and shivered a little.

“Are you cold?” he asked quickly.

I shook my head and smiled, embarrassed at being detected in an emotion too intense, perhaps, for the time and place. I detest any manifestation bordering on sentimentality or hysteria.

But I needn’t have worried. He said quietly, “I see,” and leaned back once more.

“When I haven’t been here for a year,” I explained casually, “I’m always rather maudlin about it. Tomorrow I’ll be more nearly normal.”

“By normal I suppose you mean more unresponsive or inarticulate,” he smiled. “Being an Anglo-Saxon, you’re mortally afraid of revealing an emotion.”

“Not with everyone,” I admitted. And then to my surprise I was saying:

“This reminds me of a dream I’ve had—three times, I think. I’m always standing on a plain, and there’s a high mountain in the distance. The sun is setting, and as I watch it I realize that the sun is sinking in front of the mountain instead of behind it. And each time I realize, without regret or surprise, that when the sun touches the earth everything will be obliterated. (Dreams are no respecters of science, of course, because the obliteration would come long before I had a chance to foresee it!) And when it comes I find myself floating in space, with a rapturous sense of lightness and release, and I think with intense pleasure: Why, this is death, and it’s better than anything I’ve ever known! What a pity we can’t know this in advance, and then we wouldn’t be so horribly afraid. . . .”

I’d never told that dream to anyone, Tim, because it meant so much to me. I couldn’t bear the preoccupied, “Yeah,” that would dismiss it, and the eager, “That reminds me of a funny one I had the other day,” that would inevitably follow. But Duncan Rhodes said thoughtfully:

“You’re very lucky to have had it. I think it’s proved to you what most of us suspect: that death is the crowning ecstasy of life. We fight it and fear it because we can’t quite accept our own instinctive knowledge of it.”

“Perhaps. But I’ve never been afraid of death for itself; the only thing I dread is dying hideously, for weeks or months or even years, as so many people do. If I could die as I die in the dream, I’d hold out my hands to it.”

And suddenly it was really cold on the bench, for night falls swiftly and icily upon the mountains. I shivered again and stood up.

“We’d better go in. The party has probably gone home and left us.”

He rose with me. “I suppose we had.” And I thought there was regret in his voice.

We had underrated the quality and the quantity of Aileen’s whiskey. The remnants of the party were noisier and more firmly planted than when we had left, and our defection had apparently gone unnoticed. I decided that noise and more whiskey were unendurable after the stillness and beauty outside, so I sought out Aileen and began my farewells.

She was more vivacious by several drinks than when I had last seen her. She laid an arm around my shoulders and drew me aside.

“How’d you get along?”

Everything in me recoiled before the hot, almost lascivious eagerness of her voice. There was satisfaction in it also; the elation of a chemist who has mixed two dangerous elements and achieved a foreseen result.

I answered her casually. “I liked him a great deal. But just as a matter of curiosity, why are you trying to make something of nothing? My twelve blameless years ought to show you how useless that is.”

She laughed. “I know it, you idiot, but I wanted you to meet each other. To tell you the truth,” to my great relief she had lowered her voice, “I tried to ensnare him myself, and I couldn’t get to first base. I’m not bad looking, but I haven’t got the brains.”

I had to smile. “And you felt that our sex needed vindicating. What makes you think I could do it? I’m no siren.”

Her blue eyes, that were clouded now with alcohol, grew wistful. “I know it. And that’s why you could do it if you wanted to. Sirens only succeed with infants or morons.” She added with a childlike naïveté, “I’m not nearly as dumb as I pretend to be; at least I’m smart enough to see what you hide from most people.”

I felt the familiar affection for her and patted her hand lightly.

“You flatter me. Anyhow, I had a grand time at your party and I’ll see you

tomorrow.”

I had already said goodbye to Duncan Rhodes, but as I went into the hall I saw him standing near the door.

“I waited on the chance that you might have walked over,” he explained. “You strike me as the sort of person who would walk whenever it was possible.”

I laughed. “I am. And it’s darker now than I’d realized.”

“That’s what I hoped.”

He helped me into his car—a convertible roadster that seemed a little out of character for a professor—and slid under the wheel. We sat silent, even after he had maneuvered the car into the narrow mountain road.

As he drove I studied his profile—unobserved, I thought. By his voice he was a Southerner, but there was no Southern carelessness about him and I wondered about his background.

He smiled. “Well, what have you decided?”

I laughed awkwardly. “I haven’t decided. You’re a Southerner, and yet you’re not.”

“I was born in Carlton, Virginia, if that’s any help.”

It wasn’t, because I had never heard of Carlton. “Is it belligerently Virginian?”

“Not very. It’s in southern Virginia—too close to the contaminating influence of your Carolinas. Besides,” there was amusement in his voice, “the belligerents who drape themselves with Virginia creeper are usually descendants of the ones who sat barefoot on the porch and sold hay to the Confederate soldiers.”

“That still doesn’t explain you,” I insisted. “You must be a mutation.”

He accepted the theory. “Perhaps. They occur among human beings as well as among plants.” Abruptly he counter-attacked. “What about you?”

“Argyll, South Carolina. I’ve lived there all my life.”

He glanced briefly at me. “Another mutation?”

“I don’t think so. Call it, rather, a split personality”

“We’re all victims of that,” he said quietly. “Individual civil war. Do I turn left here?”

“Yes. Pinnacle is that huge, undecided structure on the bluff just ahead.”

As we stopped before the hotel he turned to look squarely at me. “I wish you’d have dinner with me if you haven’t another engagement.”

Gradually I was becoming accustomed to his abruptness. "I'd like to, but knowing my Altamont, I have to decline regretfully. Altamont is simply a projection of all the cities and towns from which it draws."

I felt no reluctance in saying that, Tim. Duncan Rhodes was too direct to respect any answer except the true one.

He nodded. "I see." And then, after a moment's hesitation: "Would golf tomorrow afternoon come within the rules? After all, one can hardly be clandestine on a golf course."

I laughed. "That's true. Yes, I'd like to play."

"Thank you. About half-past two?"

"Or quarter of three. I'm lunching with Aileen and I may be a little late."

He got out of the car and came to open the door for me. "Then I'll come at quarter of three. But don't hurry with your lunch; I'm an excellent waiter."

He walked with me to the cottage; held out his hand. "Goodby, and thank you very much."

His gratitude was flattering but scarcely warranted, it seemed to me. I had no prescience about Duncan Rhodes, Tim, and that is my sole defense. If I had walked into the situation with open eyes I should certainly have been more culpable than I now feel; but on that first afternoon Duncan was nothing more than an interesting man whom I liked on sight.

"The thanks are mine," I said. "Goodby. . . ."

I played bridge and lunched with Aileen the next morning, with only a passing thought for Duncan. I did not, I confess, tell her of my golf engagement; but that was because she was apt to invest it with an undue significance. Or so I thought then: now I wonder if after all I had a knowledge of the future that hadn't yet come to the surface of my mind.

It was quarter of three when I came back to the cottage, and Duncan was sitting in his car at the hotel entrance, reading. I apologized rather breathlessly and he only smiled.

"I told you I was a good waiter. Take your own time."

"Come down to the cottage, then, while I change," I suggested. "It's at least more comfortable."

He went with me, and nodded his approval of my living-room.

"I like this idea. Privacy, but no bother about keeping house."

His reaction surprised me a little. "Most men never think of the bother of

keeping house.”

His answer was tinged with bitterness. “You’d be amazed at the awful meals I’ve cooked over a gas burner.”

I was amazed, and I resolved to follow up the subject if I ever saw him again. But now I went in to change my clothes.

When I came out he had found the books on my table and was turning the pages of Stephens’ “The Crock of Gold.”

“Have you read this yet?”

“Often. But I read it about once a year, for fear I may have forgotten parts of it. I hope it’s required in one of your courses?”

He shrugged. “Not required: forbidden. I get better results that way. Ready?”

“Finally. I’m not often late: punctuality is a vice I’ve never been able to conquer.”

“Nor I. I’ve wasted weeks of my life waiting on other people to keep appointments.”

You’ve never cared for golf, Tim: you consider it a pastime for rich men and loafers. You prefer deep sea fishing, which is scarcely a poor man’s recreation, either. But I have never called attention to the inconsistency: instead I have conquered my aversion to slaughter and learned to fish creditably, with never a feminine squeal when I get a strike.

Duncan played good golf, as I had known he would. Except for the favored few, golf requires concentration and discipline in a greater degree than any other sport, and he had probably mastered it as carefully and thoroughly as he mastered the courses he taught. When we were waiting to tee off he looked at me with a lifted eyebrow.

“What’s your handicap?”

“Fourteen.”

“Mine’s six. Suppose I give you four bisques a side?”

I nodded. “It’s more than generous.”

The Altamont course is very beautiful, Tim: rolling green velvet on the top of the world. There are days when the velvet is smothered in clouds, but that afternoon was perfect and I have never enjoyed a game so much. Like drinking, golf is a revealing pastime. Unsuspected traits come to the surface then, for better or for worse. Duncan stood the test well; I only hope I measured up as he did. Whenever I took a hole from him he invariably smiled with a pleasure that seemed genuine.

“Nice going. Maybe I was too generous with those bisques.”

But much of the time we were silent, and I know now that the fact was significant. Few men—and fewer women—can accept the challenge of silence: it frightens them, so that they pour words—any words—into it feverishly. Duncan could accept the challenge and so could I—when I was with him.

He beat me, one-up, and we were both satisfied. I felt, as I sat beside him during the drive home, that I had known him always. And when we reached the hotel I hesitated only an instant before I said:

“Won’t you come in and have a drink before dinner?”

There was amusement in his eyes and I knew he had sensed my hesitation. But he only nodded.

“Thanks. I’d like to.”

A fire burned in the living-room, and the logs gossiped sibilantly among themselves. While I telephoned to the inn for ice and soda water Duncan sat relaxed on the couch with his eyes on the whispering flames.

“I wonder why no one told me about this place,” he said as I joined him. “I’m in that mausoleum they call a clubhouse, and it’s a diabolical spot for working.”

“Then you are working,” I said. “I wondered how you spent your time, because you don’t strike me as a man with a passion for leisure.”

He laughed. “Oh, Lord, no! I’m trying to finish up my doctor’s thesis.”

I studied his face in the firelight with an interest that I thought was impersonal. “What’s the subject?”

His eyes twinkled. “Very modest. A survey of American literature for the past decade. But I find I’ve got an excellent chance of having it published next year.”

My interest deepened. “Would I be out of order if I asked to read some of it?”

“I rather hoped you’d suggest it. I’d like your opinion.”

“It’s valueless,” I warned him dispassionately. “I’m out of step. I’m one of those people who don’t know nothin’ about art but know what they like.”

“All the better. The critics will tell me voluntarily.”

A bell-boy arrived with ice and soda and I mixed the drinks. We sat for a time in a companionable silence, pleasantly tired and completely at ease. In the space of a night we seemed to have hurdled every barrier to friendship and the knowledge, I think, pleased Duncan as well as me.

“I suppose,” I said finally, “that I ought to find out the salient and obvious

things about you. I don't know where you live now, or where you teach, or even whether you're married."

He agreed. "And then it will be my turn. I teach at Meredith University—my alma mater, incidentally. If I have any official home, I suppose it's the Meredith campus. As for whether I'm married or not—can't you apply Stephens' rule and guess for yourself?"

I burst out laughing. "A married man," Stephens says in effect, "looks at a woman quietly, as if he knew all about her; but a bachelor looks at her very sharp and looks away and then looks back again. . . ."

"I have a feeling," I objected, "that you look at everybody very sharp."

"Maybe I do." He rejected self-analysis. "Tell me about you."

"But I hadn't finished the catechism."

"You can finish it some other time."

"Very well. I live, as I told you, in Argyll, South Carolina. I have a husband who's president of a small textile mill. No children."

I had not meant to let my voice drop on the last two words. He flung me a quick look and said gently:

"But you have had?"

"One; a boy. He died when he was a week old. I can't—try again."

(I can see your resentful frown if you read that, Tim. You will say I have no business confiding such intimate things to a stranger. But incredible as it seems, there was nothing I could not have told him except the secrets of my life with you. Those secrets belong individually to neither of us.)

He moved quickly away from my pain, as if in apology for having touched it with even so light a finger as this.

"What do you do in Argyll?"

I said evenly: "In the summer I play bridge and golf and poker. I drink just enough to make myself a Good Sport, so that drunk people will seem almost as amusing to me as they seem to others. I take seltzer tablets after a hard Saturday night and appear promptly in my pew on Sunday mornings, because my husband is a vestryman in the Episcopal church. I dissect my friends behind their backs—in the dialect of a corn-field Negro—and then, like a true Southerner, rush to their defense or their assistance in adversity. In the winter I vary the program a little by sitting on hospital and welfare boards and going to concerts or lectures—with some other woman whose husband has also rebelled."

He was watching me steadily; almost in pity. "But—is it what you want

from life?”

“Not entirely, of course. I doubt if anybody ever has exactly what he wants. I live that way because I was born into it; because I love my husband and my friends. Because—in spite of everything—they’re gentle, unselfish, charming people, with the typical Southern zest for living and love of laughter that are unequalled anywhere else in America.”

He nodded in reluctant agreement. “That’s what I resent so bitterly about Southerners. Being all those admirable things, why must they also be the others?”

“Heaven knows,” I said wearily. “I’ve stopped trying to find the answer.”

He continued to look at me, and the firelight was golden on his hair.

“Where did this half of you come from? The half you’re letting me see?”

In the space of a day, Tim, he had guessed the secret I’ve hidden from you for twelve years.

“I’m not sure. From my mother, I think, who died twelve years ago—when I was twenty-two. She was a remarkable woman, but I never really knew her while she was alive.” I hesitated, attempting to put a difficult idea into words.

“It’s tragic, isn’t it, that you can’t know your parents until the sum of your experience begins to approximate theirs? If they die comparatively young you gradually catch up with them and see them whole, and not through the dark glass of a parental relationship. If they live to be old, I suppose you never really know them.”

He nodded. “And if they die young, you can never profit by your knowledge. What was your mother like?”

Again I fumbled for the right words. “She was an individual before she was a woman, and in her generation that was no mean feat. She taught me to think: or rather, she showed me the road. You can’t teach another person to think. But the most important thing she taught me was to doubt; to distrust clichés and accepted truths. Of course I didn’t know any of this while she was alive; I’m only now beginning to see it.”

The room had grown very dark as we talked, and I got up and turned on a lamp. The movement startled Duncan into a realization of time and he jumped to his feet.

“Good Lord, I’ve probably made you late for dinner! I’m terribly sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said quickly. “I can always eat, but I can’t often talk about myself. You’re too good a listener.”

He smiled. “Oh, my time will come, and you’ll pay at usurious rates.” He stood and looked steadily at me. “If you won’t dine with me, will you go for a

drive after dinner? If you're tired I'll let you go to bed very early."

But I had promised to play bridge with the Howards. I told him that, and he gave the quick, non-committal nod that was so characteristic of him.

"I'm sorry. Then will you go swimming with me tomorrow morning?"

I hesitated, having no desire to make myself—or him—a topic for gossip. I was not conceited enough to assume that he intended to monopolize my time, or that his interest was unduly personal: in the beginning I think he felt as I did—that we might have a great deal to say, and little time in which to say it.

"What about your work?" I temporized.

"There are plenty of hours left for that. I usually swim or play golf every day anyhow; the exercise dispels a mental fog."

His voice was so devoid of intimacy that I felt foolish for having hesitated.

"Then I'd like to. About eleven?"

"Eleven would be fine." He smiled quickly. "And I promise not to wear out my welcome this time by making you late for lunch. . . ."

He went away, walking with the light, quick stride of an Indian.

The Altamont lake is as cold and clear as a diamond, Tim, but you scorn it because there are no breakers to ride. I feel that swimming and surf bathing are two separate sports, and I love them both: the first because it is a test of one's own strength; the second because it is a battle with an unleashed and unmeasured force.

Duncan swam as he had played golf: easily and tirelessly. I wondered at the perfect physical condition he maintained: physical efficiency has never seemed to me a characteristic of men whose work is mental and sedentary. When we lay in the sun, resting, I spoke my thought.

"You don't swim like a professor, Duncan."

He raised himself on one elbow and grinned. "Brawn, my child, was what got me into college and helped to keep me there."

"Not football," I objected. His build was too slender and his muscles too pliant for that.

"No; running. Meredith goes in heavily for track and I decided at fifteen that I wanted to go to Meredith. I had speed and endurance, so I made myself into a distance runner."

"As simple as that," I murmured. "You were fortunate to know, at fifteen, what you wanted."

He hid his face in his arms again. “I had to know. There was no one to decide it for me.”

“No one at all?” I asked gently.

“An uncle and his wife, with whom I lived. The uncle was my father’s brother and he took me in. The aunt—suffered me, because my mother was an aristocrat and my aunt liked the idea of being generous to the descendant of a president.”

“Your parents . . .” I hesitated awkwardly, moved by pity and searching for words in which to frame my question.

“My father died when I was ten—contracted sepsis while he was operating in a farmhouse—and my mother died five years later,” he said quietly. “Dad was a small-town doctor with more patients than income—like so many small-town doctors. I was too young to know him then, but as you said of your mother yesterday, I know him better now. I realize that I’ve missed a lot.”

“And your mother?”

“Unlike yours, she was a woman before she was an individual, and she had the added handicap of having been born a Virginia lady. Dad left nothing but a little life insurance—eight or ten thousand—and we lived it up. Frugally, to be sure, but she didn’t know what else to do about it. And just before it was all gone, she died of pneumonia.”

I lay silent, not knowing how to put my sympathy into words. After a pause he added musingly:

“There was something rather—symbolic about it: as if she had paid out her life with every dollar, and died when the last of it was spent.”

“Then the uncle and aunt?” I persisted because I wanted to know the whole of his background; because I felt that it held the answer to his personality.

“Yes. My uncle was a good sort and he never stressed the obligation, but he had three children of his own and not much money, either. I paid my own way as best I could: carrying papers, driving a delivery truck in the summer, cutting lawns, working at a soda fountain. . . .” He added without bitterness: “I got out from under foot as soon as possible.”

I began to understand him better. He was mature because he had never had a chance to be young; he had a core of steel in his nature because you cannot hew your own path and cling to the illusion that life is good and that all men are brothers. And to my admiration for his mind I added that morning an admiration for his character, which had made its own opportunity.

“Tell me about Meredith,” I commanded.

He smiled dryly. “That was where I got my culinary experience—along

with a lot of other extra-curricular knowledge. But it wasn't really bad: I coached English students, and waited on tables, and ran several thousand miles—more or less—and made a little money from the weekly paper. Thirteen or fourteen years ago the competition wasn't quite so keen, and there were more plutocrats ready to pay for service.”

There was still no bitterness in his voice; only the dry amusement. But for all that I sensed the struggle that lay behind his unadorned recital, and to the admiration I added pity. Not that he would have wanted it, but being a woman I was ready to give it.

“And after you graduated, what?” I asked it casually, keeping the pity from my voice.

“Well—I won a scholarship that enabled me to get my master's degree, and went back as a fellow when I was twenty-three. A couple of years later Howell College offered me an associate professorship and I stayed there until three years ago, when Meredith invited me back. In the summers I've worked for my doctorate, which I hope to get this year. Now I'm fairly rolling: I make four thousand from teaching, and a few extra hundreds from articles and reviews.”

I looked at him in a sort of wonder, almost appalled, Tim, at what he had achieved during those years when I was adjusting my life to yours.

“You make me feel like a halfwit and a parasite,” I murmured.

He lifted his head to stare at me. “For God's sake, why? There's no virtue in struggling unless you have to.”

“Perhaps not; but what a comfort to have discovered that you're capable of it. Under your circumstances I'd probably have gone under completely.”

His eyebrow lifted. “No. You wouldn't have gone under.”

He said it quietly and added nothing to the statement, but I felt as if I had received an accolade.

“Do you like Meredith?” I asked. Rather banally, because I couldn't tell him how much his estimate meant to me.

“I think I do. It's as liberal as any institution in the South.”

I smiled, remembering some of the tempests that have originated in its halls. “There are Southerners who think it too liberal. My mother-in-law, for example, considers it a hotbed of communism.”

He didn't laugh scornfully, as I had expected. His eyes grew thoughtful.

“The complement of liberalism is apt to be excess, unfortunately. We've got a few crackpots, of course, who see Russia as the hope of the world.”

“But you don’t?”

“Heavens, no! I’m an individualist always, and no state is more important than the people who compose it. What the crackpots don’t realize, being crackpots, is that communism turns the social order upside down as far as classes are concerned, and then imposes another tyranny in place of the former one. Stalin or Nicholas; the Imperial Police or the G.P.U. and your next door neighbor; a firing squad in any case. Take your choice.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather not. I’ll keep the groping, blundering machinery of democracy. I’ll even keep the politicians, who desert important legislation in order to run home and get themselves reelected.”

“So will I. As for the other totalitarian states: slavery and the death of initiative are too big a price to pay for bread. I’d rather be relatively free—and hungry. And having been hungry, I don’t speak inadvisedly.”

“But aren’t we,” I asked, “heading for some sort of totalitarian state ourselves?”

He chewed thoughtfully on a blade of grass. “Perhaps; if we keep on in our present direction. And yet the temperament of the American people seems to me our biggest safeguard, because an American doesn’t take kindly to regimentation as a German or an Italian does. The nation was born of a rebellion from vested authority—and it’s been rebelling ever since! Take prohibition as an example. We almost drank ourselves into delirium tremens just to prove that ‘no damned government’ could revoke our inalienable right to do as we pleased even if it killed us. We obey those laws that suit us; the others can go hang.”

I laughed. “That’s quite true. Maybe it will save us.”

He turned on his back and regarded me through eyes that were narrowed to the sun’s glare.

“And yet—if it comes, it might be interesting to live through. . . .”

“If we live through it,” I amended. “I’ve always admired Kipling’s tramp royal, who asked no other favor than the ’ealth to watch it all.”

“Exactly.” He stood up and held out a hand to me. “Do you feel like going in again?”

“Of course. Unless you ought to go back to your work.”

He shook his head, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of something intimate and personal in his eyes.

“I’ve got the rest of the day for work—unless you’ll play golf with me this afternoon?”

I had promised to play with Aileen, and told him so. He shrugged.

“In that case I’ll stay here as long as you’ll let me.”

His voice was casual, but the compliment implicit in his words pleased me more than I cared to realize. Perhaps, feeling that quick elation, I should have ended the acquaintance there. But I have never attracted men easily or in great numbers, and I was not conceited enough to think that Duncan shared my interest. So long as the interest was mine alone I was free to enjoy it to the last. He would drop out of my orbit in two weeks, leaving me with nothing more than a pleasant memory. That was my reasoning—and my undoing: I know now that complete self-confidence in an unfamiliar situation is the prerogative of fools.

The next afternoon I took him to Beatty’s Rock—because I love it more than any spot in the mountains and I sensed that he would feel about it as I did. We drove almost to the rock, then left the car and followed a mountain trail the rest of the way.

The sun was low, and purple shadows lay over the folded hills below. Silence was thick about us: the majestic, all-engulfing silence of height and distance. We sat on a crude bench with our shoulders touching, and made no effort to talk.

“I wonder,” he said finally in a hushed voice, “why the mountains bring such an unearthly peace. The sea is more awe-inspiring; but the sea excites and even disturbs me. I want to conquer it; I even want, sometimes, to lose myself in it. But the mountains are like a hand on your brow.”

I answered in a voice as low as his. “They give us perspective. We can never get farther away from life than this; never come quite so close to seeing it whole. It’s bromidic, of course, but you can’t see life when you’re down in the thick of it. Which,” I added grimly, “is probably a fortunate thing for us all.”

He kept his eyes on the distant hills for a time, and gave no sign of having heard me. Then he turned and searched my face.

“What do you want from life, Lynn?”

I weighed the question. “I’m not even sure. Besides, it isn’t a case of what one wants; it’s a case of making the most of what one gets. I seem to be speaking in bromides this afternoon,” I added lamely.

He made an impatient movement. “That’s a defeatist viewpoint. We can never get what we want unless we fight for it. If we’re willing to fight, we can make of our lives anything we choose.”

“You know better than that,” I said flatly. “We don’t make our lives; they make us.”

“You think mine has made me?” he countered.

I held my ground. “To a greater degree than you realize. You believe that anyone in your circumstances could have done the same if he had *wanted* to; but you’re wrong. He would have needed the same strength and determination, and those qualities were given to you on the day you were conceived. You had no more to do with them than with the color of your eyes.

“There are times,” I went on more quietly, “when I long to rebel against certain phases of my life. I carry the *germ* of revolt, if nothing else. But I can never break that pattern because I lack the necessary—ruthlessness: I see too clearly the effect of a revolt upon the people I love.”

“If you wanted a better life more than you want—smoothness,” he said contemptuously, “then you’d take it at any cost.”

“I doubt that. It isn’t a desire for ‘smoothness’ that holds me back; it’s—well, a sense of obligation; a respect for a contract I’ve made. I’m never afraid for myself, but for the people I love—and who love me. I’ve shown courage on occasions; once I gambled all I possessed. But before I tossed in my chips I was sure—in my own mind, at any rate—of the value of the thing I gambled for. As for the value of a different life—I’m *not* sure; and so I conform voluntarily.”

“You can never be sure in advance,” he insisted.

“Perhaps not. But you can think you are, and it comes to the same thing. Besides,” I smiled slightly, “I don’t often feel rebellious. Most of the time I see the tremendous value of what I have—and thank God for it.”

He looked steadily at me. “But you’re capable of so much more. That’s the thing about you that I resent so deeply.”

There was no mistaking the intensity in his voice, and I was startled by the swiftness of my response. I realized for the first time, Tim, that Duncan Rhodes and I might be riding a fence, and that our ability or inability to clear it was a thing that neither of us could foretell.

Perhaps I ought even then to have pulled up short. I considered it—and discarded the idea. The keenest regrets of my life have been for the things I have not done, rather than for the things I have: this time—goaded perhaps by his estimate of me—I decided to walk deliberately into a situation that might bring me untold pain. But even pain is an evidence of life, for the dead are incapable of suffering, and I was willing to risk the pain if it could prove to me that I was still alive. Because there are times, Tim, when I question the fact of my own existence.

I have no excuse to offer for that decision, save the excuse that I thought the situation would involve none but Duncan and me. It was an episode completely outside the boundaries of my other life, and there it would remain. I know now that the reasoning was faulty, but it satisfied me then.

And so I met his eyes squarely, and the interchange was like an electric current.

“I may be capable of more,” I confessed, “but it’s something I shall probably never find out.”

The words were a challenge that he was almost certain to accept. I stood up.

“We’d better go. It isn’t easy to find our way back after dark.”

He rose at once, and I thought there was a strange glint in his eyes.

“It’s never easy to find your way back,” he said.

As I look back over the growth of this relationship, Tim, I realize what a shock the discovery will be to you. (Or would be to you: I don’t yet know the correct mood.) Jealousy has never been one of your faults, thank heaven, and your confidence in me has been your strongest safeguard. You will never know how completely that trust has bound me hand and foot for twelve years. I have refrained from even the casual flirtations with which so many women season the dish of marriage; I have had many friends but no over-ardent admirers.

I might have had them if I had been willing. For willingness is the first requisite; it emanates from certain types of women as unmistakably as an odor. But lacking that will, and moved by your own unswerving loyalty, I have enjoyed more satisfactory and permanent friendships than I could have otherwise enjoyed.

Realizing all this, I am as surprised by my decision as you will be. Still more deeply am I surprised by the absence of any sense of sin or remorse, for the right to dalliance without regret (if this is dalliance) belongs exclusively to men.

Or perhaps I should say that it has belonged exclusively to men. Within my own span I have seen a change in the status of women, and if they have appropriated a wider professional and personal freedom it is logical to assume that they have also appropriated a wider emotional freedom.

Certainly that is true of their superficial contacts with men. While I was in Altamont you were squiring other women who were permanently or temporarily unattached, and squiring them with my consent and blessing, since

they were my friends. Conversely, I do not think that my meetings with Duncan created more than a mild ripple of interest. Certainly no criticism reached me, and knowing the universal weakness for tale-bearing I feel sure that any serious criticism would have reached me—from some well-meaning soul who “had my best interests at heart.” When I came home I told you something of Duncan and you said, “That’s good. I’m glad you found somebody to entertain you,” and retired behind your newspaper.

But if I’m wrong in lacking a sense of sin; if you read this and feel that I should cry a *mea culpa*, then I shall bow to your opinion and accept the bitter knowledge that I have wronged three inherently decent people. For I have great confidence in your judgment of good and bad: your discrimination in this respect is instinctive and often unerring, while mine is a process of introspection and rationalization, less concerned with right and wrong than with motivation and effect.

Strangely enough, we didn’t reach that fence for several days. The feeling was there, pulsing closer and closer beneath the surface, but both of us were reluctant to recognize its existence. What we had was so valuable and so satisfying that we hesitated to exchange it for an emotion that was apt to be brief and turbulent and painful.

I saw him every day, but always openly. And always we talked as if we were to be condemned the following day to an eternal silence. There was no brilliance and no great depth in the things we said; I have never deluded myself into thinking that either of us was exceptional. Duncan has a good mind, but so have half a dozen acquaintances I could name: the difference—with both of us—lies in the fact that we have tried to develop such capabilities as we possess; that we are interested in life as a whole, rather than in our own minute segment of it. Our observations and conclusions were no doubt trite and faulty, but at least we made them thoughtfully, and found a bond and a stimulus in the process. I realize that the fragments which I have repeated will be of little interest to you, but I have written them in order that you may contrast them with the things we did and said at Ocean City, and then perhaps you will understand what I am laboriously trying to convey.

We differed hotly at times: I condemned the ruthlessness of his creed; he disdained the cowardice of mine. He gave me sections of his thesis and we argued the relative importance of certain books and the problematical length of time that they would survive. I shall spare you those discussions, since your reading is confined to mystery stories and the daily papers—neither of which

survive beyond the time of reading them. But a business man must have relaxation (I know because I hear the statement so often and from so many men) and for some reason only the trivial is capable of furnishing it.

But now and then the deepening sense of intimacy betrayed us into a sentence or a gesture that showed us too clearly the thing we were trying to hold at bay. As when Duncan said quietly, on the day after our visit to Beatty's Rock:

"In all her panegyric, Aileen Hillyer didn't warn me that you'd be beautiful. . . ."

My heart raced, but I made a blunt and honest reply.

"I'm not—often."

He corrected me. "Often, but not always. I like you better that way: it gives me something to watch for."

Or when we waited to drive on the sixteenth tee and he lit my cigaret, holding the match in his cupped hands.

"You've got beautiful hands, Duncan," I said impulsively. "Did you ever think of being a doctor?"

He shrugged. "I thought of it, of course; but it was more than I could swing without capital. I consoled myself with the romantic notion that training minds might be the next best thing to curing bodies."

"Maybe the minds are even more important than the bodies," I suggested.

He grinned. "They are—until you're ill. Then there's no question about the body's supremacy. More than that, I overlooked the fact that two or three hours a week is painfully inadequate if one hopes to shape and develop an intellect."

"Do you expect to keep on teaching?" I asked the question because I was finding it more and more difficult to visualize him in his chosen profession.

"Not for the rest of my life. In time I hope to give up teaching for writing—although my sort of writing is apt to be art for art's sake. What we humorously call higher education in America is making strides, but it still has a long way to go. I'm not sure I want to fit myself into the present academic mold."

I had to smile. "Certainly you haven't done that yet."

"No; but no one is proof against the constant dripping of water. Before I degenerate into a state of meek acceptance I'll become another tramp royal—even if it means touching bottom." He added slowly: "After all, there's a lot more real life at the bottom than at the top, and that's what I want before I die."

His eyes swung deliberately around to mine, and I read the words in them with dazzling clarity: “And it’s what I want for you. . . .” I rose in a sort of panic.

“We can drive now. It’s your honor. . . .”

The next day we reached the fence.

We had walked miles that afternoon, and had sat on Beatty’s Rock and watched the sun go down. We came back to my cottage at dusk, to a firelit intimacy too deep for safety. Dusk, I think, is the hour when our defences go down; when we enter a half-world where only thought and feeling can follow, while action and resolution retire to await the coming of another day.

I was too conscious of him then: of his eyes and hands and the strength of his body. I moved quickly across the room to light a lamp.

He stopped me with a gesture. “Please don’t. It’s so much better this way. . . .”

His voice was low and almost uninflected, but there was a vibration in it that set my nerves quivering. He was a study in chiaroscuro in the firelight: darkness and the blur of his hands and face, crowned by the pale gleam of his hair.

I sat down again, across the room from him; not trusting myself to speak for a moment. At last I said, hoping to break the spell with laughter:

“The days are drawing in a bit. . . .”

I didn’t succeed. He said, “Lynn!” in a voice so low and roughened, with emotion that I shut my eyes against it in ecstasy and pain.

There was for a time a crashing stillness in the room. On the hotel driveway an automobile horn sounded and a girl giggled foolishly. A log in the fireplace broke noisily in half, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. And then Duncan rose and came towards me.

I think I put out my hands, and I think the gesture was meant to ward him off; but I shall never know—now. He took my hands and drew me to my feet, and I felt his arms.

No one had held me like that, Tim, since the last time you did it—too many years ago. Not even you, perhaps, since your temperament is not his. I had an impression of drowning—of losing my identity completely—and like the greenest schoolgirl I closed my eyes when he kissed me.

I don’t know how long we stood like that, but it seemed a lifetime—and no longer than a heartbeat. All my training—all my love for you—should have held me back; instead I stood with my body and my mouth against his in the

most complete surrender I've ever known. I saw now that we had moved towards this since the beginning, and it was typical of our relationship that when the moment could no longer be postponed we accepted it without question or hesitation.

He lifted his head to look at me, and even in the faint light I could see that his eyes were brilliant.

“Lynn, darling, darling. . . .”

Not even words could break the spell. I said, “Oh, Duncan. . . .” in an uneven whisper, and put my hand behind his head. I knew then that I had wanted to touch his hair from the first, and that it would be sentient with a life of its own.

He smiled and drew me towards the ugly, comfortable couch. “Sit down and let me hold you. I've wanted to do it since the second time I saw you.”

I obeyed without hesitation, and felt the muscles of his shoulder ripple beneath my cheek as his arm tightened.

(I would spare you this if I could, Tim. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you these things, for if my secrets and yours are jointly owned, so are Duncan's and mine. But I must try to make you understand—if understanding becomes necessary—just how deep the feeling has been, and how completely it has escaped the trivial and the second-rate. And only by describing what he came to mean to me can I convince you that this feeling may be bigger than any I have had for you.)

It was I who first regained touch with reality. The romanticism and impracticality of women are two more of the fictions that men have cherished for ages, thereby proving that the shoe fits them better than it fits us. I sat up and said unsteadily:

“Duncan, we've both gone crazy.”

His eyes were shining. “No. We've both come to our senses.” When I tried to protest he interrupted me quickly. “Can't we leave the discussion until tomorrow? I can see by the set of your mouth—” he touched it lightly with his—“that you're getting ready to enumerate all the reasons why we can't possibly do what we are doing.”

“Well, we can't.”

(Because I was afraid now, Tim, of the forces we had unleashed. To contemplate disloyalty and to practise it are different things, and require different types of courage—or depravity. I had faced the possibility of this crisis with a sort of fatalism; now that it was upon me I wanted to turn and run.)

But Duncan grinned like a boy. “We are.”

“Temporary insanity,” I insisted. I got up with an effort and stood looking into the fire. “It’s passed now.”

He sat still, but his voice was grave and deep. “You know better than that.”

I did know better. I doubted whether it would ever pass.

“Yes, I suppose I do. But you’d better go now, and give me a chance to collect myself.”

Humor crept into his voice. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. If you still refuse to have dinner with me I’ll go and give you a chance to eat; but,” he rose and ended on a note as menacing as that of the villain in a ten-cent melodrama, “I’ll be back!”

I had to laugh at the incongruity, and with our mutual laughter the tension snapped. He was no longer a threat to my security, but a dear and familiar presence that I wanted, just then, more than anything in the world.

“You fool!” I said, and lifted my face to him as naturally as if I had loved him always.

We were both trembling when we drew apart, but wisely he held the note of lightness. He asked, with one eyebrow lifted:

“Now may I come back?”

I shrugged. “You’ll come anyhow, so what difference does it make?”

He laughed softly. “You learn fast, darling.”

At the doorway he turned to face me; slight and graceful and smiling; but to my awareness the smile seemed taut with a carefully concealed fear.

“I forgot to tell you that my intentions are entirely honorable. But I imagine you’d guessed that.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I’d guessed that. It might simplify things for me if they weren’t.”

The offer of a casual infidelity would never for a moment have tempted me, but to have such a man lay his heart and his life before you is another thing.

That evening I denied my temperament—a temperament that looks usually to the future and weighs every act in the light of its consequences—and yielded to Duncan’s request that we postpone discussion for another day. We drove out the Mt. Masters highway for several miles and stopped the car at one of the specially constructed lookouts. The gods had granted us a full moon, and

the mountains were clothed in an unearthly majesty and mystery that sunlight can never bestow.

During the drive Duncan made no effort to touch me, but when silence had enveloped us he took me in his arms and pressed my head against his shoulder and we sat silent, in the most complete unity of spirit I have ever known. I thought once of you, Tim, with tenderness and even affection; but you were too far removed from this world of silver and silence to have any reality.

"I haven't told you yet," he put his face against my hair, "that—I love you."

"And I love you."

"From the beginning, I think."

I repeated the words, like a pledge of faith. "From the beginning. . . ."

But the sound of my voice, repeating such words as those, brought me closer to earth. For all my present madness I was not the type of woman to become entangled in a situation like this; nor, I believe, was Duncan the type of man. I said desperately:

"Duncan, this is all out of character for us both! What's happened to us?"

His arm tightened. "The thing that happens occasionally—to people who are fortunate enough to recognize it and accept it."

"But I didn't recognize it," I insisted. "At least, not in time. When I did, I couldn't turn back; it was as if something were pushing me on."

"Why should you have turned back—unless you're a coward?"

"Because it *is* out of character. I've been married twelve years and I've never even kissed another man. You're unmarried at thirty-two, which means that you're not—impulsive, either. Why should a thing like this happen to people like us—and all within the space of a week?"

"I'll tell you why it happened to me," he said quietly. "Being a conceited male who demands the earth, I've waited for a woman whose mind and face and body were all beautiful. It's relatively easy to find one of those things, but I've never before found all three. If you had been ugly I might finally have come to love you anyhow, because our minds meet. But because you're also physically attractive it happened almost immediately."

"I suppose that's true of my feeling for you," I said. "And then I've never before known a man who was equally interested in me as a woman and as an individual. It's—" I laughed weakly—"it's an irresistible combination, Duncan!"

He seized on that, as I should have known he would.

“Then—that ought to settle it for us, oughtn’t it, Lynn?”

The question burst like a bomb in our fragile, impermanent heaven. I winced as if I had actually heard the explosion and seen the destruction.

“Duncan! And it was you who made the conditions!”

“My darling, I’m sorry.” His voice was husky. “But there doesn’t seem to be another answer, and I couldn’t resist asking you for it. I swear I won’t do it again tonight.”

He kept his word, but the illusion was gone. Whether we willed it or not, the necessity for discussion and decision had thrust its heavy fist through a soap bubble.

We succeeded for the rest of the evening in catching and holding a lighter mood that carried us safely through. As I think back over the remainder of that week, I marvel at the frequency and abandon of our laughter. Faced by the almost certain prospect of renunciation and pain we still could laugh—at the world, ourselves, and each other. And realizing this, I believe that the strongest bond that can exist between two people is not suffering, but mirth. I feel this not only with Duncan but also with you, Tim: the moments of our deepest intimacy have been those in which we have looked into each other’s eyes—and laughed.

He started the car soon after that, and seeing him turn it skillfully on the dangerous highway I spoke my thoughts impulsively.

“It’s ludicrous, Duncan, for a woman who’s nearly thirty-five to be shivering with excitement over a good-looking young man in an open roadster. I thought I’d left that behind me fifteen years ago!”

He chuckled. “If I know you—and I flatter myself that I do—you’ll never leave it behind you.”

I sighed. “Probably not. It’s the curse of Eve.”

“Then thank God she was cursed.” He laid an arm across my knees and drew me closer. “If I do get you, Lynn, I’ll never make the mistake of resting on my laurels.”

(As you have done, Tim, was the implication, and I recognized it as such. Like most American men, you have been an excellent husband and only a mediocre lover; while Duncan, I suspect, would be a better lover and a worse husband. For every-day living the sensible woman will choose a husband; but in a situation like this even sensible women cease to be sensible, and long for a lover!)

I looked at him in amused speculation. “And apropos of that, Duncan, no really inexperienced man can make love as beautifully as you do. It isn’t

possible.”

I heard him chuckle. “My child, I’ve been observing women for fifteen years—with the impersonal eye of pure science, of course.”

“Yes,” I drawled. “I have no doubt.”

He grew grave. “Seriously, sweetheart, I can’t imagine anything more unfortunate and unfair than to *learn* the art of making love on the one woman to whom you want to give your past and present and future.”

I heard that with none of the repulsion that it will arouse in you, Tim. “Then you don’t think that skill comes intuitively, with falling in love?”

“I do not.” He smiled reminiscently. “I’ll never forget my first grotesque attempt to kiss a girl. Nor,” his arm tightened, “will I forget my first fumbling, inadequate attempt at sleeping with one. She was pretty decent, and while I don’t think I harmed her, I know very well that I disappointed her!”

(I can guess your fury if you read that, Tim. Chastity before marriage is not required of men even in your code, but to speak humorously of one’s unchastity—to the woman one loves—is unforgiveable. When I tell you that the casual admission did not shock me in the least, you will doubtless feel that I am tarred with the same brush.)

“How would you feel,” I asked curiously, “if you knew that your fiancée had also been—practising?” I saw his mouth curve wickedly and I hurried to add: “Assuming, I mean, that she hadn’t been married? I wonder if you’d be consistent?”

He looked thoughtful. “It’s always hard to give an honest answer to a hypothetical question, but I think I would be. While it isn’t a parallel, the fact that you’ve been married doesn’t disturb me in the least: rather, it gives an added value to your love. You’re not a child; you know what marriage means—far better than I can know. If you cast in your lot with me you’ll be doing it, I hope, without illusion; you’ll be paying me a much greater compliment than an inexperienced girl of whom I might ask the same thing.”

I sighed, thinking of the fetish that American men have made of youth and freshness and virginity. “Oh, Duncan, I do love the way your mind works!”

He took his eyes from the road long enough to flash me a smile. “I can say the same of you, my darling.”

I had an engagement for bridge the next morning, and I went through those hours in a complete daze. I had forgotten the feeling of isolation and exhilaration that comes with a new love, but it was back upon me now, even

more intensely, I believe, than I had known it in my early youth.

(I wonder how the discovery of being in love affects a man? It's one of the few things I forgot to ask Duncan. I know a woman's feelings—assuming my own to be typical: she moves in a brightly lit vacuum; sounds and sights reach her as from a great distance; her own words and gestures have a special significance because she sees and hears them objectively, through another's eyes. And above all she thinks, with feminine glee: How shocked and surprised you would all be if you could read my mind!)

I lived through the bridge game and I do not believe I made any glaring mistakes. Certainly none were called to my attention, and knowing my friends I feel sure they would have been. And afterwards I drove home—still in my vacuum.

That afternoon as I dressed I looked carefully and critically at my own face, attempting for the first time in many months to appraise it. Whatever Duncan may think, I am not beautiful: my mouth is too wide, and my nose is indeterminate. My eyes create the illusion, I suppose, because of their size and their odd hazel color—and I do not, as someone spitefully intimated, dye my lashes.

My figure is probably good, since well-cut garments fit me perfectly, and to my mother I owe the trick of walking well. “Walk from your waist, Lynn,” she told me crisply. “Most women walk from the knees, and it makes them look ludicrous.”

But I knew, examining myself impersonally, why Duncan had thought me beautiful. I was glowing, with an inner light that would have betrayed me to any astute observer. Fortunately for me, there are few such observers: most of us soon cease to see the people we know well, and see instead the picture of them that we ourselves have formed.

Duncan came early, and entered my living-room without knocking. The intimacy implicit in such an omission was a little thing, but it set my heart racing. I called to him—lightly, I hope and pray:

“You're ahead of schedule. You'll have to amuse yourself for a few minutes.”

His voice was eager. “I'd rather look at you. Are you decent?”

I was, but I couldn't cloud my thinking with the memory of Duncan in my bedroom.

“No. Read a book—or count sheep.”

When I came in he crossed the room swiftly and took me in his arms and I

re-discovered another trick that love plays on its victims. We think we remember everything—from the play of an expression to the impact of a personality—but inevitably we find that memory has failed us, and that the reality is more vivid and precious than the picture we carry in our hearts.

He held me off and smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry if I hurried you, but I couldn’t see the hands of my watch move and I decided it had stopped.”

I shook my head. “It’s still running, but I’m glad you feel that way. Shall we stay here, or go out?”

“Let’s go out. Somebody’s sure to drop in on us.”

I hesitated, thinking—for the first time since I had known him—of subterfuge. “Because my conscience is no longer clear I grow cautious,” I confessed with a smile. “Take my golf clubs, Duncan, and put them in your car.”

He took the clubs and together we went to his car.

“Where shall we go? I can’t drive and use persuasion at the same time.”

He had guessed, and wisely, that persuasion would be necessary.

“Take the road that leads past the golf course. There’s one more trail I haven’t shown you.”

(A mountain trail, Tim, is the safest rendezvous available. You may meet an occasional group of girl campers, brown and bursting with youth and health, or a pair of New England spinsters in tweeds and sensible shoes; but you will never see any of your own acquaintances.)

We left the car in a clearing and walked half a mile to the edge of the world. And there we spread our sweaters on the ground and sat like good Mohammedans with our faces towards the East. But for the first time Duncan ignored beauty; instead he turned his eyes to me and waited. I met the look and realized that his eyes were shadowed, and that the lines beside his mouth were deeper than I remembered.

“My darling,” I said gently, “you look exhausted.”

One corner of his mouth lifted in a travesty of a smile. “I didn’t go to sleep last night.”

“Duncan!”

It was all in my voice: all the love and hunger and pity that I had meant to thrust behind me this afternoon. A weaker man would have taken advantage of it, but Duncan sat motionless.

“I’m like an accused murderer waiting for the jury’s verdict. Let’s talk, Lynn.”

When I would have answered him he interrupted me.

“There’s only one thing I’d like to say in the beginning, my dear. I won’t use physical persuasion on you if I’m strong enough to help it. I want you to consent with your mind as well as your body, because the decision your mind makes will last longer than the other. But I warn you,” his eyes lit briefly, “that if I decide you want to come, and lack the courage, the rules are off.”

I nodded. “That’s fair enough. . . . I argued most of the night myself, Duncan, and always came out by that same door wherein I went.”

“Let’s take the arguments, then, in inverse order of their importance and weight.”

“Very well. I’m older than you. . . .”

His grin was genuine then. “Stop bragging. My I.Q. would amaze you.”

“Oh, no, it wouldn’t. I’m talking about calendar age. And I’m even more mature than most women of thirty-four.”

“If you weren’t, I’d never have loved you.” He gestured impatiently. “Let’s not waste valuable time on that one.”

“All right.” In the face of his amused impatience it did seem childish and trivial. “I can’t have any children. . . .”

His gray eyes were luminous. “I’m marrying for myself, Lynn; not for posterity. I haven’t the particular type of ego that demands children as proof of its own validity and importance. If you were unhappy without them we could adopt them; adoption is less of a gamble in many ways than having your own.”

My lids stung with tears I would not shed. You have flatly disagreed with that opinion, Tim; it must be your child or none.

“What’s the next point?” Duncan demanded evenly.

“The only really important one: Tim. You see, Duncan, incredible as it may sound, I love him.”

“My darling,” his voice was gentle, “you’d be less than I think you if you didn’t. But *it’s* a different sort of love: made up of friendliness and tolerance and twelve years’ association. There’s even an element of the maternal in it.”

“There is in every woman’s love,” I confessed. “I’m aching right this minute to take you in my arms and hold you like a child.”

His face twisted, but he sat still. (I think that even you, Tim, must admit his strength.)

“For a while you would miss him and regret him,” Duncan conceded, “But if you stay with him you’ll miss me and regret me even longer. If you stay it will be because he needs you; because you feel that I could survive the blow

better than he.”

“Well, couldn’t you?”

He shrugged. “If you call it surviving.”

“But my dear, you’ve known me a week, and Tim has lived with me for twelve years.”

“And in that week I’ve loved you enough to ask you to marry me. I’m thirty-two, and I’ve never asked that of a woman before.”

He made the vivid, impatient gesture I knew so well. “Quit thinking about Tim and me, and think about yourself. It’s a habit you really ought to cultivate. What has your life been with him?”

I answered honestly. “Adaptation. Compromise. The development of one half of me at the expense of another. And in spite of all that, a pleasant, gentle life with a man I’ve loved for a long time.”

“But not,” he insisted, “as you love me.”

“No; but this is very new. Wouldn’t our love, in time, come to mean habit and tolerance and gentleness—if we were lucky?”

“I doubt that. Has Tim ever known and respected and appreciated you as an individual, the way I’ve done? Have you ever even approached, with him, the mental unity you’ve known with me?”

I bent my head, unable to give the answer that you, Tim, would have wished to overhear.

“Then,” Duncan’s voice roughened, “I may have to use persuasion after all.”

His arms were stronger than I had felt them, and his mouth was almost savage. And in that interval I understood, for the first time in my life, the meaning of passion. It washed over me in a black, all-engulfing wave that receded at last, leaving my defenses scattered like driftwood on a beach. I saw for the first time how men and women under its influence may throw away life or safety or honor, and—for the moment at least—count them well lost.

When Duncan lifted his head his eyes were blazing. I lay still, too exhausted to draw away from him.

“Have you ever felt like that with Tim?” he demanded. “Have you ever *wanted* Tim like that?”

He was uncanny, and I was no match for his intelligence and intuition. But I could at least match his honesty.

“I’ve never wanted any man like that. I didn’t know I could. I thought—it had been left out of me. . . .”

“And you thought that the importance and beauty of physical love had been grossly exaggerated. That it was a figment in the minds of lechers and nymphomaniacs.”

“Yes.” And then I laughed, almost hysterically. “Damn you, Duncan, it’s indecent to understand a woman so well!”

His face grew gentle. “My darling, I love you.”

That seemed, in his opinion, to explain everything.

(I want you to know, Tim, that I was not then—and am not now—aware of any physical lack in you. That phase of our marriage has been perfect in its way: shared and satisfying, and marked by an unselfish gentleness and consideration on your part that must be very rare among men. I even feel that throughout one’s lifetime a relationship like ours may be more stable and more restful than the tumult I have known with Duncan. Ecstasy is rich fare for daily living. I have written this episode only because it may, in the end, tip the scales that I hold in an unsteady hand.)

He spoke again, with his eyes on the blue distances. “I’ve been pretty brutal, Lynn, in asking you to decide this overnight. I realize that now. You’ve got too much imagination to arrive at any important decision quickly; you see too well what it will mean to all three of us. Take it a little easier, and I’ll try to be patient. We’ve got almost a week left, thank God. . . .” His voice dropped.

I was conscious of a vast relief. Like any female, I wanted to eat my cake and have it. I wanted the warmth of Duncan’s love and companionship without the devilish necessity for making a permanent and soul-racking choice. I felt that he had granted me a week’s reprieve.

“I may be a fool and a coward, Duncan,” I moaned. “But if you force an answer now, it’s ‘no.’ ”

“I know it,” he admitted promptly. “That’s the reason for my generosity. Most generosity,” he added with a smile, “has its roots in selfishness, if we look deep enough.”

He put an arm around me and drew me towards him. “Lean back and relax, sweetheart. You’re strung up like a violin.”

But even as I leaned against him I knew—or thought I knew—that the answer would always be “no.” Perhaps I ought to have told him then; but, Tim, the thing was too beautiful to relinquish immediately. Life had taken on a new richness and intensity; there was a golden glow over the world and a sound of music in my ears. I know now that the very young can *never* really appreciate love, because they have not learned that life is usually a monochrome. Having no standard of comparison they cannot know the value and the transient beauty of the treasure they hold.

With all the blindness of an untutored adolescent, I had imagined that we could enjoy those last few days for themselves; that we could regard them as a fragment cleanly cut from the fabric of our lives; that we could turn our backs on the future and live in a present of our own making. I know now that I never seriously considered leaving you, Tim, until much later. In my heart I had already renounced Duncan, and I think he knew it and refused to accept it.

In the light of that unspoken decision my continued association with him takes on the color of infidelity, I admit. But I felt—wrongly, perhaps—that by my renunciation I had paid full price for two weeks out of a lifetime, and that I was entitled to those few days.

Foolishly I misjudged the strength and nature of our feeling. In an immature way—the way of twenty or twenty-one—I had loved one or two men before I married, and heaven knows I loved you; but I had never really wanted anyone. This unfamiliar hunger may have been the result of maturity, or it may have been because Duncan was of a different stripe; because he dared to recognize and admit the importance of passion in any real love.

He didn't thrust the fact upon me; he showed it to me, almost wordlessly. We swam the next morning, and as we lay in the sun afterwards, shivering still from the icy water, he raised himself on one elbow and looked at me deeply and significantly. Water glistened on his bare shoulders and his eyelashes; he seemed to radiate physical strength and vitality. Then slowly his eyes swept my body, with a look that could neither be misunderstood nor resented. There was hunger in the look, but not lust, and I felt my face growing hot with a knowledge of the hunger and my own response to it. I shut my eyes and turned my face until it was hidden in my arms, and his voice reached me as from a great distance.

“Oh, my darling. . . .”

He got up abruptly and plunged into the water. When I looked up he was far from the shore, swimming slowly and steadily as if he never meant to turn back.

When he rejoined me later he was smiling crookedly. “I feel better now,” he said, and lay down and closed his eyes.

I understood then that the desire for consummation of a deep and mature love is as natural and inevitable as sunrise. Duncan knew that I understood, and with that mutual comprehension our peace was shattered. The episode shook us both; and although we tried for a time to ignore it, we knew that

eventually we should have to face it.

We drove out the Mt. Masters highway the next evening and sat for an hour at the lookout, wrapped in solitude and an intimacy too deep for any groping words of mine. At eleven o'clock I stirred reluctantly and said:

“Duncan, we’ve got to go back. . . .”

He pressed the starter at once, and then withdrew his foot before the motor had caught.

“Lynn,” he muttered, “surely you know I don’t want to take you back—this way.”

I understood immediately, and there was neither shock nor revulsion in the understanding. Having been married for twelve years, I saw only too clearly the exorbitant price he was paying for this incomplete physical intimacy. I nodded slowly.

“Yes, I know. . . .”

“Then, must I?”

When I didn’t answer for a moment he continued thoughtfully.

“If you marry me, it would be just one other bond between us. If you don’t, I think we’re entitled to that much. God knows it’s little enough to last us a lifetime.”

In my mind I had already faced the issue and I had my answer ready.

“In theory, Duncan, it seems the natural, simple thing; something that concerns us and no one else. My *mind* is entirely convinced. But all the generations back of me, and all my training and instincts, refuse to accept the verdict of my mind.

“If I belonged to you now, I think one of two things would happen. Either the experience would be so complete and satisfying that I’d be unable to give you up, and I’d go with you even though I knew it would mean unhappiness for us both; or else I’d be aware of having betrayed my training and my nature so completely that the shame and remorse would wreck me. When you’ve lived an entirely *conventional* life for thirty-four years, as I have, your life becomes set in a mold that can’t be destroyed without destroying you, too. I’m refusing, not for moral reasons, but from cowardice.”

He said bluntly: “That’s not surprising. Nine-tenths of our morality is rooted in fear rather than in essential goodness. But do you honestly think,” he searched my face, “that belonging to me would make you feel *shame* afterwards? Lynn, I can’t believe that!”

“No,” I confessed, “I don’t think it would. I feel so close to you now that consummation is only a half-step further. I could easily believe that it’s already happened, except that I wouldn’t feel this gnawing hunger if it had.”

“Then if that’s the case, you’re refusing for fear you couldn’t give me up—afterwards.”

“I suppose I am.”

His face was like marble in the dimness. “What if I took you anyhow? I could, knowing what you’ve just told me.”

“Yes; but you won’t. If you did, you know I might hate you afterwards for having made me betray myself. The decision has to be my own.”

He laughed harshly. “Damn you, Lynn, for a too-logical being.”

I sat as far from him as I could, so that he wouldn’t know how I was trembling.

“And yet you admired that quality in the beginning.”

“I know I did. Curiously enough, I still do. But let’s get back to the issue. If you’re afraid of discovering that you can’t live without me, shouldn’t you make the experiment and let that decide the question for you?”

“No. It’s Tim who decides it. It may seem incredible in view of my behavior, but Tim’s happiness is more important to me than yours or mine. You see, I’m responsible for his.”

“Nobody is responsible for anybody’s happiness,” he said shortly. “That’s a sop to your own vanity.”

“What about the fact that no man liveth to himself. . . .”

“A fallacy. Man is completely alone in life and death. No one can help him or save him except himself.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said flatly. “Both you and Tim have the power to hurt me horribly, and I can do the same to you. You’ve just admitted it.”

“But whether I survive or go under depends entirely on myself. Everyone’s alone at the center of his being.”

“Perhaps. But only the introspective and damned, like us, ever realize what the center of their being looks alike. The rest live and die dependent upon outward circumstances and influences, without ever getting beneath their own surfaces.”

We could have argued until dawn, and so I said again: “We’ve got to go back, Duncan. I’ll have to take off my shoes and slip in the back way, as it is.”

He smiled grimly. “On the contrary, you’d better tramp noisily up the front steps. It’s better for the neighbors to hear you come in late than not to hear you

come in at all.” His face contorted with pain. “Damn it, Lynn, I hate this secrecy! I want to post a bulletin, telling the world I love you.”

I didn’t dare let him see how much that meant to me. “It’s the penalty, my dearest, for an illicit love.”

“But I don’t feel illicit!”

“Neither do I,” I admitted. “But that’s because I’ve kept the other half of my life at bay up to now. By this time next week I may feel like the woman taken in adultery. Start the car, Duncan. . . .”

(If you read this, Tim, I suppose you will find a thin solace in the fact that Duncan never possessed me physically so long as I was your wife. The thing is relatively unimportant, and the tremendous moral significance attached to physical intimacy now seems to me irrational. I may be wrong, but the fact that Duncan had had my body should not be nearly so important as the completeness with which he invaded my spirit. Possession would have given us a brief release; as it is I shall—if I give him up—long for that release for many months to come.

And yet, knowing you, I realize that as your wife I might even tell you most of this in some distant future, and still maintain a fairly stable and satisfactory relationship with you. Whereas the admission that I had been—I believe the phrase is “technically unfaithful”—would wreck all our chances for happiness.

And that was what I meant by the possibility of remorse. The remorse would never have been for my act in itself, but for its certain effect upon you if by any chance you discovered it. And so I deserve no credit for my refusal: it was, as Duncan pointed out, the result of a more obscure and complex motive than mere goodness.)

When I read these pages it sounds as if Duncan had absorbed my entire two weeks at Altamont; but that was not the case, Tim. As I told you, I have pruned this story to its essentials, and other people have no importance here. Many of our meetings were intolerably brief; wedged between the endless hours I spent with my friends. I marvel at his patience in the face of my later timidity, for Duncan is not habitually a patient man. Where I accepted invitations and returned social obligations, he declined everything on the plea that he was working, and stayed close by the telephone so that he might know when I was free.

More than once I came back to the inn from an engagement and almost ran across the lobby to reach a telephone. And always Duncan's voice waited for me, quick with eagerness.

"I thought you'd never phone. I'll be right over."

And more than once I had to connive. "The rocking chair brigade is out in full force, my dear. I'll walk towards the village. . . ."

On such occasions as that I was filled with remorse for what I was costing him. But invariably he reassured me.

"Did I interrupt your work?" I asked anxiously, the first time we had met this way.

He smiled faintly. "In the last few hours I've covered a dozen sheets of paper with intricate geometrical figures. The titans of literature have become pigmies: it doesn't matter whether they survive or not."

"Oh, Duncan! I'm so desperately sorry."

His hand tightened over mine. "Why? It's much more important to live books than to write them: too many people write them, anyhow. How much time have we, sweetheart?"

Time was my mortal enemy in those days. Most of the hours creaked rustily, shackled by my impatience; the few that I spent with him ended before they had begun.

"Only thirty or forty minutes, I'm afraid. I've got to go out for dinner. . . ."

But my caution and his consideration were the factors that enabled us to be so intimate in such an unobtrusive way, and if I stay with you, Tim, you will be—unknowingly, I hope and pray—forever in his debt.

He made no further attempt to break down my resistance, and I loved him the more for his restraint. He might easily have succeeded in a second attempt; he might even have created in me an illusion of consent. For a woman's body is like a musical instrument, from which the skilled artist can evoke any mood or melody he chooses. And from my own experience, my mind held no room for doubt of Duncan's skill.

But when I intimated as much he shook his head and smiled.

"Don't endow me with virtues I haven't got. I've told you that morality is nine parts cowardice. If you weren't intelligent I'd probably take advantage of you: chivalry becomes unimportant to me in a matter of life and death. But the stake is too big to be jeopardized by any immediate need of mine. I'll take what you're willing to give—and be grateful for it."

And then skillfully he shifted to a lighter mood, easing the tension because reality was too harsh to be faced until separation forced it on us.

“But I may as well warn you,” he said with a twinkle, “that if you turn me down I intend to plunge into a life of excess that will make Casanova tremble for his laurels.”

“And by your own reasoning,” I said with a calmness I didn’t feel, “the blame for that will rest with you and not with me.”

He laughed. “The round is yours. I never thought to be condemned by my own logic.” He continued to smile but his eyes were grave.

“Oh, Lynn; what you and I could make of life . . .”

I dared not dwell on that, because I was afraid he might be right.

Our last evening was almost unbearable. I dined with Margaret and Jim Torrance, but I had explained in advance that I must leave early in order to pack and get a night’s rest. I made my escape at ten, and Duncan came a few minutes later.

We drove in silence to the lookout, but when the motor was stilled he turned to me with an air of purposeful finality.

“I know by this time that you’re not going to decide yet, Lynn—at least, not in my favor. All I ask is that you don’t decide in Tim’s favor either, for a while.”

“When I go home, Duncan,” I confessed, “all this will probably seem as beautiful and unreal as a dream. Home has a way of enveloping one like a cloak.”

“It may have done that before,” he said without hesitation, “but it won’t this time. I’ll be with you every minute of the day: I may even be more real to you than I am now.”

I shivered. “Dear God; I hope not!”

“Wait and see,” he insisted. “You think it will be easy to forget me, but nothing like this has ever happened to you. The part of you that loves me has never really been awake before; it’s suffered all your life from malnutrition. But you’ll have a hard time killing it now.”

“I know that,” I murmured. “There’s something of Lot’s wife in every woman. Staying with Tim, I’ll look longingly back at you; if I went with you, I’d look longingly back at Tim.”

He took my hand and held it against his face. “That being true, you’ve got to come with me, because this half of you is so much more worth saving. You may not believe me, but I’m fighting for you as much as for myself.”

He went on quietly, after touching my palm with his lips.

“You’ve got to forget, first of all, your imagined ‘obligation.’ By your own admission, your life has been one of compromise and adaptation to Tim’s tastes and habits. I can guess, too, a lot that you’ve been too loyal to tell me. I can guess that the compromise and adaptation have been all on your side, for Tim’s type never concedes an inch. And that you’ve been a shock absorber for twelve years. You’re wise and strong, and all his troubles have been poured into your ears; you’ve taken them to yourself and eased the burden for him. To the best of your ability—and it’s a pretty considerable ability, my darling—you’ve handed him life on a silver tray.”

I told you, Tim, that he was uncanny. Much of his surmise was true; the rest I disagreed with.

“What I’ve done is nothing more than a fulfillment of my contract,” I objected. “Don’t overlook the fact that Tim has encountered most of those difficulties in an effort to provide for me.”

“A man works first, Lynn, for his own satisfaction. Providing for his family is only secondary, and even that has in it a measure of vanity.”

“I wonder. In any case, the family profits by it. I certainly have.”

“Financially, yes. But wouldn’t you trade a lot of the physical comfort for a little more mental and spiritual companionship?” He smiled grimly. “I’m arguing my own cause. I’ll never be as rich as Tim will.”

“That doesn’t enter into it,” I said quickly. “I hadn’t even considered that aspect of it with either of you.”

He touched my hand again gently. “I know you hadn’t, bless you.”

Suddenly he took me wholly into his arms. “Oh, God, Lynn; I love you so! And I want you to be happy. I swear I do.”

I held him close. “I doubt if anybody is really happy, Duncan, except in rare moments. I’m not even sure it’s important. Certainly you can’t achieve it by running wildly around hunting for it, or by examining yourself under a microscope to see if you’ve got it. All you can do,” I smiled, because I sounded so much like Elsie Dinsmore, “is to live your life to the hilt.”

He caught at that, as I had known he would. “And that’s what you’ve never done. You’ve lived only half of yours.”

“And I’d live only another half with you.” I stroked his hair and thought: I must remember all of you; how you look and feel and smell. . . . Tomorrow it’s all I’ll have left. . . . “You don’t believe in the rest of me because you’ve never seen it; but it’s just as real as the part you know. More real, perhaps.

“You see,” I stumbled in my effort to find the words I wanted, “no one

person can be the whole of life to another; no one person can feed every hunger of another personality. Part of us is always unsatisfied. I suppose the only completely integrated life is that of the rare individual who finds himself—and loses himself—in some engrossing work; for whom work is the whole of life. Great artists can do that, perhaps; and great scientists. Small souls have to—tighten their belts instead. . . .”

He looked at me steadily. “I wonder if you’ve got any idea of what you mean to me? When I think of finding you—and then perhaps losing you—I could shake my fist at heaven.”

The moment was intolerable, because I felt the same of him. I laughed, but the sound broke in half.

“I know very well what I am. One of the small fry, engaged right now in taking another notch in my belt. Kiss me, Duncan, and then we must go back.”

But we couldn’t say goodbye that night, when a fragment of another day was left to us.

“I’m coming over in the morning,” he warned me, “and let the chips fall where they will.”

I shook my head. “Somebody will probably stop in to see me off. Drive down the mountain three miles, and turn off the highway at a little church.”

He laughed gently. “Do you know every rendezvous in the Blue Ridge, sweetheart? I’m beginning to be suspicious.”

I smiled. “I have no idea where the road goes; I’ve only seen it as I passed. But it’s quiet and shady, and I’ve often wondered what becomes of it.”

That was where I left him, Tim, the next morning. I almost wished I hadn’t promised, because his face was too white and the shadows beneath his eyes too dark. As for my own face: I had taken one brief look at the mirror that morning—and shuddered!

I can write only a few of the things we said at the last; the rest belong to no one but Duncan and me. I shall remember them as long as I live, but I shall never put them on paper.

He smiled faintly as he helped me back into my car. “You haven’t seen the last of me, sweet. I’ll stay here through August—if I can stand it—and I’ll give you those two weeks at the beach for comparison. If you don’t send for me I’ll come anyhow—just a summer acquaintance passing through town—and make you tell me face to face that you’ve decided once and for all.”

I had sworn I wouldn’t cry, but I had flattered myself. He was only a blur through my tears.

Not even Duncan was proof against a weeping woman. His control snapped for the first time since I had known him and he said hoarsely:

“God *in heaven*, Lynn; if you cry I’ll come with you now, and have it out with Tim whether you like it or not! I can’t stand this; you’ll drive off the road and be lost to both of us!”

That steadied me, as he had probably known it would. I stiffened my spine.

“I’m all right now. I swear I am. Duncan, my darling—darling. . . .”

But I couldn’t finish the sentence. I started the car, and as I drove away he was standing motionless, with sunlight bright on his hair. . . .

Part II

THE SEA

THE SEA

HERETOFORE, AS I HAVE TURNED MY face towards home after several days of absence, my thoughts have also turned. Home has rushed forward to meet me, enmeshing me again in all the ties and associations that I have snapped in leaving it. Heretofore, having turned my face towards home, I have begun to worry about all the things that may have happened there; small accidents or inconveniences that you in your consideration may have kept from me.

I think first of you, Tim, because you hate letters and rarely write to me while I am away. "If anything goes wrong," you insist, "I promise I'll let you know. When you don't hear from me you'll know everything's going smoothly." But like any wife, I have a smug conviction that things cannot possibly be quite right in my absence, and invariably I am chagrined by the discovery that they not only can be, but usually are.

I think too of Laurette; and wonder whether she has been faithful to her trust (as if Laurette could be anything else); and whether she has managed you as you need managing. Or of Philander, whom I suspect of sparing himself and spoiling the hose. (Usually I am right on that count.) Or of Sandy, whose itching foot may one day lead him beneath the wheels of a speeding car. But we have respected Sandy's intelligence and independence, and credited him with a desire for a short life and a good one, rather than for the smothering monotony of an enclosed runway.

But this homecoming was different, as Duncan had known it would be. This time my thoughts were all with him, and with the things I had meant to say to him. (Tragically enough, the best and most satisfying conversations that one ever holds with a lover are conducted in the lover's absence; his presence makes one feel too deeply for coherent speech.) I was tuned to a higher pitch of awareness than I have ever known, and the least fragment of beauty awoke an aching desire to share it with him.

I drove slowly so long as I was in the mountains, reluctant to quit the surroundings that would always suggest him to me. But heat rose from the

foothills to meet me; grinding, vitiating heat that quivered visibly in the air. The tempo of living slowed to a sluggish crawl, and in the fields beside the highway Negroes chopped cotton with weary detachment. I increased my speed until the needle vibrated at sixty-five, and held it there; feeling little, thinking less. Deliberately I reduced myself to a machine with a task to be accomplished.

I reached the house soon after three o'clock and saw it—not as my home, but as a temporary refuge from heat and brilliance. The lawn was vividly green and part of my mind thought indifferently: It must have rained while I was away. . . .

You were not there, of course (I was to call you as soon as I arrived) but Laurette heard the car and came hurrying out, still tying the strings of a fresh white apron.

“Come in outa that heat, Miss Lynn. You look kinda tuckered.”

“I am. I haven't been able to breathe for hours. I want a gallon of cold water.”

The house seemed cool at first, but that, I knew, was only by contrast. Later its walls would press against me. It was immaculately clean, and it exuded an atmosphere of serenity and prosperity.

It's a nice house, I thought—still indifferently; better than Duncan could afford. . . . But the thought brought me no comfort, for a house derives its value from the people who live there.

Sandy yipped wildly at the door, having heard by the mysterious grapevine of dogdom that I had arrived, and having raced heaven knows how far to welcome me. We exchanged greetings in which he assured me that things had gone badly with him but that he was feeling more sanguine already.

I sat wearily on a couch and drank the water Laurette brought, and knew that Duncan had been right. He was here beside me; he had invaded the sacred precincts of your home and mine; his quiet, clipped voice was asking: “Now are you convinced?”

I went quickly to the telephone and called you, Tim.

Your voice grew warm with pleasure and the sound brought me home at last. You ceased to be an obstacle and became instead the focal point of my existence.

“Are you all right?” you asked eagerly. “Not worn out?”

“I'm tired and dirty, but all I need is a shower and some clean clothes. Hurry, Tim.”

You laughed. “Don't worry. There's a salesman waiting for me, but I'll get

rid of him in short order. Lie down and try to catch a nap until I get there.”

I lay down, but sleep was out of the question. Until I had seen you and touched you I was still a house divided against itself, and Duncan was nearer than you were. I gave up the attempt to banish him, excusing myself with the thought that I should not be really at home until you came; that I could keep him in my heart for a few minutes longer.

The screen door banged at last; your voice said, “Hi, fella!” to Sandy, and your feet hurried towards me.

You were as hot and tired as I had been, but you were sanctuary. I said, “Hi, yourself, tramp!” in a voice that shook a little, and you leaned over and kissed me heartily.

I had then the sensation that comes to familiars only after a separation: for the moment I saw you objectively, as a stranger. Saw your smile and your strong, irregular teeth; noticed how absurdly long your eyelashes were. I recaptured something of the earlier thrill of loving you, and clung to the illusion with both hands, knowing that very soon the strangeness and clarity would be submerged in habit.

You said, “Gosh, I’m glad to see you!” and added plaintively: “I can’t get close to you yet; I even smell bad. God, but it’s hot!”

You went to the door and shouted, “Laurette! A couple of juleps, and do your stuff on ’em,” and began flinging off your clothes as unselfconsciously as a child. A moment later you were whistling and splashing beneath the shower.

We sipped the juleps, lying almost naked on our beds, while an electric fan purred on the floor. I told you much of what I had done (I couldn’t yet speak of Duncan in the casual tone I should need) and you told me what had happened in the mill.

“I’ve been lucky so far about outside agitators,” you added, “but the bastards are closing in on me. And when they do, there’ll be the devil to pay. The fools can’t see that I’m running the mill right now just to keep ’em alive, and that I’d welcome an excuse to shut down until I can sell out what I’ve got on hand. It’s a damned shame, too, because the majority don’t want any trouble; a lot of ’em don’t even like being in the union. Unions beat anything I ever saw, anyhow; once you’re in ’em the only way you can get out is to die out.”

You leaned over and kissed me and your mouth was suddenly urgent. Although I tightened inwardly, I think my mouth was responsive, but you sensed with your exquisite consideration that I wasn’t yet ready.

“Well,” you said with a convincing yawn, “I’d better get up and dress before I’m sound asleep. . . . By the way, Emily and Dan Waring want us to

have dinner with them if you're not too tired. They suggested bridge, but I said it was too hot, and why didn't we go to the club and swim instead. Do just as you like, though."

Ordinarily I should have been reluctant to spend my first evening with outsiders. You are always glad to be with people; you are never entirely alive except in a crowd; while I prefer an evening of solitude now and then. But tonight I was glad of those others because they would allow me less time for thought.

"That'll be grand," I said. "I'll phone Emily right away."

And so we went to the Warings' and from there to the club, where we swam in milk-warm water and laughed loudly at nothing.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Emily shouted at me—although there was no necessity for shouting, "we're going to Ocean City too—for the same two weeks that you're going. Isabel's loaned us her cottage while she's in Canada."

"Grand!" I said, and you grinned delightedly.

"Say, that's swell! We'll have to get together."

Ocean City, I knew, would only be Argyll in beach clothes and beach manners: we would do the same things, and see the same people, that we see here. But I had had my vacation—with a vengeance—and this was to be yours. I nodded.

"Of course. Isabel's cottage isn't but a block or two from the hotel."

When we went home that night, Tim, your gentle urgency was not to be denied. I consented willingly, in an effort to atone for what I had taken from you; and searching my heart I could find nothing in it but tenderness for you. If I turned my face away afterwards to hide my tears, it was from no distaste for you, but only because I longed so desperately to grant the boon of a similar release to Duncan; because I guessed that his need of that release was even greater, perhaps, than yours.

And later, when you slept with your face against my shoulder, I felt nothing but a passionate desire to protect you from my own disloyalty and weakness.

The next three days were spent in preparation for our trip, and you were like a small boy waiting for Christmas. You passed hours with your fishing tackle; sorting and re-sorting it; now and then emitting a howl of rage when

you thought some item was not in its proper place.

“*Where the devil is my new minnow?*” And then, under your breath: “Oh, I remember. . . .”

We resurrected our disreputable beach clothes and dumped them into a laundry bag, for no self-respecting individual would dare to dress well at Ocean City except during weekends. Sandy was going with us, but all our reassurances could not convince him permanently: he went from one to the other of us, wagging a hopeful, ingratiating tail, and had to be told, “Yes, Mac; you’re going too,” again and again. Each time he received the news with ecstatic bounds, and each time doubt assailed him when the exodus didn’t begin immediately. It was a pleasant, bustling interval—the more welcome because it allowed me little time for remembering.

And then the drive across the state to Ocean City, and the look in your eyes when we caught the first faint breath of salt-laden air. Your passion for the sea, Tim, is one of the most lovable and poignant things I know. Sentenced for and by life to the dust and noise of a cotton mill you go cheerfully and successfully about your business; but the real Timothy Sheldon comes to the surface within sight and smell of the sea. You turned to me, as you have turned so many times in twelve years, with glowing eyes.

“Smell it!” you exulted. “Just *smell* it!”

And as always, I caught from you a vision of the sea’s true meaning and fascination.

There are many milestones in our annual pilgrimage. The liveoaks that stand guard over still, black water; and wear moss like the hair on dead old women. That first breath of salt-touched air; the first expanse of marsh land; the first brackish, stagnant backwater; the first resonant “Whoop, whoop . . .” of a freighter. And finally, that frail blue line that merges with the horizon, seeming more an illusion than a reality.

And as always, seeing that dim blue line, you turned on me a look of complete fulfillment.

“There she is!”

Yes, Tim, our annual approach to the sea has always taken on for me the quality of a spiritual experience. I was passionately glad to discover that not even the memory of Duncan could dull the intensity of that experience. Men like Duncan Rhodes pay a price for the mental discipline they impose upon themselves, and the name of that price is simplicity. Only the simple (and there is none of the commonly accepted derogation implicit in the true meaning of that word)—only the simple can know emotion in its purest form. In that, you are more fortunate than he or I.

We reached the hotel half an hour later, and immediately you began to bustle like a sitting hen. I left the details of our disembarkation to you, knowing that they were part of a ritual, and that you were delighted even with the drudgery.

The hotel is a hotel only by courtesy and affection; away from the sea it would be a second-rate boarding house. Sand grinds beneath our feet as we walk; the walls are unceiled, so that every sound carries with a disconcerting frankness; the beds are thin and dispirited, and have a musty, salty smell that would be unendurable elsewhere. There is a lavatory in each room and a bath to each wing; but comfort, in your opinion, is not only vitiating but incompatible with a true vacation.

We unpacked feverishly and sketchily because the sea was beckoning, and left the tidying process for another time—a time, incidentally, that never comes.

“Hurry up,” you urged. “I want to get out while there’s some sun left.”

I began to feel driven. “Go on without me, then. I can’t find that damned bathing cap, and I’ll never find it as long as you stand on one foot like a stork and put the evil eye on me!”

Ordinarily your temper would have flared, but today you only grinned and began to rummage with me.

“Here it is,” you announced triumphantly, “inside an evening slipper. Looks to me like any sap would’ve known to look there first of all.”

I laughed, “Oh, go to hell!” and reached for something to throw at you, but already you were halfway down the hall.

There is one more milestone in our trip that I forgot to mention—or perhaps it is the goal. And that is the cool, fresh caress of the surf as it tiptoes forward to wrap itself about our ankles. You say, “The water’s cool today,” or, “Warm, isn’t it?” in the tone of one who makes a world-shattering discovery, and I agree eagerly and rush to meet it.

This time, as in times past, Sandy accompanied us as far as his short legs would allow, and even swam a few feet, his small body buffeted like a cork. I cried, “That’s far enough, Mac. Go on back!” and he gave me a reproachful look and obeyed. But the shore has its fascinations too, and Sandy has never learned that sandpipers cannot be caught by fat black dogs. His untiring pursuit should perhaps point a moral for weaker spirits than his.

The breakers were perfect that afternoon; high and slow and surprisingly gentle. We rode them for a long time, whooping like children on a rollercoaster, and when a marcher in the eternal procession caught us off guard and knocked us forward on our faces we whooped even louder, for that was

part of the game.

The sun was still warm when we staggered out and dropped face down on our beach towels. You breathed, “Gosh, that’s great!” and Sandy pattered over to welcome us back to earth, then returned hopefully to the chase.

After a few moments of silence you lifted your head to gaze inquiringly at me.

“Happy?”

I nodded. “Perfectly. There’s no need to ask about you.”

“Nope.”

(Examining my heart, Tim, I think I gave you an honest answer. I *was* happy—then. I loved you, and I was sharing a deep, clean pleasure with you. You are at your best in such moments and your best is very good. Not articulate, but genuine and wholesome; characterized by a sort of poetic beauty and unity. It was only when you had dragged in the rest of our world that my answer—which I would have made quite as promptly—would have been dishonest.)

You rested on one elbow and swept the bathers with a careful look. “See anybody you know?”

It had come already, and our moment had passed. You wanted companions—reinforcements in the pursuit of pleasure—and it was a matter of hours before you would find them. They might be our friends or they might be strangers—who would qualify as friends after the first two drinks.

I wanted to cry out in terror: “Make this vacation different, Tim! Make me feel, as Duncan did, that I alone am sufficient; that you haven’t yet married me, and want me more than anything in the world. . . . I’ll bring in those other people myself, if only you’ll protest that you don’t need them. If only you’ll make me remember that you love me. . . .”

But I couldn’t say it, and how could you know what I wanted? For twelve years you had given me your heart and your loyalty and the fruits of your work, and for sensible married people that was sufficient; it needed neither gestures nor protestations. How could you know that I had left common sense in a cottage at Pinnacle Inn?

And so I answered your question as cheerfully as I could. “Not a soul, sister Ann.”

You lay down again. “Well, we’ll drive up after dinner and see the Warings. Maybe we can stir up a little excitement.”

A chilly breeze swept the beach, and something wet and icy brushed my neck. I sat up in terror and saw Sandy, with his tongue lolling and his sides

heaving. He wagged his dripping tail.

“Damn you, McNasty,” I cried. “Sound your horn before you do that again!”

He looked crestfallen, and you rolled over and stared at me in astonishment. I patted him apologetically, explaining that his caress has startled me.

I couldn't explain, of course, that my anger was not for Sandy but for a scheme of things that I was powerless to alter.

As a concession to freedom we had two drinks before dinner, instead of the one we take at home. While we dressed we quarrelled good-naturedly over space in the minute closet and on the shelf above the lavatory.

“Looks like you could've left me at least *two* coat-hangers,” you complained, and I retaliated swiftly.

“It looks like you could've left at least enough room for my toothbrush. For a male without vanity you do carry more excess paraphernalia. . . .”

“Yeah, and by tomorrow you'll be borrowing most of it.”

“Why not? If I'd brought my own, we'd have to sleep in the hall!”

And then we looked at each other and laughed.

“How about another short one?” you suggested, but I shook my head.

“I'm starving. Besides, the night's young yet.”

“Oke. Come on then, glutton.”

We ate at a long table, boarding-house style; consuming quantities and combinations of food that would have ruined us under normal conditions: shrimp cocktails, devilled crabs, fried bluefish and grits, generous slabs of lemon pie. We found one couple at our table who we knew would “do,” estimating them in the swift, intuitive way of people with their own kind. The four of us discovered mutual acquaintances in North and South Carolina and the acquaintances stood sponsor for us all. Their names were Mike and Celia Hardy, but the surname was superfluous: we called them Mike and Celia immediately, as Southerners do, and forgot they had another name.

They were definite and rather ordinary types. Mike was big and breezy, with a ready laugh for his own or another's wit. He called me “darling” or “beautiful,” and put his arm across my shoulders when he stood beside me. There was, I suppose, a certain animal attraction about him: he exuded male vitality and his sensual mouth was beautifully modelled, and flanked by an

incongruous dimple that invariably surprised me. He was from Merville, North Carolina, and he sold cotton, which made you and him brothers in the bond.

Celia, who was several years younger than the rest of us, was small and dark and arch, with a childish prettiness; but I knew, being also a woman, that she was as predatory as her pointed, blood-red fingernails. She annexed you at once, as she had probably annexed males since she was ten, and assumed with a disarming naïveté that in our future excursions you would belong to her and that Mike would fall to me. I knew her type well—and disliked it—but she would never, I felt, be important enough to merit the compliment of my jealousy. In view of our later argument you may find that hard to believe, but to me Celia was always a symbol of futility rather than an individual.

You invited them, in your expansive way, to accompany us to the Warings', and they accepted immediately. "You'll like Dan and Emily," you assured them largely, as if you yourself had fashioned the Warings and made them perfect. They were equally ready to like Dan and Emily, but I suspected that they were in a mood to like anybody and that they might, with a few more drinks, be equally ready to dislike anybody. (In that I was wrong. Their good humor survived every test, including drunkenness.) They attached themselves to us that night and it came as no surprise to me when I learned, three days later, that they had prolonged their visit another week in order that their departure might coincide with ours.

To walk along the beach by night is another thrilling experience for both of us. The surf is furtive and strange then—a black mystery ruffled with white foam—and now and then a small silver shape is left stranded, and struggles wildly to overtake the retreating water. I should have preferred walking only with you, but not even the Hardys, I vowed, should spoil this pleasure for me.

We strode gaily along, talking of people and places; discovering mutual tastes. They played bridge and poker; they expected to do some fishing; they were looking forward to dancing at the Casino tomorrow night. . . . In a word, they were exactly what you had hoped to find.

The Waring cottage was ablaze with lights, and a radio blared swing music that pitted its strength against the roaring surf and came off victorious. I realized with a brief regret that I should have to drink too much, because the pattern of the evening called for it. There was quietness and emptiness within me, and quietness was not the order of a time like this. The thought of Duncan swam across my mind, but his face was dim and his voice was drowned in the uproar.

We tramped noisily up the porch steps, and you cried, "Ship ahoy!" and flung open the door. Screams and shouts of welcome greeted us, although we

had seen Dan and Emily only two days ago. But we were on foreign soil now, and the meeting took on the exaggerated importance of a miracle. Fred and Louise Hepburn were there, and when we had exchanged greetings you presented the Hardys with a flourish.

“Two castaways we found at the hotel. They know how to play poker and drink like Southern gentlemen so we brought ’em along.”

The din was deafening. Everybody talked at once, and the women’s voices were high and shrill. (I have never understood the basis for our national belief that Southern women have soft voices. In reality most of them are the thinnest in America. Untidy voices, it seems to me. . . .)

“When’d you get in?” Dan asked, and we told him in unison. (I had caught the fever too, by that time.)

“Drove over in four hours and ten minutes,” you added proudly.

“How’d you come?” Dan asked, not really caring.

“By Elmwood and Hartsboro. Less traffic that way.”

We disposed ourselves about the living-room. Celia began to tell Dan in a plaintive voice how she had nearly *died* of boredom until she found us.

“Nobody from home’s here,” she explained, “and we couldn’t find anybody congenial to play around with.”

She smiled upward at him, and Dan rose to the smile. “We’ll take care of that in the future. This is headquarters for the gang.” He sprang to his feet. “Good Lord, I’m neglecting my social duties! Who’s ready for a drink?”

Everybody, it seemed, was ready. I dislike drinking immediately after dinner and so do you, as a rule; but this was a holiday. I accepted with the rest of you, and wondered in passing if we had remembered to pack the seltzer tablets, and if the shrimps and crabs would rest quietly between layers of alcohol.

“What’ve you all got on for the evening?” you asked. “We don’t want to interrupt any plans.”

Dan gestured largely. “There weren’t any plans until you came. We were going to play bridge in desperation. Now we can shoot a little poker.”

We threw ourselves into the game with feverish gaiety. (Nothing is more pathetic to me, Tim, than the avidity with which an American pursues pleasure on a vacation. He is determined to have a good time if it kills him—and it very nearly does. He has never learned that true enjoyment is wary: it comes softly and stealthily, when we least expect it, and flees from clutching hands.)

Celia sat beside you, and smiled through skillfully darkened lashes. “You probably play a lot of games I’ve never even heard of, so you’ll have to help

me, Tim.”

You grinned warmly. “Don’t worry. I’ll see that these barracuda don’t take your shirt.”

She giggled. “I hope not. I haven’t got on anything under it!”

She was the sort, I knew then, who would toss off a casual allusion to herself in her bath or in her nightgown, shrewdly aware of the mental images thus evoked; and toss it off in the small, ingenuous voice of a child. The trick is one of the oldest and most dependable in the feminine bag, but only a female recognizes it—and a true female knows better than to give it away. In your innocence you laughed at the remark as a witticism, and failed to visualize a shirtless Celia.

I evaded Mike (who, I suspected, would press a heavy knee against mine beneath the table) and sat beside Dan. I am fond of Dan; he has a swift mind and a Rabelaisian wit that are gradually being dulled by alcohol; but on rare occasions when I surprise him with his defenses down I have the feeling that he drinks to deaden the sense of futility that is corroding him.

You grinned across the table at me. “I’ll stake you, mama. I know you forgot your pocketbook.”

The patronage irritated me. “I didn’t forget it; I left it at home purposely, because I didn’t know I’d need it. I’ll pay you when I get home, if it takes my last cent.”

You pushed a stack of chips across the table and chuckled. “What’s the difference? It all comes out of the same pocketbook.”

I laughed, but my answer was tart. “Oh, I earn it, darling. Don’t kid yourself about that.”

Mike gave me a significant look. I realized with a hot discomfort that he had put his own interpretation on my answer, and that the interpretation was repellent.

“I’ll bet you do,” he assured me.

Dan was dealing to expose the first jack. It fell to me and he passed me the cards.

“Your deal, Lynn. Give ’em fits.”

The pattern of the evening ran true. We all smoked incessantly, until the air was thick and blue. Luck shifted erratically, and Dan muttered the old simile, “As homeless as a poker chip. . . .” There were frequent breaks in the circle: “Deal me out; I’m gonna take a little drink. . . .” or, “Time out; I’ve got to see a man about a dog. . . .” Or Celia, with a self-conscious giggle: “Where’s the

ladies' powder room, Emily?"

Outside, the surf flung itself against the beach; a waning moon rose distorted and eerie; clean salt air blew off the Atlantic and retreated, beaten by the thickness within the cottage. Dan drew out his fourth bill and moaned, "Jesus! This is such slow bleedin'," and Celia held whispered consultations with you, Tim, about her hands.

"Look at this, Tim, and tell me what I've got. I'm so dumb I can't read it."

You read it for her, gallantly. "You're looking down their throats. Kick it five. . . ."

I took three small drinks, spacing them carefully in an effort to bring myself back to the cottage; but only my body was there. My heart was far away, and my mind sat apart and watched us all contemptuously. I encountered Dan's look now and then, and found it fraught with a meaning I could not fathom. I think that Dan, of all the people there, guessed something of what I was feeling; but Dan was almost drunk and his eyes were not to be trusted. He may have been merely trying to keep his head steady.

By midnight I had reached the limit of my endurance.

"I'm not even semi-conscious," I announced flatly. "How about calling around?"

You were exhausted too, because we had risen early, finished our packing, and driven two hundred miles. But you never know when you are physically beaten; that insatiable urge for excitement carries you far beyond your strength. And you always look reproachfully at me when I suggest putting an end to anything; you forget that even pleasure is intensified by curtailment.

Celia added her voice to mine. "I think maybe we'd better. We've got to be fresh and beautiful for the dance tomorrow night."

The round ended half an hour later. Dan said, "Who'll have a nightcap?" and we crowded around the buffet and tossed off one more drink before we said good night.

Celia was childlike in her appreciation of the Waring hospitality. With the single-mindedness of her kind she had ignored Emily during the evening, but now she went to her with outstretched hands.

"You were *darling* to let Mike and me come," she said, overlooking the fact that Emily had had no choice in the matter. "It's the first time we've really had any fun since we got here."

Emily accepted her hands and smiled warmly. "We're so glad you came. You'll have to make this headquarters from now on. We'll get up a big crowd for the dance tomorrow."

Celia gave the impression of a little girl clapping her hands. “That’ll be *grand*. It’s so much more fun when you’ve got your own crowd.”

We strolled home along the silvery, beaten sand. Celia was in front with you, Tim, although I grant you the maneuver was hers and not yours, and her arm was slipped trustingly through yours. Mike put a heavy arm around my shoulders and I left it there for a moment, because he was a little drunk and apt to be volatile of temper. But when his hand slipped lower and brushed against my breast I rebelled. I pulled away and drew his arm through mine as the lesser of two evils.

“It’s better walking this way,” I explained casually.

He was not deceived, but he accepted the rebuff good-naturedly. “Okay, beautiful. Just as you say.”

And then, to my astonishment, he began to sing. The song was a current ballad; cheap and sugary and trite; but the voice was incongruously lovely against the murmur of the out-going tide. When he had finished I stopped and stared at him.

“Why, Mike! Your voice is beautiful.”

(It was beautiful, Tim. I think that even you sensed its quality, although you have little fondness for music. It was a tenor and entirely untrained, but it was sweet and flexible and remarkably true. If you learn my true feeling about that two weeks and wonder why I endured Mike when I felt as I did, you will know now that it was partly because of his voice. I will not believe that a man possessed of such a voice could possibly be so crude and animalistic as he sometimes seemed. I prefer to think that somewhere in Mike Hardy there was another man: an artist who might have developed in a different land and under different standards. I may be wrong; a voice like his may be as accidental as a harelip. Artistic ability has been known to choose strange dwelling places before this. But that was the reason for my amiable acquiescence.)

He shrugged deprecatingly at my honest enthusiasm. “It might have been. Now it’s just another whiskey tenor.”

“But why haven’t you done anything with it?”

“Because mama has to have shoes. I sing in the Shrine quartet at home,” he added defensively, as if there were justification of a sort.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. But that, I knew, might be the result of too many drinks. I took his arm and walked on.

“Sing something else.”

He sang—all the way to the hotel. You and Celia had waited for us at the entrance, and Celia giggled as we came up.

“Mike *must* be tight. In another minute he’ll be singing ‘Sweet Adeline.’”

I wanted to strike her across the mouth, and the savage impulse startled me. I must be tight myself! I thought. I said lightly:

“Don’t bring that up, or we’ll all be singing it, and people will throw shoes at us. Let’s go in.”

We separated on the second-floor, with whispered protestations of mutual pleasure and the promise, “See you in the morning. . . .”

Our room was depressing at best, and the scattered garments made it look even worse. I paused in the doorway and eyed it distastefully.

“It looks like a flophouse, Tim.”

You grinned. “Sure. What else is a vacation for?”

You came over and kissed me lightly, and it seemed to me that there was conciliation and even apology in your kiss; that you were trying to tell me how innocent a party you had been to Celia’s machinations. You need not have worried; Celia, as I have said, was never more than a symbol.

I laughed and began to undress. “The next time this bed comes round, please catch it and hold it until I can get in.”

You lifted your eyebrows in surprise, and the expression went through me like a sword. It was not Duncan’s expression but it recalled him to me, and this was not the time for remembering Duncan.

“Is it just the bed?” you asked gravely. “I thought it was the whole damn hotel. Sure, I’ll be glad to.”

We had breakfast with the Hardys, of course. Not by agreement but because the four of us arrived at the last possible minute. You had found the Hardys and you cultivated them with the single-mindedness of a child with a new toy. Mike’s eyes were red and his face was slightly swollen, but Celia was as fresh as a violet in the morning.

We arranged a schedule for the day. Immediately after breakfast you and Mike would drive to the village and arrange a fishing trip for Monday morning. (Boats were scarce and rates were exorbitant during the weekend, and besides, there was a special captain. . . . You explained all this with the assurance of a native.) Then a swim and a sunbath before lunch. The afternoon was ignored, thank heaven, but in the evening we would all go to the Casino. . . . I tried to sound as enthusiastic as you, and almost succeeded.

Dan and Emily and little Emmy came down to swim with us, and we

rubbed olive oil on one another and lay in the sun, laughing a great deal at nothing. Sandy, ecstatic at being allowed to join the party, resumed his mad pursuit of sandpipers. It was a lazy, effortless interval, so pleasant that I succeeded after a brief struggle in banishing the image of Duncan and myself, lying in a different sort of sunlight and talking a different language.

(During those first days, Tim, Duncan intruded only rarely. I had shared none of this with him; my *mental pictures* of him had another, dissimilar setting; and for a time that was my salvation. It was later, when you and I entered upon a minor crisis, that he took his place beside me and even invaded my dreams.)

We had several drinks before lunch, sitting—still in our bathing suits—on the crude banisters of the hotel porch. I dislike drinking during the day, but for some reason a vacation makes it imperative. One of the great attractions of the beach (or so everyone contends) is that “you can drink more liquor and feel it less than anywhere else.” Since the avowed purpose in drinking is to “feel it,” I have never seen the logic in that contention. But perhaps I am obtuse.

When we separated we had made arrangements to meet at the Waring cottage and go in a body to the Casino. There would be several other couples in the party, all of them friends of ours from Argyll, and we assured one another that we were destined for a Big Evening.

I wonder how the Casino looks to you, Tim; if you have ever seen it with a feeling that approaches mine? Probably not: you are fortunate in seeing only the things you like, and ignoring the rest. To me the Casino means freedom raised—or lowered—to the point of licence. It’s a huge barn, built upon piers, and from it emerge primitive rhythms like the beating of a jungle’s heart. Costumes vary from immaculate linens to dirty trousers and tie-less shirts; from evening dresses to slacks. Liquor bottles are everywhere in evidence; drunkenness is too common to inspire more than a passing smile. Most of the dancers move like automatons; never speaking except in monosyllables; and their faces are as still as death masks. We brush against thieves and cutthroats (since a beach resort with its floating population is an ideal haven for lawbreakers of every class) and succeed in maintaining our own standards of behavior, such as they are.

By the time we reached the building I was mildly but deliberately drunk; I had achieved that delicate balance between sobriety and drunkenness that is essential to the enjoyment of such an occasion. I saw the sordidness and lust with even greater clarity, but I could accept them as part of the picture and even find them interesting. I love dancing, and the Casino orchestra is always

excellent: given a good partner and good music, much can be ignored.

Celia entered the building with you, and while I couldn't hear her words, I knew their import. "I don't know a *soul*, Tim. Please look after me. . . ."

Mike held out his hand to me. "Dance with me, Lynn?" I nodded and stepped into his arms.

Like so many big men, he danced beautifully. His skill, I suppose, was born of the love of music and rhythm that found inadequate expression in a Shrine quartet. We forged through a steaming mass of humanity to a quiet corner, and for a while I forgot myself completely.

When the music died in a spatter of perfunctory applause he bent his head and looked curiously at me.

"You're a deep 'un, beautiful."

I stared at him. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I had you wrong. I thought you were cool as a cucumber and indifferent as hell, but you're not."

I laughed, but I cannot vouch for the sound. "What under the sun gave you that idea? Either idea?"

"Well—" He broke off and mopped his face. "Let's get out of this hotbox and take a drink."

I followed him to a table in the bar outside, and declined whiskey in favor of an orangeade. Our party had scattered, but I knew that eventually we would come together for a general exchange of partners. In the meantime I wanted to follow up Mike's estimate of me.

"I want to know why you thought I was cool and indifferent in the first place, and why you changed your mind."

Certainly, I thought, there had been no undue intimacy in my dancing.

He frowned and made an effort to concentrate. "Well, I've noticed you several times when we were checking back and forth, and you're always a good sport, and all that, but part of the time you're not even there. You're somewhere else."

I tried to look puzzled, but I'm afraid my uneasiness showed through. I cannot believe that Mike was especially intuitive; rather I think that, being a stranger, he saw me more clearly than you or my friends had done. As I have said, the true picture of an intimate is often blurred by the picture we carry in our minds.

"I'm absent minded," I explained lamely. "That may account for it. It isn't that I don't like people, or enjoy myself; it's just that I've got a bad habit of

drifting off.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” He emptied his glass with a tremendous swallow and set it firmly on the table. His voice acquiesced politely in my explanation but there was skepticism behind it.

“And why did you decide differently?” I persisted.

“The way you dance.” He held up a big hand, palm out. “No offense, beautiful; not even your mother could criticize it. But there’s—well, there’s a fire burning, and dancing helps you express it. Now that I think about it, it’s in your walk, or some sudden move you make. I’ve got a feeling that if you ever cut loose, you could turn things upside down.” He scowled. “Hell, I can’t handle words! Maybe I’m making you mad.”

I stared into my glass. “No; you’re not making me mad. You’re just—surprising me. But don’t you suppose that everybody has that feeling now and then—of wanting to cut loose?”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.” Already he had lost interest and was tapping a foot to the music. “Let’s dance. I do know about that.”

We found you and Celia in the *mêlée*, Tim, and when the dance ended we joined forces and sought the rest of our party. You were a little conscience-stricken, I think, because it isn’t a habit of yours to neglect me at dances. You whispered in my ear:

“The next one’s mine, before anybody else asks you.”

You don’t dance as well as Mike, but I like your dancing nevertheless. It’s rhythmical and effortless, and I have the added pleasure of knowing that you are enjoying yourself. Your zest is like a fire that warms those about you.

“Having a good time?” you asked.

“Swell. Only I’m hot as a fox.”

“We’ll go out and cool off during the next one. Take a drink.”

“That won’t make us cooler.”

You grinned. “No; but it’ll make us forget we’re hot.”

We had our drink and then strolled across the platform to lean on a railing and watch the shimmering black and silver water. Near us a girl vomited noisily, while her companion stood with his arm around her waist. A shaft of light fell upon the boy’s face and revealed neither ridicule nor distaste; nothing except a gentle sympathy for a friend—or a sweetheart—who had overestimated her capacity.

I winced and turned away. “Let’s find a pleasanter spot.”

You chuckled tolerantly. “She’ll feel better after that.”

You'd look just as that boy looks, I thought in wonder. You wouldn't even be disgusted; you're never disgusted when your friends become animals. . . .

And yet you drink beautifully, Tim—if that isn't a contradiction in terms. I have never seen you sodden or fumbling; never had to worry about whether I should have to drive you home and drag you to bed. Perhaps it is just as well, for I doubt if my love would long survive such humiliation. And perhaps you have guessed it, even though I have not put the feeling into words.

We found a less distasteful spot and leaned forward again, with our shoulders touching and our hands clasped.

“Lord, I love it!” you breathed. “Even when it's dirty and stagnant and smelly I still love it. There never was a perfume as sweet as that salt water stink.”

I touched your shoulder with my cheek. “It's a rotten shame you can't live near enough to see it every day.”

“Oh, I don't know. I'd probably never hit another lick of work if I did. Maybe I get more kick out of just seeing it occasionally.”

Behind us Dan's voice jeered good-humoredly. “Here, you! It's against the rules for husbands and wives to smooch. Lynn, old gal, it's your time to struggle with me; Em's found a stag, and she's as proud as a kitten with its first mouse.”

I pressed your hand and turned reluctantly. In that moment I had recaptured something of the old thrill of you; and the thrill, together with the blessed familiarity of twelve years, was too rare and precious to relinquish willingly. But the moment was over now, even if Dan had left us, and so I went into the Casino with him.

And you, I think, went in search of Celia.

Several days passed before I realized that your attitude towards Celia was different from anything I had ever seen you show for another woman. Perhaps I was obtuse in my failure to recognize it earlier, but there were two excellent reasons for the obtuseness.

The first was Celia herself. She was undeniably pretty, but she was so obvious in all her maneuvers and mannerisms that it never occurred to me that you could be taken in by them. I forgot that a woman can easily be transparent to another woman, and opaque to a man; particularly to a man who has never devoted his leisure to the pursuit of extramarital romance. As I have said, you are essentially simple and direct, and you always mean the things you say.

Being honest, you credit others with the same virtue.

Your own nature was the second reason, Tim. You had always treated women with the same easy friendliness you accord to men; I had never before seen you show the slightest preference for one woman over another. Women are quick to notice that lack of emotional response, and usually—if they are in search of a passing thrill—they train their guns upon a more willing prey.

But perhaps you were a challenge to Celia. Perhaps that very lack in you encouraged her to test her skill. Or perhaps she was genuinely attracted to you; a possibility which I, as your wife, find it easy to accept. At any rate, it finally dawned upon me that for you Celia was something different and appealing.

I don't mean that your manner towards her was overladen with significance: in a different type of man it would scarcely have been noticeable. But you were intensely aware of her; you sensed a need or a wish of hers (and she had many, since that was part of her act) before she had finished putting it into words. You heard every trivial thing she said (and all her remarks were trivial) and were the first to reply. You were always near her; not possessively or objectionably, it is true; but still you were there.

I grasped the situation one morning as we all lay in the sun; as I saw her lean nearer to you and whisper something, and saw your smile flash quickly. The moment was photographic, as so many significant moments are; and because of it I remembered many small things that I had not noticed as they occurred; incidents that came trooping past like a regiment in review. I shut my eyes and lay still, analyzing my own reaction.

Even then I knew that Celia was not really important; that in any small emergency you would leave her side and hurry to me. That you would dismiss her from your mind when we separated and think of her, fondly perhaps, but without yearning. I even doubted that there had been any actual intimacy between you, either of word or gesture. In the first place, the Celias of this world are notorious for promising with their eyes more than they ever intend to deliver; in the second, I believe that any genuine manifestation of emotion would have startled you into a realization of your own position.

But the situation was a new one, and it arose at an unfortunate time for me. I had come home to you, hoping foolishly for a renaissance of the more articulate love of our earliest association; instead I was confronted with a rival for your immediate favors.

I couldn't blame you; certainly I was in no position to cast the first stone. But the discovery had the effect that I most dreaded: it tended to absolve me of the sole blame for disloyalty even though I knew that the cases were in no sense parallel, and that my defection was far more serious than yours. Still,

being a female, I descended for a moment to retaliation. I thought: All right; if anything happens after this, it's your fault!

But that too was cold comfort. I could never be satisfied by a brief and casual intrigue with Duncan; between us there must be everything or nothing. I had decided at great cost in favor of nothing, and now my renunciation seemed destined to anticlimax. I was in the position of a person who suffers from angina, and who is called upon to nurse a case of measles.

As I lay thinking, still with my eyes closed, a voice beside me said quietly: "Wake up and turn over. You'll get blistered."

I opened my eyes and saw that Mike was sitting beside me, regarding me with a level, speculative gaze. He sat there; big and hairy and uncouth; knowing, perhaps, something of what went through my mind.

For the first time, I wondered about Mike and his own feeling in the matter. I realized that he had paid no more attention to you and Celia than I had paid—and for a different reason. He had known from the beginning, but the situation was as old to him as it was new to me.

I have often wondered about the husbands of all the Celias. Almost invariably their attitude is characterized by good-humored resignation or bland ignorance. Perhaps they have learned after much travail that such detours are usually trivial; perhaps they feel, as I felt of you, that the detours will never affect a permanent relationship, and that any protest might dignify an unimportant incident. Or perhaps, being genuinely in love with their wives (and such women have a curious and lasting fascination for men) they prefer half a loaf to none. I do not pretend to know.

I met the speculative look in Mike's eyes with a smile that I hope was casual.

"Surely I won't blister after all these hours in the sun?"

He took his cue, and for that I was grateful.

"I wouldn't bank on it. Even the native fishermen look to me like they're always peeling."

I sat up and stretched. "All right. Let's go in."

We waded into the surf, and to our overheated bodies the water was like an icy shower. You and Celia came too; hand in hand like a pair of innocent children, and Celia squealed—as I had known she would. I thought contemptuously: I wish to God you'd surprise me some time by not doing what I know you're going to do . . . and was immediately ashamed of myself for descending to bitterness.

Humorous detachment is your role, I told myself grimly. But in the next

breath I whispered, beneath the crashing surf:

“Oh, Duncan; my darling, darling. . . .”

I dreamed about Duncan that night, Tim. The dream was dim and formless: a series of disconnected and pointless incidents that left me, on waking, only a vivid impression of having been close to him in mind and body. His face evaded me, but I remember wandering with him through a city that was being devastated by an earthquake. He hurried me through unsteady streets and smiled quietly.

“This is just another version of your favorite way of dying, Lynn. It’s not a bad way after all, so long as I’m with you.”

But he wasn’t with me at the end. I was in a different part of the city—alone—and I didn’t know when or where we had separated. I saw a wall tottering above me, and felt the same serenity I had experienced in my other dream of destruction. I said aloud, “I love you, Tim,” and was surprised, even in the dream, because your name and not his came to me at the last.

I awoke and sat up in bed. Day had broken, and you lay with your arms flung out like a crucifix—and snored. I settled down again and thought, without shame or reluctance, of Duncan.

We played poker that night with the Warings, but the evening was not a success. We had been together too constantly during the past ten days, and friendships such as those were never built to withstand the friction of constant association. We were bored with one another (all save you and Celia) and boredom hung like a pall over the cluttered table.

Dan and Emily had found two new people who relieved the boredom momentarily: a couple from Harrison, North Carolina, whose names were Charlotte and Jerry. Mike and Jerry, being fellow North Carolinians, went through the ritual inevitable with Southerners meeting for the first time.

“Harrison!” Mike exclaimed. “You know Charlie Summers?”

Jerry grinned. “I’ll say I do! Charlie and I were s.o.b.’s together at Carolina. You know Charlie?”

Everybody laughed, Mike loudest of all. “He’s one of my best friends,” Mike said. “Give him my best when you see him again.”

“Be glad to. Where’d you say you were from?”

When they had exhausted the list we settled down to poker, but the game

lacked zest and our minds wandered. The most frequent remark was an impatient query: “Where’s it stuck?” and one of us would start guiltily.

“With me, I guess. What’s it cost me to come in?”

“A thin.”

“Hell, I’m tired of contributing to charity. I’m out.”

We drank even more than usual, because of the boredom, and by eleven o’clock Dan was very drunk. His eyes were glazed and sightless; his movements slow and awkward. He dealt deliberately and emphatically, chanting as he banged down each card.

“Tha’s for *you*, an’ it’s lousy. An’ tha’s for *you*—an’ it’s worse. An’ *this* is for me, an’ it’s a bull—with another one underneath it, by God! I hope you all heard the noise when it hit. . . .”

Emily’s face was white and pinched, and her eyes were black with contempt. Dan was very funny to the rest of you, but Emily was his wife. She stood it as long as she could, and then words cracked like a whip.

“Oh, shut up, you old goat!”

Laughter burst like a bomb. Dan straightened with an effort and eyed her reprovingly.

“Why, mama! Surely you’re not talkin’ to *me*?”

“You know I am.”

He moved his head slowly from side to side, like a bewildered bull. “I’m wounded. Wounded to the quick—whatever that is.” He peered around the table. “Where’s it stuck?”

“With you—you fool.” That was Emily again.

He grinned stupidly. “Why, so ’tis. Well, these bullets’ll let you off light—just to keep the shoe clerks in. A jit. . . .”

Emily folded a deuce. “I wish the congregation at St. Stephens could see you now,” she said bitterly.

Dan chuckled. “I’m glad they can’t.” He glanced around the table. “Whenever I pass the collection plate after a night like this, the thing rattles like a damn Salvation Army tambourine.”

Yes, Dan was very funny. But I wondered what had driven him to this; I wonder what it is that now and then drives us all to this—for I am as guilty as the rest of you. Guiltier, perhaps, because I see so clearly what we are doing. At those times I long to cry out: “We’re not really like this; we’re all decent and intelligent people at center! Let’s stop being this way. . . .”

But although I ached with sympathy for Emily, I smiled with the rest, and

tossed a red chip into the middle of the table.

(I think, Tim, that in a fumbling, groping way I know why we are like this. We have lived through nine difficult years—only to learn after a brief respite that the future is even more precarious than the past. We *feel* fear even if we do not recognize it; we sense dimly that ours may be a doomed civilization; that we live above a growling volcano. Most of us are unaware, but the emanations of panic reach us and destroy our balance and our confidence. We are subconsciously fleeing from ourselves and an acceptance of insecurity.

Dan is perhaps the most tragic of us all, because he has intelligence enough to know, and weakness enough to succumb. His mind is not of the type to achieve business success, and he and Emily enjoy luxuries like this cottage only through the generosity of their friends. They have always been poor—and they always will be. The fact is unimportant to those of us who like them for themselves, but it is important to Dan and Emily. Their pride, I think, is constantly at war with their love of comfort and pleasure, and the conflict may in the end defeat them. The very fact that Dan was drunk upon whiskey that we four had brought may have contributed, subconsciously, to his resentment.

But I don't want you to think, Tim, that I am always in revolt against the life we lead; or against the recreations we enjoy. Evenings like this occur only rarely, thank God; usually they are a dubious celebration of some special event. I love the people who are our real friends, and the occasions upon which we shed our desperate frivolity and talk quietly and sanely among ourselves are all the more precious because of their infrequency. They reveal us the more plainly, and bind us closer together. Only now and then do I feel despair for what we are doing to ourselves; the rest of the time I enter completely into the spirit of any party. If I had not come to Ocean City straight from knowing and loving Duncan Rhodes I might not have felt all this so acutely. I might not have felt it at all, for usually I am as trivial as anyone.)

We played until one o'clock that night; doggedly, because we were unwilling to admit defeat. I made one attempt—"Listen, everybody's half asleep. Why don't we call around?"—but the words fell into a pool of stubborn silence. Only Celia said plaintively:

"Oh, please let's don't! I'm just beginning to win back a little of what I've lost."

And you, Tim, smiled tenderly at her. "You *have* had tough breaks, haven't you, Celia?"

Your eyes and mine met across the table, although you had not intended it. You had hoped to steal a glance at me to see how I was "taking it," and then look away. But deliberately I waited for you. Your grin was warm and

conciliatory, and I realized with a shock that at last you too were aware of what had happened. You were too much like Sandy when he has misbehaved and comes wagging an affectionate tail; expecting a just punishment and hoping against hope to divert it.

I met your eyes levelly, and for a fraction of a second I let you see my discovery and my contempt. Ordinarily you would have given me look for look in righteous indignation, but tonight you held the bright, affectionate smile.

“How’re you doing, sugar?” you asked.

I answered you indifferently. “I haven’t checked up.”

And for the first time in my life, Tim, I knew contempt for you. Not jealousy; not even censure for your unimportant dereliction as such. My dereliction was far greater than yours. And yet that very fact seemed a mitigating circumstance: there was nothing cheap or easy in my disloyalty, and I think there was in yours. You had picked such an unworthy object, and it was that for which I despised you.

But the exchange passed unobserved—save by Celia, I suppose, who had probably hoped for it and was delighted and flattered by it. I turned my attention to the game.

That night you walked home with me, pressing my arm affectionately against your side. I disregarded the gesture, but in fairness to you I believe it was sincere. Even now I was perhaps more important than Celia; you didn’t want me to be hurt or worried and you were trying to tell me so.

Or perhaps you were afraid of antagonizing me; of driving me to take a stand against the Hardys. You had three days left, and you wanted the best of those three days. And so you may have been motivated by a deeper guile than I have ever attributed to you.

When we were alone in our room you began to chatter feverishly; hoping, I suppose, to forestall an outburst on my part. You need not have worried; I was too busy analyzing my own emotions to have a deep concern for yours. I understood Mike’s acceptance of the situation now; I was unwilling to dignify the episode by underscoring it. But the thing that frightened and distressed me, Tim, was a thing you may find humiliating and unbelievable.

I simply did not care. Beyond surprise and disappointment I felt nothing at all.

And that, I knew, was serious. Even jealousy would have been preferable to indifference, because jealousy implies a desire to retain possession of something or someone. Even pain would have been preferable, because pain would have carried the same implication. The fact that I was in no actual

danger of losing you should not have allayed pain completely under the circumstances; I ought still to have suffered from this first evidence of divided interest on your part.

(Because, Tim, I wanted desperately to discover that you meant more to me than Duncan. If I could convince myself of that, my problem was solved; my life, unsatisfying as it was in some ways, would continue to be relatively simple.

But if I found that our relationship was being maintained through habit—that it had lost its depth and meaning—then I would be unable to resist the hunger for Duncan. And yielding to that hunger would mean tearing up my life and yours by the roots; would necessitate a process of transplanting that might result in failure. Roots sink deep in twelve years; old trees do not readjust themselves easily to an alien soil. I may have been a coward in wanting to cling to you, but I have no illusions about divorce and the scars it leaves.)

I accepted your good-night kiss passively and still you made no protest; gave no sign of noticing. You did notice, of course, and your silence was the more significant and damning. You were afraid to ask what was wrong, for fear I might tell you.

When I had gone to bed, deliberately and for the second time, I unlocked the door of that room in my memory which held Duncan. And he and I sat on Beatty's Rock with our shoulders touching, and repeated the conversations we had had there. And as I drifted into sleep (I saved that memory for the last, as a child saves the icing on its cake) he took me in his arms and held me until my body seemed to merge with his.

When I realized that the Warings weren't coming down to swim with us the next morning, I took Sandy and strolled up the beach towards their cottage. You called out to me as I walked away, in a voice that was bright with artificial interest.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“To see Emily,” I said without turning. You might have come with me from a sense of duty, and I didn't want you.

I found Emily and little Emmy on the beach before their cottage, building a castle in the sand. Emily looked worn and depressed but she gave me a vivacious smile.

“Greetings! Have a seat.”

I dropped down and watched the construction for a moment in silence. Sandy squatted politely beside me, but I knew from his expression that he was longing to burrow into the fragile structure and demolish it. I said, “Don’t you dare!” and he wagged a reassuring tail.

The castle was completed at last, and Emmy took Sandy and went in search of shells with which to adorn it.

Emily looked at me. “Well?” she said in a weary voice.

“I came to see why you weren’t being sociable this morning. Or are you as tired of being sociable as I am?”

She shrugged. “I feel like I’ve been running a road house for the past ten days.”

“You have,” I admitted contritely. “And the Sheldons and their—friends—have been largely responsible.”

“Oh, mercy no! Dan would have been miserable if we hadn’t had something doing every minute, and you know we’d rather have you and Tim than anybody.”

“But not our Siamese twins.” I couldn’t resist that.

She shrugged again. “Oh, they haven’t mattered. I have a feeling Mike’s a fairly decent sort of person.”

I smiled. “I notice you confine it to Mike.”

“Oh, Celia’s a little bitch, of course. But not important enough to waste any dislike on.”

(I hope that won’t hurt your feelings, Tim, if you read this. . . .)

I shook my head. “I haven’t wasted any on her; I’ve suffered her—like chicken pox.”

“And she’ll run her course in about the same length of time. Be glad it’s nothing worse, like drinking too much.”

She referred to Dan, of course. I asked casually:

“How is he this morning?”

Her smile was grim. “He says he’s got a boiler factory in his head and butterflies in his stomach. He’ll be all right this afternoon—if he doesn’t get tight again in an effort to drown the butterflies!”

(This, Tim, is the sort of conversation I referred to a while ago. Emily had dropped all her vivacity and her deliberate obtuseness; she was completely herself, facing a problem and admitting it, even though she had no solution to it. We were friends and there was no need for pretense in either of us.)

She turned quickly towards me. “Lynn, what’s the matter with a man like

Dan? Why does he go ahead and get drunk when he knows what it does to him and me? He really loves me; I know that.”

“Of course he does. As for why—” I told her, as best I could, my theory about us all.

She considered it and smiled bitterly. “Uncertainty’s no new thing with us. Our future’s been uncertain from the beginning.”

“All the more reason. Dan probably resents that too.”

“I know he does. And he resents the fact that being really smart, as he is, doesn’t help at all.”

I said resignedly: “I’ve observed, Emily, that making money usually takes a very special and unattractive kind of brains. There are exceptions, of course: good management or a new idea, or something like that; but the rest of the rich ones are too much like Scrooge—without his final change of heart. Dan’s a fool to let that worry him.

“Besides,” I added calmly, “we’re all apt to go bankrupt any time. At least, the Sheldons are. I’ve quit thinking about it. If we’re bankrupt, maybe we won’t be liquidated by our employees.”

But that, I knew, was cold comfort to a woman in Emily’s position, and I hated myself for the apparent flippancy. I was half in earnest, but the remark seemed too extravagant to be taken seriously.

Emily shook her head. “I’d hate to think the situation was improved by misfortune for my friends. I’d rather be the exception.”

And knowing Emily, I believe she spoke the truth. I returned to the earlier topic.

“Have you ever spoken to Dan about drinking too much?”

“Yes. And he cuts the ground from under me by agreeing with everything I say. That’s what makes it so hopeless. And I can’t leave him—or rather, I don’t want to. I’m crazy about him, and then there’s Emmy. He worships her, and she does him.”

There was no answer, of course. At least none that I in my inadequacy could supply. I said banally:

“I guess, if the truth were known, we’ve all got our secret hells.”

She thought I referred to Celia, and protested quickly. “Surely you’re not worrying about that Hardy wench, Lynn!”

“No. We’ll go our separate ways after tomorrow—thank God. She’s nothing but a nuisance—unless, of course, she turns out to be the first of a long line of nuisances. In that case I’ll have to do something.”

“She won’t,” Emily said firmly. “Tim’s not very happy about the whole thing anyhow. He’s not cut out for it.”

“No,” I said slowly, “I don’t suppose he is. But for a novice he isn’t doing so badly.”

Little Emmy came back then, laden with shells and followed by a dripping, panting Sandy. For the next few minutes we turned our attention to the castle’s beautification, serenely indifferent to the fact that an incoming tide would nibble away its foundations. The castle would remain intact in our minds, and that was enough. The memory of beauty is more satisfying, I think, than beauty itself, for no one can take that from us.

You knew from my desertion of the morning, Tim, that the situation might become serious, and when we were in our room after lunch you said carelessly:

“Why don’t we take in the village movie tonight—just you and me? I’m sort of caught up with poker.”

I felt a quick pleasure at the admission and the suggestion, but doubt trod heavily on the heels of pleasure. I wondered if you really wanted me, or if you wanted peace in the family. And so I said with maddening politeness:

“It would be grand—if you think we can leave the Hardys stranded.”

If the shot found its target you gave no sign. “We needn’t say anything to ’em. After all, we haven’t adopted ’em.”

I almost said, “Oh, I thought we had,” but I caught the words in time.

“In that case, Mr. Sheldon, I accept with pleasure.”

And so we went to the moving picture, which neither of us enjoyed, and afterwards we walked slowly back to the hotel. Celia and Mike were sitting on the porch pretending to read, and there was a gentle reproach in Celia’s gay greeting.

“Where’ve you all been all by yourselves?”

“To the movies,” you replied in an apologetic voice. Celia’s claim on you was plainly revealed by that apology; I suspected, hearing it, that tomorrow you might be made to pay through the nose.

But tomorrow was Saturday and our last day together. If we could weather that last day I resolved never to let you know how I really felt about her.

When we went to our room you took me in your arms immediately. I knew, of course what it meant; I even felt an instinctive response and hated myself for it. Things were not right or normal between us; the desire was born, not of mutual love and trust, but of a hunger as primitive and old as life itself.

If you had taken me under those circumstances I should have felt like a prostitute, and so I drew away and yawned.

“I can’t stand the late hours we’ve been keeping, Timothy. It’s going to take me a month to rest up from my vacation.”

You understood at once and even laughed a little.

“Well, it’ll soon be over, and home’ll be as quiet as a tomb from now till September.”

But we didn’t weather that last day. We struck a squall at the Casino dance and the consequences of that squall drove me, soon after our return to Argyll, to write to Duncan Rhodes.

We all went together, of course: the Warings, Hardys, Charlotte and Jerry, you and I. My instinct had been right about Celia: she kept you near her (or you stayed near her) all during the day, and when we started up the boardwalk towards the Casino she slipped her arm through yours and triumphantly led the procession.

She was all in white, like a little girl at her first party, with a white flower in her hair. You wore a spotless linen suit (there had been a great deal of vocal anguish in the Sheldon quarters lest the laundry fail to deliver that white suit in time!) and you had to lean towards her to catch her words above the roar of the surf.

Mike selected me—almost too pointedly, I thought—and for the first time the invitation and the suggestion in his eyes were unveiled. Mike was seeking a last thrill of his own and the realization filled me with distaste.

The Casino seemed hotter and more crowded than ever. I thought with longing of the hard white beach, swept by a cleansing wind; and wished that Duncan and I might be walking there, or lying side by side with our faces towards the stars. Instead I must endure three hours of light and noise and the animal odor of sweating men and women. I must be brightly unaware of—or indifferent to—the fact that you and Celia were clinging to each other, in spirit if not in fact. I must evade the invitation in Mike’s eyes; not angrily or obviously, but with the light touch that is the foundation of our social creed.

We pushed our way onto the dance floor and momentarily I forgot my dread. The orchestra was playing softly; softly Mike took up the refrain: “One song, I have but one song. . . .” His beautiful voice was muted, reaching no one but me, and I shut my eyes against the distasteful surroundings. He was rather clever that night; cleverer than I had imagined he could be. He knew what his

voice could do and whenever he danced he used his voice for singing instead of talking.

Several of us met in the bar when the number was over, but you and Celia were not with us. I felt a blinding contempt for you both: not, I insist, because you were attracted to each other, but because you were making yourselves conspicuous. Because you, Tim, were making me the butt of the amused, tolerant gossip that had never before touched either of us. My straits were worse than yours but I promise you that, had Duncan been in the group, no one would have guessed what lay between us.

I danced next with Dan, who smiled wryly when we were alone.

“Listen, Lynn; you’ll tell me the truth. Was I really stinking the other night? Emily says I was, but she might be prejudiced.”

“You were,” I said promptly. “Your face was all swollen and your eyes were turned back in your head and you talked like the drunk in an old-time vaudeville act. You practically drooled.”

“Jesus!” he whispered, and then he grinned. “You let me have both barrels, didn’t you?”

“Well, you asked me.” I added slowly: “I’ve often thought that the best way to cure anybody of getting drunk would be to take moving pictures of ’em while they were that way. Women especially.”

“Why ‘especially’?” Dan was openly amused.

“Because drunk women fall to pieces even worse than drunk men. Their hair comes down and their makeup streaks and their clothes slip off the shoulders. . . .”

He flung back his head and roared. “You ought to go on a lecture tour. That’s the damn best temperance argument I ever heard.”

“I probably sound like Aunt Tassie,” I confessed; “but, Dan, I hate to see people abuse a thing that’s not bad in itself. I like a drink; there are times when it makes me relax and forget the things I want to forget. But getting drunk is another thing; when they’re drunk, people seem so terribly—naked. All the things they’ve tried to cover up come to the surface. . . .”

His thin face was sober. “You’re right, mama. And just for that I’m going to surprise you and invite you to join me in an orangeade when this dance is over. Tonight I’m taking a drink every other time I want one. How’s that?”

“It depends on how often you want one.”

He looked crestfallen. “You do like to encourage a guy, don’t you?”

“For acting like an adult? Why should you need encouragement for that?”

I was still angry with him for the pain he had caused Emily and I intended that he should know it. Dan has always liked me in his defiant way and I have liked him; but I felt no mercy. I had problems of my own, and no pain to spend upon my friends.

He shrugged. "I give up; I'm sorry I brought up the subject. But the invitation to the orangeade still holds."

We drank it with Charlotte and Jerry, and finally you and Celia drifted in, looking cool and wind-blown and self-conscious. You came straight to me.

"Going to dance the next one with me, old lady?"

I forgot my resolution then. I said, very low, "I suppose I'll have to—at least once," and turned back to Dan.

You tried very hard during that dance, Tim. You were still hoping to avoid a scene; still striving to maintain the illusion of complete innocence. You talked a great deal and I answered you politely and even made one or two observations of my own. If any of our friends noticed us, I was determined to deprive them of the vicarious pleasure of our feud.

The dance ended at last, to the relief of both of us, and we rejoined the party. I didn't see you—or Celia—during the rest of the evening.

Mike came back to me soon afterwards, but in the middle of our dance he stopped abruptly.

"Is there any reason why we have to stay in here and roast alive?"

I spoke without thinking—because I was so desperately tired of thinking. "None that I know of."

"Swell."

He took my arm and led me through the dancers, to the platform over the water. A boy and girl stood against the railing, locked in each others arms. They made no move to separate as we approached and I felt a swift unwilling envy for their primitive abandonment. Perhaps that's the best way to take life, I thought: to plunge into it with no care for the rest of the world; to follow your heart—or your body—wherever it leads. . . .

Mike chuckled. "It seems a trifle crowded here. Let's go down the boardwalk and sit on somebody's steps."

Deliberately I acquiesced. I have no idea why I went—nor do I care greatly. You had already called us to the attention of our friends; there was nothing I could do to remedy that. I fled willingly from the necessity for further pretense.

We walked a short distance, until we reached the first series of steps that descend at intervals to the water. We sat on the bottom step with our feet in the

warm sand and let the wind blow against our faces.

“This is better,” Mike said emphatically.

Better, yes, I thought; but still far from good. . . .

“If we *had* to endure that Casino,” I laughed, “we’d rebel.”

He threw back his head dramatically. “Oh, pleasure! What crimes are committed in thy name!”

“So you’ve observed that too.”

“I’ve observed a lot of things I don’t mention.”

The remark was pointed, and I paused to fashion a reply.

“Because you think discretion the better part of valor?”

“No. Because I like peace at any price.”

After two weeks of constant association, Mike could still surprise me. Under different circumstances I might have liked Mike Hardy a great deal.

“I wonder, though,” I was deliberately probing him now, “if peace isn’t worth fighting for sometimes.”

He put his arm casually around my shoulders. I left it there for the moment, rather than make an issue of something that was actually unimportant.

“Depends on what you’re fighting. Leopards, now, can’t change their spots.”

I stared at the restless, silvered water. “Unless they’re just masquerading as leopards. . . .”

He shifted swiftly from general to specific. “She’s not. She was born that way and all hell couldn’t change her.” He faced me. “What about Tim?”

The boldness of his attack caught me flat footed. Women are rarely so direct as this: they feint and parry and sidestep, and convey their questions or answers by innuendo. I decided to be honest.

“This is Tim’s first attack.”

“Then maybe you can cure him: it’ll save you a lot of mental anguish if you can. You take a lot of punishment before you find out the attacks are usually harmless.”

“Thanks,” I murmured. “If he starts to make a habit of it, I’ll try. But I doubt if I can do any more than you.”

“I don’t agree with you, beautiful.” His arm tightened and mentally I braced myself. “You strike me as being equal to anything.”

If you only knew! I thought wildly. But I laughed.

“I don’t know anybody who’s more inadequate than I.”

“I don’t agree on that either.”

He leaned over me and I felt a momentary panic. This was the first time in twelve years that I had had to resist an unwelcome overture, and one loses one’s knack for doing that sort of thing skillfully and painlessly. I drew away a little and smiled as I shook my head.

“That wouldn’t improve matters any, Mike.”

“That’s not why I’m doing it, damn it!” He leaned nearer, so that I was uncomfortably aware of his vitality and physical strength. “I’ve wanted to do it for a long time.”

“Well, I haven’t. Please, Mike.”

But reason and appeal were wasted on him. Perhaps he was a trifle drunk, or perhaps he was motivated by a desire for revenge. I refuse to believe that he was under any fatal spell of mine; I think any woman would have served.

It wasn’t a pleasant moment, Tim, and with feminine inconsistency I added it to the score against you; forgetting that I had invited it by coming here with him. I endured it because I thought endurance preferable to an unequal contest of strength.

He sensed my passive resistance after a time and took his mouth from mine.

“Sorry,” he said thickly. “I thought I could make you like it. At least I hoped I could.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I said it quietly, although my heart was racing. His kiss had reminded me of Duncan: not because the two bore the slightest resemblance, but because any unfamiliar embrace would have had the same effect.

“That was one way of convincing you,” I added.

“It convinced me all right,” he admitted ruefully. “But I still think the fire’s there—and not for Tim, either.”

I thanked heaven that he couldn’t see my face. “You’re wrong about that, but it still doesn’t matter.” Nothing mattered. I felt suddenly exhausted; past any desire to return to the Casino and the bland unawareness of my friends. “I think I’ll go home, Mike. I’m so tired I’m numb.”

He stood up at once. “Lynn, I’m sorry as hell. I’ll take you right now.”

“You had nothing to do with it. As a matter of fact, I like you.”

“Thanks.”

His voice was gruff, and he gave me a hand without another word. We walked in silence to the hotel; parted at the doorway with only an awkward

“Good-night.”

I wanted to be asleep when you came, Tim, but that was too much to hope for. You came soon after midnight—as stealthily as a thief—and I kept my eyes shut in the hope of deceiving you. But you knew me well enough to realize that I could not possibly be asleep, and like an uncomfortable child you wanted to make your peace before you went to bed. When you had undressed you tiptoed carefully to my side and whispered:

“Are you asleep?”

I wanted to laugh, because there was real comedy in the situation; but anger overrode my sense of humor.

“No.”

“Why’d you run away?” You asked the question anxiously, hoping against hope that I would lie and save your face.

I looked squarely at you. “You know why I left.” And then without warning I heard my own voice, and the sound was harsh and strange.

“You damned fool!”

You turned crimson, because in twelve years I had never spoken to you like that. You tried to frame a protest, but the storm had broken within me.

“It isn’t so much what you’ve *felt*, Tim; you can’t help that. It’s that I loathe you for being so obvious; for putting me in a position like that, and then leaving me to the tactful ministrations of others.

“And she’s so cheap, Tim! I can even tell you her line. ‘Don’t leave me, Tim; I don’t know a soul here and I’m scared to death. . . .’ ‘I can’t swim very well; look out for me, Tim. . . .’ (Of course Mike couldn’t do it nearly as well as you.) And tonight, after two weeks of skillful build-up: ‘We’ll have to separate tomorrow, Tim, for always, I guess: let’s just have one good time to ourselves. Let’s go somewhere and just *talk*. You’re so sweet and sort of—understanding, Tim. . . .’”

Your face was a study then, and I felt a sardonic satisfaction at your discomfort. I added scornfully:

“I know all the moves, even if I don’t make ’em. Now go on to bed.”

But you had to defend yourself. “Lynn, I swear she doesn’t mean anything and you know it. I give you my word I never even kissed her!”

“No, I don’t suppose you did,” I said contemptuously. “She’s the kind that keeps her skirts clear of any real emotion and thinks she’s been a virtuous, faithful wife; that gets her thrills without paying for them. I’d have more

respect for both of you, I think, if you *had* cared a lot about each other; if you had kissed each other. You might as well have done it; you'll get credit for it with everybody who was there tonight—so what's the difference?"

I salved my conscience with a half-truth. "I don't blame you if you're attracted to a girl; I've felt that way myself once or twice. But neither you nor anybody else has guessed it; I've never worn any placards about it!

"Mike's got more courage," I added relentlessly. "He kissed me, even though I didn't want him to. And then apologized when it wasn't a success. That's when I came home and went to bed."

I turned away with a gesture of finality and you were too stupefied to answer. You snapped off the light and crept into bed.

Neither of us slept, of course. Now that the storm had broken over your bewildered head I felt a strong maternal tenderness for you. I had hurt and surprised you so deeply that I could forgive you, and I wanted to stretch out my hand to you. But I lay still, knowing that too easy a reconciliation would nullify the effect I had created.

Later—perhaps an hour later—you spoke my name cautiously, just above the murmuring surf.

"Lynn?"

"Yes?"

"I can't go to sleep this way. . . ."

I smiled, feeling a thousand years older than you at that moment. You sleep instantly and deeply, like an infant; unmindful of the black hours during which I lie and watch my thoughts march past. I never mind those hours: they are my time for taking stock of myself and the world about me; for listening to the still, small voice of courage or wisdom that speaks unheard above the tumult of one's daily living. But your ears were unaccustomed to that voice—or perhaps its words were too unpleasant—and you wanted the solace of oblivion.

I laughed aloud. "Come here, then."

You came in a rush, like a child fleeing from its nightmares, and I put my arms around you and felt your mouth eager against mine. There was no passion in the kiss; only apology on your part and tenderness on mine. You sighed—a long, gusty breath of relief and relaxation—and I laughed again in genuine mirth.

"You blessed idiot!"

You agreed promptly. You would have agreed to any verdict, I think, so long as it also contained forgiveness. You were willing to pay any price for

security and serenity regained; your mind is not adjusted to the existence of conflict between you and me.

“I guess I am. I’m sorry.”

You slept almost instantly, with your head against my shoulder.

I can smile even now, as I smiled secretly then, at the changed atmosphere of our last morning at Ocean City. You were so penitent and careful, Tim, that you seemed almost to tiptoe as you walked. Celia knew of course, that there had been a battle the night before, and her manner was a blend of complacency and defiant attentiveness to Mike. She deferred to him now, instead of to you; it was his arm that she touched; his eyes and his approval that she sought. She meant to punish both you and me, I think, for having so maligned her as to assume that she could ever notice anyone but her own beloved husband. And being fundamentally cautious, she meant to make her peace with Mike as the holiday ended.

I think too that you were a little hurt by the change in her, by the fact that she had, so to speak, beat you to the gun; and her manner, following so closely upon your apparent conquest, was a challenge to your masculinity. The Celias of the world are very clever; they never make the mistake of overestimating a male gift of divination.

Outwardly we all maintained the illusion of friendship; we voiced over and over our desolation at the necessity for parting. Only once, when Mike and I deliberately walked into the surf together, did our masks slip. Then he and I looked at each other with twinkling eyes.

“Lady,” he said softly, “I take off my hat to you.”

“And I to you.”

“Thanks.” His voice was gruff. “I’ll take that home with me as a souvenir.”

(And at the same instant, Tim, I would wager that Celia was lifting wounded eyes to you and saying: “I’m so sorry, Tim, dear, if I caused any trouble. You know I never thought of such a thing.” And you probably wondering if, after all, I had been a suspicious, ill-tempered shrew.)

The Warings came down to swim with us, and even in them the change was apparent. In effect our vacation was over; we were turning our faces towards home and reassuming the responsibilities we had so defiantly shed upon our arrival. We were no longer hotly pursuing pleasure and a brief forgetfulness; overnight we had become men and women.

The change was very welcome to me: I lost the feeling of tension and effort

that had marked most of my days. When I thought of Duncan the desperate hunger for him was gone, and in its place there was a quiet joy at having loved and been loved by him.

We had one last drink together before lunch—and only one. We were all starting home immediately after lunch, and the men and women we had become knew that automobiles and whiskey were dangerous companions.

When we separated after lunch we said again all the things we had said during the morning.

“It certainly has been swell knowing you. We’ll have to get together for a weekend right away. Write to us some time. . . .”

“We’ll do that. And you’ll have to come and see us. Don’t dare come near Argyll (or Merville) without letting us know. . . .”

“Wouldn’t think of it. And we’ll see you next summer, anyhow; same time, same place. . . .”

“Sure. . . .”

We were off finally, turning our backs on the glittering, restless water that would beckon to us for so long; taking a last look at the tough, grimy old freighters; a last breath of salty air. We drove almost in silence through the marsh lands and the groves of ancient liveoaks with their long gray hair. We watched the country lose its individuality and charm; felt the still, dead heat wrapping its fingers around our throats; saw the groves surrender to fields that were only fields, dotted with cabins that often leaned rakishly away from storms long past.

Behind us Sandy shuttled from one window to another, hanging far out to catch a wind that flattened his whiskers and pinned back his ears. Even Sandy wore a grave, important look: he was wondering, no doubt, if his neighborhood supremacy had been usurped during his absence; if his huge, malodorous bones had been disinterred by other paws than his. Sandy, like you and me, had his responsibilities.

And at last you said, in a voice that was valiantly casual:

“Well, it’s back to the grind. I hope hell hasn’t busted while I’ve been away. . . .”

Part III

THE PLAIN

THE PLAIN

THE DAYS THAT FOLLOW A VACATION ARE always days of restlessness and readjustment for us both. When first we savor the quiet and comfort of our house we say, "Lord, but it's good to be back!" But when the quiet and comfort have become an accepted fact we are conscious of a depressing monotony in the pattern of our lives. You find it difficult to take up the increasing burden of business; I chafe under the drab necessity of picking over fruits and vegetables and deciding what we shall eat for dinner. The house, which has been untenanted for days, takes us back slowly and reluctantly into itself, as if it resents our return.

For that restlessness and readjustment I was prepared; but the sense of utter futility and hopelessness was more than I had bargained for. I fought it doggedly: working in my garden; reading anything and everything; playing bridge or golf with the few friends who were in town. But always, when I was alone in the house, I felt the vast, gnawing emptiness within myself.

This is what my life will be, I thought, until I die. There will be no heights of ecstasy with their complementary depths of despair; no sense of living completely and dangerously, of inviting life to do its best—or its worst—to me. Until I die—or perhaps begin the long, sordid process of dying—I shall go to market in the morning, read or play bridge in the afternoon, play poker or see a moving picture in the evening. Soon I shall begin to disintegrate physically; after that I shall pass from the age of desiring ecstasy and danger into the age of desiring comfort and peace. And acceptance and resignation will be the worst things of all, even though I shall not realize it then. For peace is an evasion of life; peace is a stagnant backwater in the turbulent river of life. . . .

And when those thoughts invaded me, Tim, I walked from one room to another like a caged animal; or stood motionless in the middle of a room, wanting—as Duncan had wanted—to shake my fist at heaven.

I could not inflict those things on you because you had troubles of your own. The union element in your mill had preferred grotesque charges that you

must fight at great expense—while a generous and impartial government paid all the expenses of the union. They were demanding that you reinstate a worker who had been fired for drunkenness and inefficiency, and you were as desperate as I.

“And can you believe,” you raged on our second night at home, “that I can’t even subpoena the officer who arrested him for drunkenness without getting permission from Washington and telling the government what his testimony will be! God damn the whole filthy setup!”

Ordinarily you are the mildest and the least profane of men, and your language revealed your straits. I knew that your resentment went deeper than this one incident; that you were reaping a harvest of tares where you had sowed consideration and fair play; and that the discovery was bitter within you. You have always been quick to recognize and admit injustice when it exists; on its small scale your mill has been a model of its kind, and this was not the reward you deserved.

But your bitterness and preoccupation were small comfort to me in my own war and you reacted in a way that is not my way.

“Let’s *do* something tonight,” you would say fretfully. “I’ve got to get my mind off this goddam mess.”

And so we “did something”—anything—until I felt like a mother with a difficult convalescent child that must be amused at any cost. Our pursuit of forgetfulness became no less feverish—and no more successful—than it had been at Ocean City. In your anger you forgot that I was an individual and saw me only as an instrument. When I suggested that we stay at home one night and read you said contemptuously:

“Hell, I can’t read! I want *diversion!*!”

And you drank too much, so that—for the first time in my life—I was afraid for you. Your voice grew louder and more defiant; you frowned almost constantly. And one night, after four hours of drinking and poker I realized that your feet were unsteady; and that night I pushed you from under the wheel of the car and drove home myself.

It was in the midst of this crisis that Duncan’s letter came.

It was a careful, banal letter; framed for your eyes in case you should see it and want to know its contents. But between the careful lines I read a hunger and a love that filled me with a wild exaltation, and I knew that my love for him had been sleeping rather than dying. With this first real contact the feeling blazed up with an intensity that left me cold and shivering.

“Dear Lynn,” he wrote. “I’m leaving in the next week or so, and I wondered if I might stop on my way through Argyll and pay a call. If it isn’t

too much trouble you might drop me a note and say you'll be there; if it is, I'll telephone just on the chance of seeing you and meeting your husband. . . ."

You didn't see the letter, Tim; I memorized it and destroyed it. Even then I couldn't give him the permission he sought; permission would have raised a false hope and that would have been too cruel. If he telephoned, I would see him and say goodbye; if he accepted my silence as final and made no effort to come, then I should be spared both happiness and anguish.

It was you who altered my decision, Tim.

Or perhaps that's a coward's statement. Perhaps you were the straw at which I clutched in an effort to save my face. Perhaps I wanted Duncan so badly that I used your conduct as an excuse; subconsciously I may have intended from the beginning to find a justification for myself. Someone has said that man was given a mind in order to justify his desires, and the statement has the ring of truth.

Two days after I had Duncan's letter you came home in a worse frame of mind than I have ever seen in you. You flung off your coat and called for a drink in a peremptory tone that jarred my ragged nerves.

"This is a home," I said acidly; "not a third-rate bar. You might at least be polite."

You scowled. "Good Lord, home's the one place these days where I can relax and act the way I feel." And then your inevitable question:

"Anything on for tonight?"

I kept my voice down, but inside I was screaming. "Not that I know of."

"Then let's stir up something. I'm too restless to sit still."

I should never have begun the argument at such a time, but my defense is that I was as desperate as you. I said in a level voice:

"Has it ever occurred to you, Tim, that you're acting in all this like a rotten spoiled child?"

The question was a burning match tossed into a barrel of oil. Your anger blazed out in a fiery torrent that seared me with the rest of mankind. You retailed your grievances, most of which I had heard, a few of which were new even to me. When you had stopped for breath I said:

"Granted all that—and I'd be the first to grant it—is that any reason to inflict your resentment on *me*? To make the house a hell on earth? Men have had raw deals before this; men have even been crucified by their friends—and

you've escaped that, thank God. And it seems to me that the measure of their manhood is the way they react to those things. You know I sympathize with you and believe in you with all my heart: why punish *me*?"

But reason (if that was reason) was lost on you. You said hotly:

"I'm not taking it out on you! I'm asking for a little patience and understanding, and what you've just said shows you haven't got it. You haven't got the first idea of what I go through during the day; you always look resigned and long-suffering when I suggest getting out and forgetting it. You think I can stay at home, like you, and read a damned book. Well, I'm sorry, but I can't." (But you weren't sorry: your tone showed clearly that you found some twisted virtue in your preference for the panacea of action rather than of ideas.) You added complacently: "I'm a lowbrow; always have been and always will be."

I loathe that word and its antonym, and I winced under your defiant pride. I have never understood the bristling antipathy of the average American man towards the thing which—for want of a less frayed and less self-conscious word—we have to call culture. Your mind and your natural tastes are as good as mine, and on the rare occasions when I have lured you into the presence of some form of art you have reluctantly confessed to a genuine enjoyment. But like most men you are under a social compulsion to ridicule any form of esthetic expression.

I said with the quietness of despair: "You've gone off at a tangent, but I suppose this was no time to bring up the subject. Finish your drink; dinner's ready. I'll telephone around and see if I can get up a bridge game."

But you preferred to hug your grievance. "It's too late to catch anybody now. I'll go back to the office and work; it's what I ought to do anyhow."

We argued that, too; but you refused to be appeased. In the end I let you go.

When you had gone I sat for a long time, thinking. For the first time in twelve years I knew that something was lacking in our relationship. We have known crises before this, but always the crises brought us nearer; whereas now we were a world apart. I know that some of the blame was mine; that, feeling as I felt, I probably looked as martyred and resigned as you had said, and that the attitude had maddened you. If you in turn should write your version of those days, I have no doubt that you could lay as many accusations at my door as I have laid at yours. You were accustomed to compliance from me; I myself had trained you to expect it; and now that you were no longer the sole interest of my life I was unable to play out the role that I had voluntarily assumed. You

didn't know the reason for my revolt, and the revolt hurt and angered you because it came at such an inopportune time.

Celia may have had a share in your attitude, as Duncan had in mine. Now that she was gone you may have begun to wonder if I hadn't wronged you after all; if I hadn't been the unreasonable virago that her wounded-fawn attitude implied. Influences like Celia cannot be shed as easily as a snake sheds its skin.

But whatever the causes, we were in a state of war and I was no longer anxious to raise the white flag. This first genuine rift seemed significant to me: I looked down a future that was apt to be scarred by a series of such rifts, growing wider each time. When once a difference or a quarrel such as ours has occurred we can never go back and erase the memory; we find it easier and easier to quarrel, and more and more difficult to forgive.

That was the point at which I decided to answer Duncan's letter; the point at which I began to question my *obligation* to you. I had, it seemed to me, conceded more than you in twelve years; in return for loyalty and physical comfort I had given you twelve years of companionship and almost complete domestic peace. Neither of us, I decided *owed* the other anything.

And that being the case, there was no reason why I shouldn't grant Duncan's request, if only to balance one of you against the other. I went to my desk and began the letter.

"Please understand, my dear," I warned him, "that I haven't decided anything. I've only come to the point of wondering if you may possibly be right. If you're willing, I should like to see you and compare you with—well, what I have now. Perhaps that's a coward's way; but I've never denied my own cowardice. . . ."

When I had finished the letter I drove to the neighborhood post office and mailed it. Recklessness breeds impatience, and having taken the step I hurried to make it irrevocable.

If you had shown any desire for reconciliation, Tim, I might have recalled that invitation. If you had said the next morning, "I'm a crabbed, unreasonable so-and-so, Lynn; forgive me," I might have opened my arms to you. But an apology sticks in your throat; in twelve years you have tendered only one verbal apology; and doubtless you felt that the overture to peace should come from me. You had no way of knowing that my straits were as desperate as yours, or my sense of injury as great.

And so we endured each other with a strained politeness that was worse than open hatred. People may be hypercivilized, I think, as we were then. Perhaps we should have cursed each other; perhaps we should have thrown things, and found an emotional release in the sound of breaking glass. We might have come to a definite end or we might have cleared the atmosphere: either would have been preferable to that venomous, artificial courtesy.

But instead, I said politely the next morning: "I'm going to get up a poker party tonight. Is there plenty of whiskey?"

And you replied: "Thanks just the same, but I can't play tonight. I've got to meet some of the men at the mill and see if we can't work out a settlement. . . ."

I said, "I'm sorry; I'll try again tomorrow," and you answered: "Don't bother: I may be tied up again. I won't know until late tomorrow."

You left then, with a strained "goodby" which I repeated in a voice equally unreal. We have never indulged in ritualistic kisses night and morning, but I did miss your warm grin and your equally warm, "So long, sugar. Be seeing you." I had a wild impulse to scream: "Don't leave like this! We may regret it the rest of our lives. . . ." But I sat and finished my coffee as if this were only another day.

The day crawled laboriously, it seemed to me, on its hands and knees. I knew my letter couldn't reach Duncan until late afternoon at best, and that he wouldn't call or wire so long as he thought you were at home. He didn't know what I might have told you and he would move cautiously for my sake, in the event that I had told you nothing.

But tomorrow morning, I thought with a shiver, Laurette might say in a rather alarmed voice:

"Long distance wants you, Miss Lynn. . . ."

And soon—perhaps tomorrow afternoon—I could look into Duncan's gray eyes and open my heart to him.

That was the night, Tim, that you chose for your automobile accident.

If I thought loosely I should probably blame it on coincidence or fate; actually it was part of the same combination of circumstances that had driven you to nurse an unwarranted grievance and me to summon Duncan. You were on the way home from the mill; your conference had been fruitless; you were in a mood of black resentment against all mankind. You had the right of way at

that intersection, and the right of way was more important to you than safety. It was one right you could assert, and assert it you did. I know that to be true from eyewitnesses: the other car was at fault, but so superb a driver as you might possibly have avoided the collision.

(Even now, Tim, I don't like to dwell upon that night. But it is part of the picture; something I must consider in my attempt to decide between you and Duncan.)

The telephone screamed just before eleven o'clock, and my heart quit beating for an instant. Duncan couldn't be so mad as to call now, and if it weren't Duncan it would be you—or disaster. I spoke a thin, frightened, "Hello," into the transmitter, and heard a voice that was vaguely familiar.

"Lynn? This is Ken Whitfield. Tim's had an accident and I was here at St. Luke's when they brought him in. I'll come over and get you."

I sat down, and my voice had no relation to me. "Tim!" (Oh, dear God, I thought; not Tim!) "How—how serious, Ken?"

"Can't tell yet." Ken's tone was brisk and professional and non-committal; the tone I dread most in all the world because it is inseparably linked with suffering and tragedy. "They've got him on the table now, and Terrill Tyson's on the way. I called you first so you could be dressing if you'd gone to bed. I'll be right there."

The strange voice said: "I'm dressed, Ken. I won't wait for you."

"You will. We can't tell anything for a while anyhow, and you'd wrap your car around a tree before you'd gone a block." The receiver clicked.

I was numb for a minute, thank God. I must have found a hat and pocketbook: women collect those items automatically, even in the midst of chaos. I remember walking into the kitchen to see if the door was locked, and deciding not to awaken Laurette and leave her with the burden of waiting. I fumbled in my bag until I felt my house key, then walked mechanically down to the street to save time.

Ken drove up immediately, and his smile was bright and blank.

"Terrill got there just as I hung up the receiver, thank the Lord. I relax as soon as I see him take over."

He talked on. He didn't insult my intelligence with meaningless reassurances, and for that I was grateful. He had "had a hen on," he explained, and had just finished delivering the baby and settling the mother when Tim was brought in. He knew I'd want Terrill, so he'd taken the liberty of calling him before he called me. . . .

"Rather I'd shut up?" he asked abruptly.

I smiled faintly. “Not unless I have to answer you.”

Tim, I was thinking: mangled and crushed and maybe dying. . . . Maybe even dead. . . . Mercifully a door slammed in my mind and I stopped thinking at all.

We turned into the driveway at St. Luke’s. Vaguely I was aware of lights blazing, white-clad figures hurrying quietly, numb figures motionless in a waiting room. Pain and death belong to no union; ask no six-hour day. . . .

“Let’s walk up,” Ken was saying. “That elevator’s as slow as Christmas.”

I became a numb figure in the second-floor waiting room. There was a dingy lamp burning beside a table that held dingy magazines. Is there a law, I thought stupidly, that requires rooms of vigil to reflect so *faithfully* their mood and their function?

“Sit down,” Ken ordered. “I’ll go see what the news is.”

“I want to go with you,” I said stubbornly.

“No use. You couldn’t get in, and it’s worse to wait there than here.” He hurried away.

I had no watch, and no idea how long I waited. Once I got up and walked to a window, but a shining black vehicle slid stealthily out the side entrance and I hurried back to my chair. I thought once of Duncan: dimly, as of someone in another world. “I must wire him early tomorrow,” I reminded myself, “and stop him from coming. . . .” There was no pain in the thought; all my anguish was reserved for you. (You and I have waited together in a hospital, Tim, but I pray that you may be spared the agony of ever waiting alone.)

Ken came at last and I sprang up and searched his eyes. They were human eyes now, and the reassurance in them was something to be trusted.

“All to the good. Sit down and I’ll tell you.”

The command was superfluous; I couldn’t have stood if I had wanted to.

You did a thorough job of it, Timothy, after years of masterly driving. A broken collarbone and three ribs crushed against the steering wheel; a deep scalp wound from the steel framework. A slight concussion, perhaps, but no skull fracture and no punctured lung, thank God. Pneumonia hung like a black shadow over you, I think, from those crushed ribs, and for a time there was still that threat which had never before been more than a word in the newspapers: “Shock.” But barring unforeseen contingencies (another newspaper phrase) your life was not in danger.

“Can I see him?” I demanded. (I wanted just to touch you, Tim; to assure myself that you still lived, even though your mind was temporarily blotted

out.)

Ken shook his head. I think he feared that the sight of you would bring me more pain than comfort.

“I wouldn’t, because he hasn’t quite come out of the ether yet. Why don’t you go home and try to get a little sleep? I’ll give you a sedative if you haven’t got one at home, and we’ll call you if we need you. We won’t, though, I’m pretty sure of that.”

I shall always feel closer to Ken for his help that night. He was just beginning his practice when David was born, and he had never been my physician; but we have known him and Evelyn in the casual, pleasant way that we know so many people; entirely unaware of the depths that lie beneath their hard and shining surfaces. If I had insisted on staying I think Kenneth would have stayed too, and disregarded the work that lay ahead of him the following day.

But Terrill came in just then, to reassure me and send me home. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he insisted. And then his weary eyes twinkled. “Your job’ll come when he’s convalescent. I’ll bet he makes a devil of a patient!”

“I want to see him,” I insisted stubbornly.

They gave in, having no doubt had a wide experience with anxious women, and took me to your room.

A nurse stood on either side of you, Tim, one with her fingers on your pulse. You looked scarcely human, and less than alive—except that you muttered now and then, and tried to stir. Your head was swathed in an immaculate turban; the bandages about your chest and shoulders gave you a hunched, distorted look beneath the covers. Your face was a greenish yellow and ether was thick and sickening in the closed room. I touched your hand very carefully and found it damp and cold.

Terrill took my arm and propelled me into the hall. “It’s the ether that makes him look like that,” he explained. “He’s reacting fine. I’ll give him morphia when he comes out, and there’s nothing you can do.” He smiled at Ken. “Take her home, Ken, and hit her in the head if you have to.”

I slept finally, under the influence of Kenneth’s sedative, and when I awoke the sun was high and hot. I sent a telegram to Duncan, praying that the message would reach him in time to stop him. I had expected to wake early, but I had underestimated the strength of Ken’s medicine. I know now, of course, that when the wire arrived he had already left for Argyll.

You were still full of morphia that morning, Tim, and I was nothing to you

but a silent, aching huddle in the corner of the room. The danger of shock had lessened but pneumonia still lurked in the background, and there would be no peace for me until the dark shape had moved away to take its place beside another bed. I sat there until lunch time, and then the nurse sent me home.

“There’s nothing you can do.” (How unanimous they all were about my uselessness!) “Lie down for a while this afternoon and come back later,” she suggested.

And so I went meekly home—and found Duncan’s message.

“I’m leaving immediately,” it said. “Hope to arrive soon after two. Bless you.”

I was too tired to feel, and far too tired for the ordeal ahead of me. I lay face down on my bed and prayed that I might tap some secret spring of courage that would carry me through.

He came at half-past two, and I answered his ring myself. When he saw my face all the light went out of his eyes; he stepped quickly into the hall and took my hands.

“My darling, what is it?”

Once again memory had played me false. Even in my confusion and pain I could re-discover the strength and texture of his hands; I could realize that even my love for you, Tim, was frail protection against that terrible pull towards him.

“It’s Tim, Duncan. I tried to reach you before you left. . . . Let’s go in the library.”

He followed me into the room, and taking my hands again he drew me down into his arms.

“What about him, Lynn?”

I told him, and began to cry in the telling. I hadn’t been able to cry until now, and of course I had no handkerchief: what woman ever had a handkerchief when she really needed it? He gave me his, that was clean and cool and fine, and—damned fool that I am—I have it still.

Wisely he let me cry. His face was still and austere with pain but his arms were steady, and once or twice I think he kissed my hair. Only when I had drawn a deep breath of exhaustion and relief did he ask another question.

“But he’s out of danger, isn’t he, darling?”

“The doctors say so.” But doctors don’t know everything, or tell all they

know. . . .

“Then hang on to that and try to forget the rest.” He lifted my face and made me look at him, knowing, I have no doubt, what it would do to me! “Would you rather I’d stay a while, or go and come back some other time?”

Now, of all times, I had to tell him the truth. The truth would have been difficult enough under any circumstances, but to say it, spent as I was, seemed beyond my strength.

“There won’t be any other time, Duncan. This is all.”

His mouth whitened, but he smiled and shook his head.

“No, it isn’t. When Tim is well again—when people and things take on their normal shape—we’ll talk the way we meant to talk today.”

Somehow I had to show him the truth. It was very clear to me then, but making him see it was another thing.

“No. Because this has answered my questions for me. When I thought last night that Tim might die, and the decision be made for me in a way I never asked for, then I felt as if I couldn’t go on living. When I thought of you, you weren’t even real to me. That ought to be sufficient, oughtn’t it?”

The confession would have daunted another man, but Duncan took it without flinching.

“No. Because no emotion can be trusted at such a time. You love Tim—I’ve always known that—and you’ve lived with him for twelve years. Part of your life is bound up with his, and to lose him would have meant that part of you would die too.

“But you love me too—in a different and better way, I think. If I’d been the one who was terribly injured, I think you’d have forgotten everything and come to me if I’d needed you. But your feeling wouldn’t have been conclusive—any more than this is conclusive. I wouldn’t have bound you by any generous, impulsive gesture made at such a time. At least,” he smiled a wry, mirthless smile, “I hope I wouldn’t. The flesh is pretty weak sometimes.”

The room was very quiet for a moment. There is a fire burning in the library as I write, but I can still feel the breathless heat of that afternoon; I can still see the delicate ladder of sunlight and shadow traced on the shining floor by a Venetian blind; I can feel the cool whiteness of Duncan’s linen coat, and the strength and comfort of his hand on mine.

(Hands, Tim, are the most vivid and characteristic things in the world. I can forget Duncan’s mouth and even his eyes, but his hands reach out to take me in spite of everything.)

When I had thought out an answer to his argument I broke the waiting

silence.

“It goes deeper than that, Duncan. I found out last night that my life had grown into Tim’s so completely that I couldn’t voluntarily separate it from his. Unless, of course, he should disintegrate or hurt me terribly and deliberately. Tim hasn’t done anything but be himself, and his self is decent and lovable. Married love—and this is something you can’t be expected to know or understand—is . . . well, it’s like a stone partly buried in the ground. Until you try to dislodge the stone, you can’t tell how deeply it’s embedded.”

He took that statement and examined it with the critical impersonality I have always respected in him.

“Are you sure, Lynn, that you’re not confusing love—and habit?”

“Yes. Because I grant the enormous part that habit plays in such a love. It’s one of the things that makes a break so impossible.”

His mouth hardened. For the first time since his arrival, I was conscious of that core of steel within him.

“That’s not a pretty confession, Lynn. And it’s rooted in cowardice.”

“Not pretty, but honest. And no one is more aware of his own cowardice than I.”

“Don’t you see,” I begged him, “that what I’m feeling now, when Tim is hurt physically, is just what I’d feel if I saw him hurt spiritually? Or even less than I’d feel, if I were the one who dealt him the blow? You can’t do that to someone you love, Duncan.”

He smiled faintly. “You’re doing it to me, sweetheart. Or am I unduly optimistic in believing that you love me?”

“No. It sounds queer in view of all this, but I do. I’ll never again assume that love is an *exclusive* emotion: there are as many different kinds of love as there are people we can give it to.”

“And on that level, monotonous plain that we call ‘daily living,’ you recognized the importance of loving me; you guessed that it might be bigger than habit or convenience or the supine acceptance of something that’s never really satisfied you or brought out the real value in you.” He shook his head. “No, my darling, I won’t end it here. I’ll wait a while longer, until you see that plain stretching endlessly before you again; and then I’ll come back.”

There was a quiet confidence in his voice that must be destroyed. Last night had shown me that I could no longer cling to Duncan and preserve my own integrity; and having made that decision, I was under a compulsion to cut him free of me. (Or so I thought then, Tim. The fact that I am writing this—that I am once more wavering between two choices—shows that Duncan knew

more of human nature than I.)

“No,” I said. “I won’t let you come back. I’ve decided—or had it decided for me—and that’s the end of it.”

He was watching me intently, seeing the conflict beneath my valiant insistence upon finality. At the time, I was unaware of the existence of conflict; but there again he was wiser than I.

“You’ve just named the weak spot, Lynn. Things like this can never be decided for you. The decision must be your own.”

“This *is* my own,” I insisted, almost childishly.

Instead of replying he merely smiled, and I felt more than ever like a child. (The secret of Duncan’s hold on me, Tim, is the strength that emanates from *him*. Of all the people I have loved, Duncan alone seems self-sufficient. He inspires me with a desire to rest against him; while you arouse in me a desire to give you comfort and rest. Since I have been old enough to recognize the battering ruthlessness of life, only Duncan has seemed capable of offering me a harbor stronger than the one I carry within my own breast.)

Having smiled, he shifted with disconcerting suddenness to an entirely different method of attack.

“All right, my darling; it’s your own decision.” He touched my cheek lightly. “My, but you’re brown! Did you have a good time at the beach?”

Taken by surprise, I came very near telling him the truth. But the memory of you, broken and in pain, stilled my confession.

“Lovely. The ocean always threatens my allegiance to the mountains.”

“And mine. But there’s still no reason why we can’t love them both, is there?”

There was a glint in his eyes that betrayed his thought, and I answered without meaning to.

“None. And no necessity for a choice, thank God!”

He laughed quietly. “How you do hate choices! It’s the most feminine thing about you.”

“Surely I’m entitled to a few feminine characteristics.” I had relaxed a little, grateful for his consideration in dropping the argument. “Will you go back to Altamont, Duncan?”

“No. I’ve been enduring Altamont since you left, because your ghost was there. When I drive out of Argyll I’ll decide where to go next: I might take a freighter somewhere, for a month or so, and get back to Meredith around the first of September.”

(Duncan walking the deck of a ship, with that light, springy tread of a runner . . . With the wind in his hair . . .)

“It sounds lovely,” I said.

He shook his head. “It won’t be. It’ll be flight, pure and simple. . . .”

I had no answer for that, and after a silence he said quietly:

“Well, I’d better go, and let you get back to Tim. I know you’re anxious to.”

He took me in his arms. I would never have responded so completely to that caress, Tim, if I had not been sure it was his last. Perhaps I was guilty of the grossest treachery even then; but farewells, like automobile accidents, level our defenses and destroy our perspective.

It began with a disarming gentleness: only the touch of his mouth against mine and the disciplined strength of his arms. And it increased in intensity so gradually that I was hardly aware of the quickening flame within me until the flame had blinded me with its brightness; until Duncan’s mouth searched mine and his hands brought to life a desire that I had thought to bury once and for all. I was a living proof of his contention that love is an art to be mastered like any other.

And afterwards I was standing in the middle of the room, shivering from head to foot.

“Duncan! What a rotten thing to do to me!”

His face was gray, and I knew with grim satisfaction that he was trembling as violently as I. All the gentleness was gone; when he spoke his voice cracked sharply.

“Lynn, for God’s sake! You’re an honest woman: be honest now. The heart doesn’t decide with *words*: those belong to cowards—and eunuchs. I’m not a eunuch, and I want you as much as your husband ever has. More, I think, because I’ll wager he can’t do *that* to you. And if that sounds brutal under the circumstances, remember that I’ve never seen Tim in my life, and that he stands between me and the thing I want most on earth. It wasn’t deliberate, my dearest, but it mowed down your lovely speeches like a machine-gun dropping tin soldiers. . . .”

His eyes blazed suddenly. “Now I *know* I’m coming back! If you haven’t got the courage to send for me I’ll come anyhow—when Tim is well again. I’ll find out when that time comes, even if you aren’t the one to tell me.”

I think he realized then that I was very near a collapse, because he took my hands and laid them against his face and his voice grew gentle.

“There’s so much *waste* in you, Lynn. So much emotion and feeling

unspent because you've never found an object worthy of your coin. You almost vibrate with it, and one day—unless you starve it to death—it will tear you to pieces. And if it dies, you'll die too. . . .

“I can't let that happen, beloved: too few people are capable of living, as it is. If you're afraid of the first hurdle, I'll take you over it myself.”

He broke off and kissed my hands slowly. Then he turned and left the room.

I stood perfectly still, Tim, and watched him go. He hadn't shaken my decision, but he had shaken me. I knew that he was taking with him my last chance for a richer and more varied life than I have ever known; but I wondered, with the hard realism that most women possess, if the life seemed richer simply because I had not lived it. Certainly it would have exacted much of me; more, perhaps, than I was able to give. Capacity is one thing; performance another. None of us ever attain a complete development of our own capabilities; we are conditioned and fettered by too many weaknesses within ourselves. My decision may have been rooted in cowardice, as he implied; or it may have been rooted in a different love and a stronger loyalty. Being human, and jealous of my self-respect, I preferred the latter explanation.

When he had gone, I drove to St. Luke's as if I were pursued by demons. I think I was pursued by demons, that you alone could exorcise.

You were conscious and in great pain. But when I stood beside your bed your eyes came to life and you smiled valiantly.

“Hi, beautiful!” you whispered. “You took a devil of a time getting back.”

“But—” I stammered in my astonishment—“you didn't even know I was here this morning. You weren't even conscious. . . .”

The smile gave way to something deeper and more precious.

“As long as I'm alive,” you said, “I'll know whether you're here or not. Sit down there where I can see you.”

I drew a chair into your line of vision, so that you needn't turn your throbbing head. And in that instant I said goodbye to Duncan without regret or a backward glance.

But as Duncan had said, most lives are lived upon an endless plain. We may rise to greatness now and then, but the effort leaves us spent; we are glad

to resume the plodding gait that is the mark of our limitations.

And so it was with you and me, Tim, during the weary days of your convalescence. For a time there is a purifying and ennobling quality in great pain or in great mental suffering, and both of us rose to the ordeal. It was afterward, when your pain and my anxiety lessened, that we folded our wings and sank back to earth.

You suffered intensely from the heat, and reminded me of it again and again. I knew you were uncomfortable, and I did my best to distract your mind; but I grew weary of your complaints, and had to struggle harder each day to keep my impatience from you. I was still shaken by your brush with death; still eager to atone for a disloyalty you never suspected; but the process was not an easy one.

And you have so few resources within yourself, my dear; you resent physical inactivity so bitterly. I tried to trick you into contemplation because the opportunity was so nearly perfect—and failed. After that I read to you, warning you in advance of my intent.

“Now that you’re flat on your back,” I laughed, “I’m going to improve your taste. I’m going to make you listen to something besides mystery stories—and like it!”

You grinned and endured my selections; occasionally you applauded them. Those times were the bright lights in my days. I started warily, with one of the less ponderous biographies and one of the less ponderous novels. You grew interested in Sam Houston and you chuckled once or twice over George Apley.

Emboldened by my success I tried “Conversation At Midnight,” more for its thought-provoking content than for its beauty. But when I glanced at you in the midst of Ricardo’s observation that “man has never been the same since God died,” I saw that you were sound asleep.

And after that I read you the newest Crime Club selection, and you were better satisfied.

Your inactivity was doubly hard, I know, because it came at such an inopportune time. Your labor dispute was still unsettled, and no other executive was so close to the men as you. When we brought you home (too soon, because you threatened to slip out and come anyhow) you began a series of conferences that I often had to terminate by threats of violence.

You resented my interference—vocally. “Look here, woman; if you don’t stop driving away people I’ve asked to come here, I’ll get out of this bed and go back to work!”

I laughed. “Oh, no, you won’t. I’ve locked up all your pants.”

You had to laugh with me, but you still grumbled. “If I don’t get out of here before long, neither of us’ll own a pair of pants. Wait till I get my strength back; I’ll make you sweat.”

I grimaced. “I’m doing pretty well at it without your help, my love. I think we need a new electric fan, by the way; this one—sort of limps.”

“We need a dozen. Call the power company and order the biggest one they’ve got.” You moved restlessly. “God, what weather! And all this damned adhesive gives me the itch.”

Your face was so white and thin that my throat ached with love and pity for you. You were so helpless, Tim; in those moments I longed to hold you in my arms and croon over you. But since I couldn’t do that, I had to find other outlets.

“It’s terrific,” I agreed. “How about a long, tall lemonade?”

“What’s wrong with a long, tall highball?”

“Everything. Too early in the day, and it’ll make you hotter than ever.”

“Okay, teacher. I’ll take the lemonade.”

Usually I made it myself, because there were so few things I could do for you. We often jarred on each other, I know; but at other times I was racked by pity and tenderness. I felt that one life wouldn’t be long enough for the love I wanted to give you. Duncan stole into my mind now and then, but each time I turned him out and came back to you.

And if I avoided the library in those days, it was because I have never been one to bite on an aching tooth.

I should never have proposed the trip to Altamont. I know now that it was a silly, sentimental thing to do. But I had two reasons, Tim. I thought that now, in late September, with most of the visitors and cottagers dispersed and the trees a flaming symphony of color, I might teach you to see and feel the things that I have seen and felt there. I hoped that you might catch from me something of the exaltation that I have shared with you on our trips to the sea.

The second reason was even more stupid than the first. By taking you there, I hoped to exorcise the ghost of Duncan Rhodes, so that I might return in the future with an untroubled heart. I hoped to superimpose your image upon his—and blot him out forever.

You grumbled a great deal when I suggested it, but Terrill added his voice

to mine.

“It’ll do you good to have three or four days in the mountains before you go back to work,” he said. “Brace you up after this rotten heat. Go on ahead, just so you take it easy. Take a short walk every day: not enough to tire you, but to help get back the use of your legs.”

And then he added: “Lynn needs a change herself. She looks worse than you do.”

I saw you glance at me in some surprise, giving me the whole of your attention. I did look worn, I suppose, because your eyes softened and you said *gently*:

“I’ve given you a fit lately, haven’t I, sugar?”

I smiled. “Not nearly as much of a fit as you gave me the night they brought you in on a stretcher.”

You looked soberly at me. “I’m glad it was me they brought in, and not you. If it’d been you, they’d have had to give *me* ether.”

Moments and speeches like that, Tim, break the monotony of the plain. We make the speeches lightly, or accept them with a laugh; but they are no less precious because of that. I began the preparations for our trip with a singing heart.

But I knew, even before we reached Pinnacle Inn, that I had been wrong. You didn’t catch my enthusiasm; you grew bored as soon as we left home. And being a man, you made small effort to conceal your indifference. I have observed that men will endure pain and danger and privation—and endure them gallantly; but boredom is a different thing. Boredom is the province of women.

I had engaged a room at the Inn; partly because an open fire was inadequate, and partly because a cottage had too many and too recent memories. Next year all would be different, I told myself. . . .

But until I saw the Inn through your hostile eyes I had never realized how crude and drab it was. (Not nearly so crude as our hotel at Ocean City, it is true, but the worshippers of Neptune have a Spartan stripe.) There were few guests left, since the season was actually over, and those few looked dull and elderly. They read newspapers and exchange crochet patterns and played Russian Bank before the huge fireplaces. Our friends had returned to their homes because the schools had opened; these people had left those days far behind them.

You began immediately to fret. “What on earth do people do here?” you

asked. “Where is there to *go*?”

Confronted with that attitude, I had no answer. If one feels as you did, there is no answer.

I said brightly: “You’ll begin tonight by going to bed. It’s what you’d do if you were at home.”

But our room was drab and cheerless too, and one of the bathroom taps dripped noisily. There was, as you pointed out, no reading light beside the bed. I felt as if the walls were closing in on me.

And the next morning I awoke to the discovery that even the elements had conspired against me. Fog had sunk quietly over the earth, and an Altamont fog is no trifling thing. I had always loved the silence and the sense of isolation that it brings, but silence and isolation have no charm for you. We were sentenced to the company of crochet patterns and Russian Bank, and you heard the sentence with bad grace.

That was one of the longest days I have ever spent. In the first place, I was on the defensive: I felt personally responsible for the fog, as if I had been guilty of mismanagement. I wanted to remind you that Ocean City has its cold and sunless days too, but that would only have antagonized you further. We watched the day go by on leaden feet, and went silently to bed at nine o’clock.

The next day was perfect: crisp and as clear as glass. The distant ranges seemed to creep nearer like friendly animals, inviting us to put out a hand and stroke their blue velvet flanks. We drove for a while in the morning, and after lunch we went to our room so that you might rest.

And later that afternoon, with bated breath and a racing heart, I took you to Beatty’s Rock.

It seemed to me that the panorama had never been so beautiful; that I was showing you all the kingdoms of the earth. I watched you stealthily; praying that you would feel that ecstatic sense of one-ness with the universe; that nearness to whatever deity you cleave to. Although you never guessed it, you were standing before the bar of my judgment.

But you swept the scene with an indifferent eye. You said, “Umhum . . .” in a vague, non-committal way. And then, God help me, you took out a notebook and began to list the things you meant to do upon your return to the office. . . .

I wanted to weep; I even wanted to laugh—because there was real comedy in such anticlimax. But most of all I wanted to curse the institution of marriage, which, within the space of a few weeks—or even a few *hours*—

could contain such extremes of emotion as I had known.

When I could speak without betraying myself I said quietly: "It's getting chilly here. Maybe we'd better go back."

You turned eagerly. And as we walked away you said:

"Is there a movie we can go to tonight?"

We left the next morning for home: on the question of departure we were for once in perfect accord. And so great was my sense of defeat that I began this letter on the day of our return.

Weeks have passed, Tim, since I began to write. You have regained your health and much of your good humor; we have resumed the pleasant, familiar routine. It is late October, and our trees are playing their own symphony of color. Amid the desolation that was my garden, only the chrysanthemums remain—a gallant last line of soldiers defying the onslaught of winter.

Two weeks ago I received a cryptic wire from Duncan: "The time has come, the walrus said . . ." And when I had read it I went in panic to a pay station and telephoned him.

His voice, distant as it was, seemed to flow through me in a warm tide, so that I recaptured for a moment all the power and the glory.

"It's Lynn, Duncan," I began inadequately, and his voice said:

"Oh, my darling . . . I've been walking the floor. Can I leave here tonight, Lynn?"

The receiver almost slipped through my shaking hand. "No, please. I was afraid you'd come without any more warning, and I called to ask you to wait." I told him, haltingly, what I was doing.

"Does it seem too ridiculous, Duncan?"

His reassurance was warm and instant. "Nothing you do, darling, will ever be ridiculous. But haven't I got the right to be—on the ground too, so to speak?"

"No. Because your presence would cause a crisis, no matter what I decide. You're just as real to me as you said you'd be; I don't even need to see you."

There was a silence. And then his voice, like a prayer.

"You won't—let me suffer too long, will you?"

"No longer than I can possibly help, Duncan. I promise you that."

He sensed that I had finished and his voice came again, throbbing over the miles of wire. “Lynn, I love you. . . .”

“And—I love you, Duncan. But there’s so much more to it than that. . . .”

“I know, sweetheart,” he said quietly. “God bless you.”

When I left the booth I was trembling from head to foot. But I came home and fought to regain my perspective, because the portraits were still incomplete.

I finished this ten days ago, Tim, and for ten days I have searched my mind and heart for the answer that must lie there.

I know now that Duncan was right; that decisions made under great emotional stress are not to be trusted. I know that your accident was fortuitous, and that it only postponed my day of reckoning with myself. For until I can arrive voluntarily at a decision, uninfluenced by any temporary or artificial pressure, I am still a house divided.

The accident accomplished one thing; the thing I pointed out to Duncan. It showed me that to hurt you intentionally would require a greater measure of courage—or callousness—than I have ever possessed. If I leave you I must be prepared for a deeper anguish, perhaps, than the anguish of that night.

And yet I know that reluctance and fear are insecure foundations on which to build a future. I realize, now, that if you hadn’t been injured at that particular time I might have yielded to the hunger for Duncan. And realizing all this, I see that my choice must rest upon a vital and irresistible need—either for you or for him.

I find little help in this record because the portraits are faulty and inadequate; too plainly the work of an amateur. And more serious still, I find little help in you.

Because something has happened to our relationship, Tim; the sense of unity and wordless communication is gone. That sense is too subtle and elusive to be defined, but every man and woman who love each other possess it. As I have said, you are again the pleasant, easy person I’ve known for so long; but we live together like friends. More than that, we are like friends who cling to courtesy for fear the friendship may be too frail for honesty and conflict.

If you had guessed the importance of Duncan I should, of course, see him as the reason. But you haven’t guessed; I’m sure of that. And I wonder, now, if you no longer feel a vital need of me; if you no longer love me as you once did. I can be wrong in assuming that twelve years of close association form an

unbreakable tie; the association may, as Duncan suggested, be based largely on habit. And the estrangement that preceded your accident may have severed our spiritual link beyond hope of repair. For all I know, we are living together because we have done it for twelve years. And if that is so, my fear of hurting you is an unwarranted conceit.

I could learn the truth, of course, by telling you of my problem and observing your reaction: the difference between love and habit would be unmistakable then. If we have deteriorated into habit you would perhaps be angry and offended; you would clutch at me as at a familiar possession that was being stolen from you. If you love me, you would be white and silent and perhaps mortally wounded—and you would never lift a finger to keep me.

But to tell you is too costly; I should be paying for my knowledge with our future happiness. . . . If the love is still there it must be kept unspotted by doubt; I must find out the truth in some other way.

And so I shall wait a little longer, like the believers of old, for a Sign.

November 12th.

I know the answer now, Tim, but because this letter has become very real to me I must close it before it goes, just as I have closed a door on Duncan.

You came home from the office last night, white and tired but with a look of triumph about you. I was in the library with a book in my lap, but I wasn't reading. And instead of going to meet you as I often do, I sat and waited to see if you would come to me.

I heard you in the hall; felt you glance into the empty living-room. Then your voice came, quick and eager.

“Lynn!”

“Hello,” I called. “I'm in the library.”

You came in with a rush, and it was then that I saw the weariness and the triumph.

“Everything's settled!” you said. “Ironed out finally, to the satisfaction of everybody. Lord, what a relief!”

There was no questioning the joy that surged through me. I cried, “Oh, Tim, I'm so glad!” and felt the tears hot on my eyelids.

You crossed to the couch where I sat, and I knew you meant to take me in your arms. But something checked your impulse and instead you sat slowly down and looked at me with intent, searching eyes.

“Does it make any difference to you?” you asked. “Are you really glad?”

I became so still that everything in me seemed to pause. I cried, “Tim! What on earth do you mean?” but I could hardly say the words.

You looked away from me, into the whispering fire. When you answered your voice was slow and thoughtful, out of the depths I have always sensed in you.

“For the past few weeks I’ve had a horrible feeling that I’d lost you, and I’ve gone around in a nightmare worse than the one about business. You’ve been—sweet and kind, but I’ve felt sometimes like nothing I did could make enough difference even to irritate you; like your mind was somewhere else. . . .”

The same thing, Tim, that Mike Hardy had guessed in me! When like a fool I had flattered myself that I was inscrutable; suffering nobly in silence and secret. . . .

I saw then that your capacity for considerate deception and your courage were infinitely greater than mine. So long as your trouble was financial you let me see it—and even inflicted it on me; when it lay also in fear for our love, you put on a mask of cheerfulness that deceived me more completely than I shall ever be able to deceive you.

I tried to answer you, but I had no words. I’ve had a great many words in this letter: some of them pretty and effective words that pleased me even as I wrote them; but this was too real and too self-revealing for rhetoric. As I searched you went quietly on.

“I know it’s been my fault, and that’s what has nearly driven me crazy. I played the damned fool at Ocean City and you understood it and forgave me; then I came back and charged around like a bear with a sore head, and took out all my grudges on you, and smashed myself up from rotten stubbornness. . . .”

I said, “Tim, that’s not true!” in a tight, choked voice, and you went on as quietly as if you hadn’t heard me.

“The funny part of it was, I didn’t care a damn about that labor mess as far as I was concerned. If the bottom drops out—and it may do that yet, because this is just a breathing spell and nobody’s safe any more—I can take it for myself. But not for you: it was thinking about you—and the possibility of *making* you work and skimp—that drove me out of my head. . . . But when I saw what my temper had done to you—how it had turned you into a kind of polite stranger—then I wanted to go jump off a bridge. I’ve had an awful feeling that maybe I’ve lost you for good; and if that’s happened I don’t believe I’ll ever fight for anything again. . . .”

I couldn’t listen longer. I sobbed, “Tim, stop it! I—I can’t *stand* it. . . .” and

turned blindly towards you.

You had been leaning forward, with your hands hanging limp between your knees, and there was defeat and despair in the long lines of your body. But you anticipated me and your arms were waiting as I turned.

There was no need for words then. This was more articulate and more precious than anything we could have said, and we knew it for the ultimate in understanding. I cried wildly for a while, in shame and terror for what I had so nearly done, and you took out a handkerchief and tried awkwardly to dry my eyes. You held me and waited quietly for the outburst to spend itself, and I believe my surrender and my unfamiliar helplessness were as welcome to you as to me. When finally I drew a deep, shuddering breath you drew away and looked at me with twinkling eyes.

“This is a devil of a way to celebrate a victory and a reunion,” you chuckled.

Nothing could have been wiser or more endearing than that chuckle. It restored my sanity; it flung a cloak of ridicule over my intense and humorless self-dramatization of these past months.

“Isn’t it?” I agreed promptly. “That’s the female in me. I’m all right now.”

You got up at once, and went to press the bell for Laurette.

“In that case,” you said, “let’s have a drink to celebrate.”

I shall burn this, Tim, when I have added a line *or two*. The letter is still not quite complete and—superstitiously perhaps—I am determined to write the final word.

There will be times when our patience and love will wear thin again beneath the friction of constant association. There will be times (I have no illusions about this) when I shall regret and long for Duncan Rhodes, and for the color and intensity that he infused briefly into my life.

Because—for all my recovered security—Duncan remains as admirable and desirable as ever. He suffers nothing by comparison with you: of the three of us, I am the only one who emerges from these pages weak and even ludicrous. Now and then I may regret having lost him, but I shall never regret having loved him, and I am proud of the compliment he paid me. Even now I find it worth everything it cost.

But I have learned once and for all that you and I are not two people; we are halves of a single individual. Between those halves there will always be a conflict of desires and personalities, just as I have known conflict within

myself; as you, I have no doubt, have known conflict within yourself.

But I cannot separate myself from you—any more than I can separate the halves of my own being. And mindful of that, I shall henceforth remain, I promise you,

Faithfully yours,
Lynn.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Memo. to Timothy Sheldon* by Marian McCamy Sims]