RENO FEVER

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By

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CHAPTER I

THE desert was soundless. The dumb stars flared; infinity was dark. The wind moved without a whisper, like a hand gliding and fingering. The salt brush, the bunch grass, the sage were wavering shadows, mutely stirred. Over the pale sand melted a dim spectral glow, as if the desert floor were a huge dull mirror. A low phosphorescence on the eastern horizon showed the moon just under the earth's curve.

Now from the east came a muttering . . . a growl . . . a roar. Across the moon's signal rode a glowing checkered streamer, whipped along faster than the coyote could run. Nearer and nearer it tore. The streamer widened. Straight through the silence crashed the howling train. Blazing headlight, gleaming black engine body, crimson vapor in the tender, dark mail cars with little railed windows, a rush of silver and white cloths and black waiters, green curtains, gray faces. The train flashed past like a devil, a sudden steaming in the brain, blinding the eye and shaking the heart. Now it was only two round red lights in the distance. The howl smoothed to a roar . . . a

growl . . . a mutter. The mutter died. Bushes tossed by the track . . . Silence resumed . . . The moon rose . . . Infinity was not disturbed.

It was the twentieth of April. In the morning, Elisabeth Wane opened her eyes. For a moment she wondered why she felt so battered, as though she had been tossed about in a box all night. She shivered. It was always either too hot or too cold in a sleeper. Her feet were frozen where the wind came in through that unspeakable little black screen. Her toes felt dead. Ah, she was unhappy, wasn't she? For a moment she had forgotten. Now the heaviness settled back on her mind.

She huddled the blanket around her shoulders and pinched the stiff metal catch of the window shade. Inch by inch it squeaked up the grimy pane. Colorless morning light flooded the berth. Everything was dirty, her nails, her gray fingers. There was soot in the diamonds of her wedding ring; her hair was harsh with soot. It made the heaviness in her mind worse to have everything so filthy. She felt suffocated and she looked eighty in that hideous mirror between the windows. But she was only twenty-seven. Everyone said it was a good thing this had happened while she was still young, before she had any children. She wondered. The view outside the window was the same as yesterday. The train might have been standing still for all the difference there was. Pale

sky, gliding desert, cones of hills, bone-white valleys, dusty little bushes waving by the track. And always the hard sun, the horizon scraped bare, as though here the earth were unillusioned at last.

But no matter how the desert looked, no matter if she could taste the gritty sand with her breakfast bread and butter, Elisabeth wished the train would keep on going, please God a week longer. While she was on the train, she could imagine she was just off on a trip, sent away for a rest, going to return to New York in a day or so to take up life as usual on 59th Street. She could imagine that her husband was at home, missing her, looking for her letters on the hall stand, being lonely at his meals. But tonight, when the train stopped at Reno, she could not go on pretending.

When she had asked at the Grand Central for a ticket to Reno, she felt sure the agent looked at her with hunting-dog eyes. She gripped the cold ledge of the ticket window and almost said: "Don't think I'm going out there for—you know. I'm only visiting a friend." But the psychologists would call that childish. Like many moderns, Elisabeth was afraid of the psychologists. She didn't care what the preachers said, but she minded Mr. Freud. Now the psycho-analysts were the priests and voodoo doctors. Psychology was a New York religion, rather like resting your head on a stone, but it worked. It taught you to be suspicious of loveliness, and that was

a good thing, because loveliness never lasted. The analysts had a nice little system and a slick patter.

For a year there had been no truth in Elisabeth's relations with Richard. For a year she had pretended to herself that Richard loved her as he had when they were married, seven years ago. On birthdays and Christmas she broke her heart, trying to keep up the atmosphere. She wrote the anniversary letter to put under Richard's pillow, though the words went dead as she put them on the paper. She knew her marriage had rotted away, but she tried to keep from saying so. She continued the illusion in their times together that everything was as it had always been—until Richard crashed through the disguise. He took off his falseface and said: "Set me free."

That false year had distorted her mind, so that now she scarcely knew the fake from the real. She had not led a life without hiding and covering in so long that she had lost touch with truth. She wondered what it was now. All that pretending had perverted her heart, eaten away whatever was clear and actual, left mush and slush. None of her emotions were translucent; all were muddied. She wanted to live adequately. There were a lot of women who secretly wanted to learn how to live. But they have got themselves in such a jumble.

When she had crossed the tangled Grand Central floor to take the Reno train, she was looking for Richard. Every tall ruddy young man gave her a turn. He had known

she was leaving. Up to the last minute there was time for him to come rushing. . . . "My darling, it was all a mistake!". . . When she went through the gate, when she sat in her berth, watching the other passengers stow away their suitcases. . . . Richard might come. A Western Union boy made her heart pinch. She kept looking at her wrist watch and forgetting what it said and having to look again. There was even time in the last seconds . . . "Reprieve!" . . . "Here is your pardon from the Governor!" . . . A man stood in the door of Drawing Room A and said: "Good-bye. Remember me to Sadie. God bless you, Helen."

The conductor shouted: "Bo-o-ord." The lonely word echoed in that hollow underground. Everything grew dreadfully quiet except for the little restless movements and tiny voices of the passengers in the car. The train glided away so gently that at first she did not know it was moving . . . emerging finally from the rattling darkness to the clutter of 125th Street: blankets in the windows, women in pink kimonos watching the train. But it seemed as if she yearned over the blankets and the women in pink kimonos, because they were part of what she left behind . . . I'll pull such foolishness out of my heart . . . next week.

She had not told many. One told it as charily as news of cancer. She remembered her great-aunt whispering: "My dear, the doctor says—a growth of some sort. If

I had only known years ago . . . " One's attitude in telling about a diseased marriage was a muddle of shame and courage and moaning defiance and noble priggish suffering. Sometimes one told it nicely, sometimes not. Elisabeth could not be proud of the way she had told Blanche. And yet she had behaved thoroughly well in the conversation with Susan. Both Blanche and Susan asked her if she were sure she was doing the right thing.

What is the right thing, right and not damned fool? There was no one who could tell you what to do when your husband said that he did not love you now . . . an event old and new as death. It was a problem that had never been solved because it had so many hideous mutations and because each woman to whom it came beat her way through in blindness and whispers. There were three schools of whispers. One school hissed: "Why should he get off free just because he wants to? I won't move away to some messy little hole simply because Ernest wants another woman." Another school said: "I'm too proud to hold him against his will." The third said: "Okay. Good riddance."

Elisabeth was muddling along with all three schools, believing in each on different days or different times of the same day. She suffered, struck out blindly, forgave and took back her forgiveness, gushed with understanding and dried with hate, was gentle and acid, low and thoroughbred by turns. So often she caught herself be-

having badly and could not stop; she turned her eyes in and watched herself be vile. Sometimes she woke up in the morning and said: "I have accepted all this. I am resigned." And by afternoon she was pleading and beating again, not doing well. She wanted Richard to say afterward: "Elisabeth behaved beautifully." But in behaving beautifully she did not want to be an idiot.

She had been on the train three days now, watching the telegraph poles jump by like knocks on her brain. Her hunger for home was stretched back over the lengthening rails like nerves spun from the car wheels. Pale and squeamish she had stood in the door of the observation car, seeing the east pushed back into the distance, listening to the whine and squeak and beat of steel. She had tried to write her mother, but all she could think of was: "Dear Mother—I am on the train." She had sat in an observation car chair and heard the conversation of people from all over the country . . . "I think the Central has a better roadbed" . . . "Yes, there's a wonderful hotel in Albuquerque" . . . Once she was forced to enter the conversation and she found herself chattering brightly and wildly about Richard . . . "When my husband and I were in Virginia" . . . "My husband is very fond of plums" . . .

There was never a treadmill like the mind. All these smudged thoughts trundled through Elisabeth's brain as she raised the window shade and looked out on the desert

this last morning. Why didn't she throw them all out of her brain and have another assortment? It would be such a comfort to open the bureau and see new delicate thoughts, unhandled, uncrowded. But to draw out a lot of greasy recollections. . . . Lord, give me the wherewithal to buy new things for my mind! Don't tell me that I can't get rid of the old. Where's that Bonfire of yours?

After breakfast the conductor stopped at her berth. (There had been such a difference since Chicago; the officials were human.) This was a large rosy man with gold-rimmed glasses, fat rosy hands, a sort of ideal conductor.

"Well, we make Reno tonight," he said.

Elisabeth nodded. His hands were pink sponges.

"There's a little lady in the next car who's going, too. You ought to be friends. Shall I bring her in?"

"I'd rather—not," Elisabeth faltered. She wanted to put off as long as she could anyone taking it for granted. Let me live in my huddle of lies until tonight.

The conductor's sponge face broke into a tolerant smile that nettled Elisabeth. Obvious tolerance is so humiliating.

"I don't want to see anybody else who's been gypped," she said.

"Cheer up. In a couple of weeks you'll be having the time of your life. If you had travelled this road as long as I have you'd know that. I've seen hundreds of cases."

"How do you know they have the time of their lives?"

"I see the difference in the women before and after. I take many and many a quiet young lady like yourself out to Reno. Sometimes I hardly know them after the six weeks. They sure come back gay—not sitting around and moping. I never saw such a change as that town makes overnight. You'll be like the rest—a bottle of gin in your bag and rarin' to go."

"Have you ever stayed in Reno?"

"I never have but I'd like to. It must be some town. It's got only about seventeen thousand people in it but —say—I figure it isn't only a town. There's no place just like it anywhere in the world. People go there from all over the United States. There isn't a swell family that hasn't had *somebody* out in Reno. It's a cross-section of our country, you might say."

"A cross-section of American mistakes. . . ."

Elisabeth felt superior when the conductor prophesied she would come back with the bottle of gin. He must have met the type of divorcee who fills the tabloids. What difference could Reno possibly make in a person, except the legal difference? A woman with a code was safe anywhere. The conductor must be talking about those hard-eyed women. Anyone with a code . . . She wondered about the "little lady" in the next car. She had been suspicious of every man and woman on the train. That smart young girl in Lower Seven with rings under

her eyes . . . was she? The pale weedy man, the fat brunette with the menthol stick, the composed tweed person reading "The Spur." . . .

Elisabeth wondered if anyone had singled her out as Reno-bound, if she looked the part with her brownish hair, mouse-colored eyes, and dark blue dress with the white organdie collar. Even to say "Reno" still gave her a small electric sensation. It was muddled with all the cheap jokes and songs she had heard. . . . "Life in Reno must be grand; Women walk there hand in hand; Shouting the battle cry of freedom."

All afternoon the telegraph poles knocked by. Liquid blue shadows began to pour over the desert, washing through the valleys, gathering deep in the hills. After the sun stopped staring, this country was better, like a harsh face asleep. She ate an apple and felt so mean that she left the naked core on the window sill. She wanted to make the car ugly, smear it with crackers, leave a rotten cheese under the seat. At five the porter turned on the lights. They gave the car such a weary lurid effect. If she only had a nasty banana to lie beside her on the green plush . . . a wad of chewing gum as large as the porter's head. Let's think of something vulgar.

She remembered what a change came over the apartment on 59th Street when she put on the light. She had always been uncertain which lamp should be first . . . the blue and almond, the squatty opalescent, or the parch-

ment with the gentlemen in their pink hunting coats. But no matter which lamp she chose, the room always broke into a smile. The glossy light smoothed the stippled rows of books, the vast soft flowered chairs, the ivory monk and the gold bell, the Italian water jar with the roses. It flashed on the mahogany, glowed on the crimson in the rug, glittered in the brass, shimmered over the delicate cups on the shelf. She used to watch for the ivory monk, and the roses on the water jar, and the cups, because they never showed so well by day.

Elisabeth wondered if she were going to faint or die. This light looked so green. She snapped the socket lamp by her seat on and off. She felt wretched. She could see nothing now outside the window, not a house light. They might be riding in a vacuum. Black beat against the glass. There was nothing in her world but blackness and the hum of the train and this queer lurid car with people sitting up in their seats like corpses. Perhaps they were all corpses. Perhaps everyone was dead.

This was the way you felt just before you reached the hospital for the operation. This must be the worst. When you reached the place and once gave yourself up . . . There were so many women that life never turned and bit. There were so many women who glided imperceptibly through marriage. There were so many women (ugly women) whom husbands kept on loving. Emily and Susan and Blanche were snug with no huge

shapes sitting in their chairs. Why was Elisabeth Wane singled out? . . . "I suppose I'm the average intelligent woman going out to Reno. What I feel there will be what any woman would feel there . . ."

The porter came, his black head bowing . . . "We'll be in Reno in ten minutes, ma'am" . . . She put on her gloves. One always felt armored against deep feeling in gloves. They reminded you so much of civilization. The passengers were staring, as if she were getting off into exile. The girl in Lower Seven was not for Reno after all, nor the brunette with the menthol stick, nor the tweed person reading "The Spur."

Elisabeth had never known a satisfactory result from any attempt at communication with God. Any faint yammering attempts at prayer had only made her feel lonely. She lacked the imagination for prayer. But something drew itself erect and pinched together in her heart and said: "Now somebody remind me to be brave for a month and a half. . . ." She saw lights outside. She closed her lips tight to keep from whimpering. The train slowed to a stop. There was a moment's dead silence, then the sound of running feet and voices . . . "This way out" . . . "Here you are, Eskimo Pie" . . . "I'll write. I'll remember" . . . "Baggage, baggage" . . . "We won't forget each other. I'll remember" . . . A woman wailing over and over: "Can't you see you've ruined these carnations, Edgar?"

CHAPTER II

WHEN Elisabeth awoke, thin sunlight was blowing in her room. Pale yellow leaves were shimmering over the ceiling. She lay still, breathing gently in the filmy light, vaguely glad of being clean and not gritty, trying to keep sheltered in a doze.

She had found the hotel motor, had a confused impression of driving down a short crowded Main Street with an electric sign in the form of an arch: RENO THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD. The motor had stopped before a hotel with an awning, a revolving door, and a conventional lobby in gray and red. She had started to register from New York City, but the hotel clerk had interrupted. . . . "If you are coming here for the usual reason, you better write your residence as Reno, Nevada." . . . Then she wrote her first Reno lie. The bellboy was very pleasant, but she imagined he was wondering what this new sucker was like. The telephone operator, in a yellowish dress with a rose in her belt, had looked up curiously from her switchboard.

The name "Reno" was a smell of cheap perfume, a

mouthful of chewing gum, mascara smeared with tears. Elisabeth was prepared to hate it all, to spend her time crouched away, hating. Well, this blue and gray room was nice enough . . . the bed against the wall . . . a bureau opposite, the top covered with glass, the drawers painted with a little design in yellow roses . . . a desk diagonally across the corner near the window . . . blue window curtains . . . blue easy chair . . . two good lamps, one behind the easy chair and one on the desk. It wasn't half bad. Here she could read all the books she had been planning for a long time to read. She could get all that rest and quiet the doctor had been talking about ever since she was fourteen.

It was expensive in this hotel, but Richard had been so anxious for her to get a divorce that he did not mind expense. She could have anything in the money line, so long as she would set him free. Richard treated her as kindly as one treats a person who is going to die . . . "Don't just take a lower berth. Have a section." . . . "Now you must be comfortable out there, Elisabeth. I want you to have the best." . . . He would be married again the day she got her decree.

Everyone said that Americans were accustomed to divorce by now. Every woman took it so calmly, until it was herself. Then she recognized divorce for what it is . . . tearing up all the plants in your garden when they are in full bloom . . . throwing all your rings out of

the window into bilge water . . . seeing a leper and having him come up and take your arm. Oh yes, everyone was very sophisticated and unperturbed until divorce came too close. And then, of course, there were the snug women with the little mouths who hated unhappy women. Don't go near a woman with a little mouth.

Elisabeth thought of having her breakfast sent up and avoiding the public a while longer. But again she thought of her witch doctors and remembered they would say it was not mature. She dressed carefully, using less rouge and lipstick than usual. She did not want to look—as a woman out for a divorce is supposed. Yes, she was sensitive about it. And she did not have a little mouth.

She went down into the dining room off the lobby, stiffening herself for the expected gaze. But there was no one, except the waiters standing in attitudes against the wall. The little white tables with their vases of daffodils were all empty. After one astonished moment, Elisabeth understood. It was only ten o'clock. No one in a colony of idle women would breakfast so early. They would stay in bed as long as possible, to make the day shorter. The head waiter led her to a table and brought her a Reno morning paper. He was short and sleek with a broad mustache, a checked necktie, and an Elk's tooth set in gold on his watch chain. Elisabeth had always wondered if Elk's teeth came from real Elks.

"Fine day, ma'am."

"I hadn't thought."

"This your first day here?"

"I got in last night."

"You're going to be with us at the finest time of the year. Just a few days now and we'll have real spring. There'll be maybe a few more storms and then wonderful weather. You bet. When spring comes here, it comes with a bang."

While Elisabeth ate the fair-to-middling food (the coffee tasted as though it were mixed with molasses), she opened the Reno paper and read that Mrs. Loretta Early had gotten a divorce on mental cruelty, charging that her husband would not let her turn on the radio . . . that the road over the summit of the Rocky Mountains would be open by the first of May . . . She laid down the paper and leaned her chin on her hand. That last news made her breath catch. When she was at school and drew maps of the United States, the Rocky Mountains had seemed Romance. She had drawn them as little spider marks down the west coast, the fabulous Rockies full of gold and silver. Well, here she was.

Breakfast was over. That much was done. She went up in the elevator.

"Fine day," the elevator girl said.

"You always have fine weather in the Rockies, don't you?"

"We'll be having it good all the time now. You'll be

here at the best time of the year. Golly, it's beautiful in May. It gets warm all of a sudden."

A broom and carpet sweeper stood outside Elisabeth's door. The chambermaid was turning over the mattress; the bed sheets were on a chair; both windows were open; the curtains flapped; the air was fresh and cold.

"Lovely day, ma'am."

"Swell day."

"How do you like Reno?"

"I—it's all sort of strange——"

The chambermaid nodded wisely, like a doctor who has heard these symptoms before . . . white uniform . . . shock of yellow hair . . . rouge . . . glasses.

"That's what they all say. The first week is the worst. The days seem so long, you think they'll never go. Many and many a woman who comes here spends her first week crying. But after that they brace up and make friends and when the six weeks is over they're having the time of their lives and the days don't seem long enough. You bet."

Elisabeth did not believe that talk. The hotel employees seemed to be trained to cheer the newcomer. It was all very nice but . . . She decided to use up time by calling her lawyer. He had been recommended to her in New York and she had written him from there. She would let him know that her term began last night. As she gave his telephone number, she felt those horrible

boiling tears in her eyes again. She had never supposed there would be a lawyer having to do with her and Richard. Such a short while ago they would have laughed at a lawyer . . . "Imagine us, Richard!" . . . "So long as we both shall live . . ."

"This is Mrs. Wane, Mr. Winter. I'm—I'm here."

The lawyer's voice was bright and nasal.

"Well, you've got a good day for it."

"When can I see you, Mr. Winter?"

"Come on over now. I'm just around the corner."

Elisabeth asked the hotel clerk the way. He told her Virginia Street was the name of the main thoroughfare she had travelled last night in the hotel motor. This morning it was warm with a thick wheat-colored sun. Was there a special color to sunlight in the West? The sky was blue and flashing as steel reaping knives. She was too stirred to be very noticing, but she saw a bridge over a swift dark river, a block of stores, a yellow hill faintly capped with snow. She felt better for Mr. Winter's matter-of-fact tone, as if a divorce were nothing monstrous, as if life might go on afterward. It was all very cheerful. There was no formality in the anteroom, no waiting, no "Mr. Winter will see you now." The door opened and there he stood, young and tanned and brisk, with sharp narrow eyes and a lean jaw.

"Did you feel the stairs coming up, Mrs. Wane?"

"I decided I must be getting old. I'm breathless."

"It's the altitude. It bothers everyone at first. You see we're up five thousand feet. Do you feel the electric shocks when you touch any metal?"

They went into his large light office and sat down. There was the usual furniture. Over the door was an Elk's head. On the walls were pictures of the desert, his diploma, two elderly people who must be his parents. Elisabeth faced a broad window. A hulking bare branch, shaped like a scythe, whined against the glass. Beyond it was the white dome of the Courthouse with a bright new American flag.

"You're going to be crazy about Reno, Mrs. Wane. You wait until the fishing gets good. I'll take you fishing. Like to go? This country is just speckled with lakes."

"It sounds wonderful. The last time I went fishing was with my—I mean—in Maine."

"That's a bargain. Shake. I'll take you fishing if it's the last thing I do."

"I wanted to tell you, Mr. Winter—my husband——"

She paused. Her voice failed to a whisper.

"I'd like to go out in the desert, Mr. Winter, and open my mouth and howl. I've never cried as loud as I want to. There's always been someone around."

"Wait before you howl." His hand slid in his pocket. "I want to show you a picture of my boy. Isn't he some kiddy?"

Elisabeth looked down through her tears at a grim child on a tricycle.

"He looks very—children are lovely."

"Let me tell you, young woman, he's the greatest kiddy in Reno. It's not just because I'm his father. Everyone thinks so."

Elisabeth wished Richard had wanted children, had been the sort who might keep a picture in his pocket, even if it was silly. But Richard would never do anything of that kind. Like many modern young men, Richard concealed his virtues and exhibited his vices. He would rather show his friends the picture of his mistress, than the picture of his child.

"Mr. Winter—I wanted to discuss——"

"Funny thing how I happened to meet my wife. She came out here for a divorce and I met her and we were married the day she was free. It's for crying out loud how things happen. Are you going to be married?"

"Oh no. Why, I never——"

"Keep your shirt on. You'd be surprised at the number of women who are. We figure that about 80% of the women who come out here have sweeties back home in some part of the United States. They won't leave one meal ticket till they get another, you know. Some of the sweeties are paying the women's bills out here. When the stock market crash came, a lot of them had to take the first train back home."

Mr. Winter spoke very fast. The words, as they jerked from his mouth, were nasal and angular. He was smoking, and his lips touched the pipe stem with a kissing motion. Elisabeth thought she would remember forever this office . . . the pictures on the wall . . . the Elk's head over the door.

"I'm not in love. I haven't gotten over my husband. I wish I could—I—no, I'm not in love."

"All the better. I think any woman is wise to have a little freedom after her divorce. Gives her a chance to draw breath and look around."

"Mr. Winter—I was wondering what grounds to use. We never settled it in the letters."

"My dear girl, there's plenty of time. But we can decide it now if you want. What was the matter with your husband?"

Elisabeth looked out of the window at the whining branch of the cottonwood tree . . . the Courthouse dome . . . the bright new American flag. It was difficult to say what was the matter with Richard, because it seemed involved in what was wrong with the whole country. She couldn't start talking about him without bringing in civilization. It was maddening work, tracing back the causes. How often she had done it, lying awake at night . . .

"He told me that he didn't—care any longer. He

stopped coming home. If he ever was home, he didn't speak."

"Another woman?"

"He intends to get married. She——"

"Any evidence of misconduct?"

"I had evidence. But I didn't want to use it. You see —Richard—my husband and I—loved each other. We were married when we were both very young. It was all so—sweet. Everything was sort of young and gentle. After I'd loved him like that, I couldn't—use such evidence. If I did that, I wouldn't even have my memories. Do you see that, or do I sound idiotic?"

"We'll use mental cruelty. That's the usual ground. Most refined people choose it. We'll make our charges as light as possible so that nobody will be hurt and everybody will be happy. We'll think them up tomorrow. Your husband won't contest anything will he?"

"He wants the divorce."

"In the name of all that's holy, don't tell the Judge that your husband wants the divorce. That would be collusion and the case would be thrown out. I'll send Mr. Wane the power-of-attorney papers to sign so that his interests can be represented out here by his own counsel. Meanwhile, you run on back to the hotel and forget it. There's nothing for you to do but live here."

It was time for lunch, at last. The large broad-windowed dining room was curiously gloomy, although here

and there on the white tables soft blurred squares of sunlight simmered. But now there were people. Elisabeth saw her contemporaries. But it was not any more difficult than walking into a New York restaurant. A few women looked up indifferently; two men at a corner table stared. There were about five women to each man in the dining room.

There was music. A cabinet by the wall was playing: "Love Is Like a Flower" in a hard nasal tone. Under the waltz time purled the running water of women's voices with the peculiar ebb and flow that voices have in dining rooms. The men over at the corner table were carelessly dressed—sack suits, spotted ties, wrinkled socks, high shoes. But the rest of the room might be the St. Regis at the lunch hour. Over the chair backs hung soft thick plumes of silver fox and sable. Arms with diamond bracelets were reaching out for cigarettes. There were shoulders with corsages. Hats were small and smart. Faces were—well—money faces. Elisabeth adjusted her mind to the discovery. Somehow she had expected to find here only cast-off hags, or else minxes. Was she like the conductor?

Most of the women were lunching in twos and threes. At one large table, with a heap of red roses in the center, both men and women were eating. They were laughing and pulling the roses out of the bouquet. No one in the room looked as if her heart were broken. Everyone

seemed to know everyone else. Some women were passing from table to table, bending over and talking. Elisabeth ate in a daze . . . the click and chink of dishes, the yellowish blobs of sunlight on the white cloths, the running water of the voices, the gloomy windows, the cigarettes in the long holders, the hurrying waiters, the metallic gaiety of the phonograph . . . and the food on her own plate that seemed large and tasteless and hard to swallow . . . Oh, God, are they all so easy in their minds?

She shouldered the burden of the long afternoon ahead. It was now two o'clock. She stopped at the hotel desk to ask for mail.

"Nothing for you, Mrs. Wane. If there's an air mail letter we'll send it up. It's the policy of the hotel."

"I might get an air mail letter."

"You're going to be with us at the best time of the year. All of a sudden spring'll be here. Some of the roads are still blocked with snow, but they'll be open soon and you can take lots of trips. You bet. There's historic Virginia City. And Lake Tahoe is one of the beauty spots of the world. You'll be crazy about Tahoe."

"Is there a fruit stand in the hotel?"

"They mostly go to Howell's for fruit and to Dunn's for candy."

Elisabeth did not know who "they" were. She believed it was a slip of the desk clerk's tongue. When

she was back in her room (every time she went into her room it was like heaving a sigh), she telephoned a dentist that her lawyer had recommended and made an appointment. She might as well use the time in getting her teeth up-to-date. In her sorrow, she had let all her fillings go. She was gathering up her clothes for the cleaner and presser when someone knocked on her door. She ran to open it . . . a message from Richard in a yellow envelope . . . "My darling, it was all a mistake. I find I cannot live without you. . . ."

It was a rigid spear of a woman in a loose checked coat with a pocketbook under her arm and a bouquet of knotted pale forsythia.

"I wonder if you would like to have your cards read, madam."

"What cards?" Elisabeth asked. She had an idea it was something to do with the divorce.

"Your cards—your fortune. I've been here in the hotel, reading cards for some of the ladies, and I thought you might want my help."

Elisabeth was startled. Fortune telling was associated with county fairs and places like Atlantic City. But to come to her door before she had been here a day—this town must be like a county fair.

"Well—I—I don't believe in fortune telling."

The woman rubbed her brown fingers through the forsythia. She spoke in a low mysterious tone.

"You'd be surprised how many ladies have said that and come to believe in me afterward."

"Not this afternoon."

"This is a crisis in your life, my dear. You need all the guidance you can get. You may change your mind. Here's my card."

"Yes—I know it's a crisis. But I don't feel——"

"That's all right. You're new here. You take my card. You'll change your mind. They all do."

Of course there were fortune tellers. They always fattened on unhappy women. Wherever people were discontented and idle, there astrologers, palmists, crystal gazers, swamis flourished, making their living out of stupidity and fear and impatience. Reno was their Paradise. Many a woman comforted that terror in her heart, watching the little cards laid out in rows . . . "She told me my next husband would have wads of money."

At three Elisabeth went out of the hotel again, anything to get away from her room. More calm than this morning, she saw that Virginia Street was a long main business artery, curving at the bridge, crowded with cars. She leaned on the stone parapet of the bridge, staring at the lead-colored river that broke into a low lead-colored falls. It was a loud river. She could hear it in her hotel room. The narrow livid water ran between leafless bushes and naked trees until it disappeared between those yellow-brown hills that were topped with snow like so many

cup cakes. She looked down at the hurrying flood until her mind felt dazed.

She found Howell's fruit store only a block away, as the hotel clerk had said. While her dozen oranges were being dropped into the bag, she weighed herself on a machine near the counter.

"You want to watch your weight," the girl clerk said cheerfully. "They all get fat in Reno."

Again that mysterious "they." Elisabeth stepped off the scales. She had lost eleven pounds in a month.

"Do you want it charged? Most of them open charge accounts."

It dawned on Elisabeth "they" meant the divorce colony. She was now "they." She felt branded; she flushed. She wondered by what signs the clerk had known she was "they." She had imagined she looked—different.

"How did you know I was here—for the reason that everyone is here?"

The girl gave a hard wise smile, tying the top of the orange bag with a string.

"We get to know. It's a gift. The way I told you was —well, you look like you're killing time."

Elisabeth asked the way to the public library. Even after all the time on the bridge, it was only half-past three. The library would be a real rescue. Now she had the opportunity of a lifetime to read such books as Boswell's Life of Johnson. When she was through with that,

she could read up on the West. New Yorkers never realized there was any West. She felt a moment's happy scorn of all the women here who would fritter away their time while she . . . A woman with a code . . .

Mercifully the afternoon grew late. The green-shaded metal lamps came on in the library, turning the book pages yellow. Elisabeth wondered why there were so many young men in the reading room until she remembered the University of Nevada was somewhere in Reno. She stayed as long as she could. She was not called "they." She went back to the hotel with Boswell and a book about Virginia City. The sun was setting over the river in chill violet. The naked trees and bushes were the color of wine. The sky overhead . . . apple-green. There was a wind rising. It was the home-going hour . . . "Tell me what you have been doing all day, darling . . ."

She went into the soda fountain that opened off the hotel, bought a magazine, and went up to her room. (She would start those serious books tomorrow.) But when she sat down to read, what drivel. The ravishing heroines . . . the dashing illustrations . . . She tried story after story, turning over the lather of words, feeling squeamish when she saw the word "love." But it was all hollow-hearted. If she could only find one story that was clear and gentle without that fixed grin . . . She felt uninterested as a shipwrecked sailor on a raft, trying to read. He is sick with dread; the waves slide under; he is

watching for a sail. His mind cannot be captured by anything that begins: "Lady Esmeralda was especially beautiful that evening. She wore her pearls."

At six she could not bear it any longer. She went downstairs. The dining room was lighted with little yellow lamps in brackets around the walls. The great window squares showed deep blue. There were red carnations in all the vases. The phonograph was playing: "I'm Just a Vagabond Lover" . . . "Pagan Love Song" . . . The place was almost as vacant as it had been at breakfast. Elisabeth felt as if she were sitting down to eat at the end of the world, not in America at all. One felt so conscious at night this was a town set in a desert, all its little lights swallowed up in emptiness, in miles and miles of darkness without houses.

She always missed Richard most at night. Sometimes in the morning she could forget him; in the afternoon she could feel resigned. But now, looking down at the white tablecloth, her hand around the stem of her water glass, she covered the three thousand miles across the Continent in one soft bound . . . across Nevada and the Great Salt Lake of Utah . . . Colorado mountains . . . Nebraska . . . Chicago and Lake Michigan . . . rolling Indiana . . . Ohio . . . the cluttered smokestacks of Pennsylvania and New Jersey . . . across the ferry-laden Hudson River . . . up Fifth Avenue to 59th Street.

She was back in the apartment, with dinner ready,

listening for the elevator to stop at the fifth floor. When Richard came home, it always seemed as though life were solved for the evening. She had asked nothing more from God. On rainy nights, when he stooped to kiss her, his face was wet and cold . . . "It's a terrible night out. Seems good to be home." When the Reno waiter put a menu into her hand, and this Reno dining room slowly became actual around her, she wondered where she had been. Was she in New York or Nevada? Was she where her heart was, listening and feeling and seeing and knowing, or was she here with her unwilling muscles and bones?

When she was eating her meringue, the dining room began to fill. One by one the women stood in the doorway, looked a moment, drifted to tables. Some were in evening clothes. Elisabeth made a mental note to dress tomorrow night. She admired the morale of any woman who would dress for a solitary dinner out here in Nevada. It showed quality. No one seemed quite as cheerful as this noon. The voices were not as loud. Perhaps they all did most of their missing at night. There was a pale beautiful young girl who came in alone . . . black velvet with puffed sleeves, round neck, high waist, and a short train. She sat down at a table by the wall and leaned her cheek on her hand.

Out in the lobby, Elisabeth inquired about the motion picture theatres. The desk clerk said there were five,

chief among them being the Wigwam and the Majestic. He told what was running, when the shows started.

"You're awfully kind," Elisabeth said. "I don't mean to be cynical—but you do make it a business, don't you?"

"Well, yes. We want everyone to be comfortable. There's no hotel in the whole country like this. It's quite a problem, keeping all our guests comfortable, especially when they have their minds made up that Reno is terrible. But after they once get acquainted. . . ."

It was dark now on the street and the air was spotted with electric lights. The sky was black. There was a cold hard wind. Far down Virginia Street burned that sign: RENO THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD. Elisabeth went around the corner to the Majestic. It happened to be the first time she had ever gone to the movies by herself. She mustn't allow herself to feel Godforsaken. She watched her change run down the little trough.

This time of night was too early for the divorce colony. What Elisabeth could see of the audience looked like a different sort. There were young couples, university students, making noises whenever the lovers kissed. There were tired looking middle-aged women, ranchers' wives. There were rough men in lumberjack coats, and gamblers with beady eyes and nervous hands, taking time off from the wheel. Since Reno was the chief city of Nevada,

sheep men, cattle men, lumber men, miners, came in from the desert for amusement. They came to the movies when they weren't flush enough for the gambling houses. All the faces in the audience—young, old, tired, fresh, bearded,—were lifted toward the glare of the screen, hoping to be enchanted.

Elisabeth sat next to a man who had the ace of hearts tattooed on the back of his hand. He rocked with laughter at Mickey Mouse. Elisabeth felt a sudden weary sense of defeat. She had always meant to make a success of her life. When she was small, she had imagined her grown-up days rising to some superb eminence. She remembered summer afternoons, lying in deep gold meadows, sucking purple clover, planning her distinguished children. And now she seemed to have taken all the wrong turns and used the wrong keys and entered the wrong doors, so that finally here she was in a movie house in Nevada, next to a man tattooed with the ace of hearts. Was it funny? He kept looking at his watch.

It wasn't all Richard's fault. Her family thought so, but it wasn't. She knew where she had made her mistakes. For months now, she had seen them for what they were. Lying awake at night, she had pulled them up out of the labyrinth. But she had not seemed to realize them while they were going on. She was walking in her sleep. Perhaps people were always walking in their sleep in the present and actually perceived only the past.

Things grew so intolerably clear in the middle distance. Mickey Mouse . . .

The elevator girl asked if she enjoyed the movies . . . "You don't say. I'm going to get to that picture if it's the last thing I do" . . . Elisabeth turned on her desk light, drew out the florid hotel stationery, and began a letter to Blanche. For some queer nervous reason, she tried to be funny. Her pen raced shrilly over the paper . . . "My dear, people told me the Reno streets would be full of seducers. But I haven't seen a single leer. One man showed me the picture of his child." . . . All the letter was falsetto. There was nothing quiet and true, nothing as she really felt.

When she had gone to bed, she lay tense in the dark. Her window open, the low rushing sound of the Truckee River filled the room with many voices chanting the same words over and over, chanting and sighing. Rivers spoke either French or Latin. Elisabeth stared at the pale window oblongs, her wavering curtains, the faint glow of her bureau mirror. There was a cool small moan of wind . . . Somehow she couldn't get used to sleeping without Richard in the room . . . his little sounds, his fumbling with the blanket, his coughs over in the other bed . . . "Are you all right, darling? Is there anything you want?"

CHAPTER III

For the first time in her married life Elisabeth had all she wanted to spend. Wasn't it silly? That pearl-and-silver gown which she had wanted badly a year ago, she could have had today. Richard had said she should rent a car in Reno . . . "I want you to be comfortable out there, Elisabeth" . . . She rented a maroon roadster at an extravagant price, miserably conscious that Richard would count it all as the cost of his freedom.

Reno looked ordinary at first, but it was different from any other town, when one saw close. There was an unnatural number of lingerie shops. Elisabeth had never seen such rich inviting lingerie. What was the secret reason? Almost every other window was an opulent mist of chiffon, orchid and green, delicate gathered yellow laces, silver and gold ribbons, knots of flowers. There was one wispy nightgown embroidered in strawberries, one violet negligee with tiny green velvet leaves . . .

There was no well-equipped book store, although three or four places sold books as an after-thought. Considering the number of lingerie shops, Elisabeth wondered . . . All the jewelry stores had wedding rings in the window,

kewpie dolls dressed up as bride and groom, little white satin altars. Elisabeth had heard there were more marriages than divorces in Reno, because people rushed over from California for quick ceremonies.

It was no surprise to see the unholy number of beauty shops that advertised face lifting. Of course the women who came out here worried about their bodies. Some of them were trying to hold a lover, get another husband, wondering if they stood a chance in this crowded modern market. The women just over the border of youth . . . Elisabeth had looked into the mirror so many times since Richard said he did not love her, searched the mirror, held it up to strong lights, bitter about her mouse-colored eyes and that indefinite brown hair. Somehow you always felt that a man left you on account of your body, even though he gave another reason. It was difficult to walk confidently about the earth after a husband said he did not love you. He had destroyed that essential trust which kept you in dignity and fine behavior.

There was a jumble of shops. Next door to a sign advertising Yogi breathing would be a window filled with jeweled shoe heels. The fortune tellers jostled the lawyers. The drug store elbowed Faith Healing. And every so often came an open door, a crowd about a table, the sound of the croupiers' voices. The naïve and middle-class and disillusioned and unsophisticated were all confused on this Virginia Street . . . filled with the sound

of the river . . . under a sun like a peeled peach . . . circled by the brown and snow of the desert hills.

The people were jumbled, too. An Indian woman walked down the street with a papoose on her back (the Piutes had a Reservation nearby). A young girl in broadcloth with soft heavy furs stopped her and tried to play with the papoose. There were sunburned men in Stetson hats, bowlegged men with spurs, pale men with new tennis rackets, sallow men with playing cards in their pockets. Housewives in gingham dresses were going to market with baskets on their arms, while directly behind them strolled divorcees with Made in France stamped on their clothes. Some of the women who lived in the legalized Red Light district were hurrying down the street to gamble their money away. One could tell them by their trinkets and their spraddle way of walking. It was queer to think of them putting the money they had earned last night down on the table.

Elisabeth began to tell the divorcees from the others, not by their eyes, but by their clothes. The latest fashions looked a bit queer, with the sense of the desert about the town, the staring sun, and wild thin air. It was as if the disillusioned divorcee elegance were overlaid on the old West, a bright unhealthy incubus on a simple awkward trading town with its Main Street and its unabashed Red Light for men who live alone. The

divorce colony was like the mistletoe which climbs on the western ironwood tree and smothers it until only its own bright berries are left. Reno was losing its old identity, but it was making money. Reno was a prostitute. Well, weren't most places? Towns who let money destroy them, let trees be cut down for gain, rivers ravaged, billboards put by the roads, beauty turned over to peanut vendors? There were many prostitute cities in America. But Reno made gambling legal, to draw the dollars in. The Mayor said it was going to be a town where everyone would have real liberty.

At lunch that second noon . . . "Weary River" . . . "I'm a Dreamer Aren't We All?" . . . Elisabeth saw the faces again. No, there never could be another hotel in the world where everyone who was at lunch had been bitten. Looking closer today, the faces did not seem as cheerful as she had thought yesterday. Of course they smiled. But there was a tense charged atmosphere. At a nearby table was a blonde expansive woman with an older man, possibly her lawyer, laughing and tossing her head. Suddenly she stopped; her eyes filled with tears; her hands gripped the table edge; she looked old and desperate. Then in a moment she was laughing again. That was the way with the faces . . . a nervous change, a quiver of light, a swift depression. It was like the wind moving over wet sea sand, shadow vanishing in light, light in shadow. Transient moods . . . flickering nerves

. . . And all the time platters of lobster and chicken à la king were gliding through the air.

A bell boy brought an air mail letter to Elisabeth's room . . . not from Richard.

"Going to take riding lessons?" he said.

"I've heard the Western horses are devils."

"There's a swell riding school. Lots of 'em go riding. It's such a fine chance to learn. Here's their card. Gee, you should learn."

"It would take up time."

"I'm here for a divorce, too. I'd go crazy if I wasn't doing something to take up my time. When I'm off duty, I go riding. Trotting over the desert . . . Gee . . ."

Elisabeth's appointment with the dentist was at two. (Imagine being so hard up that one looked forward to the dentist as a break in the monotony!) When she went into his office, she thought she had never seen a better specimen of his profession. He did not have that hearty gloating look which is so common to his line of work. His face was sensitive, young, and absorbed. He had careful hands with long fingers. His eyes were brown and intent. When he bent over Elisabeth in working, they seemed as large as moons.

"How do you like Reno?" he asked her, arranging his tools on that noisy little white tray.

"Everyone is so friendly. I mean—I like it as much as I could a place where——"

"It must be lonely at first. Now-if-you-will-just-open-a-little-wider. But I've never seen anyone go away from here that didn't have a good word for the town."

"They—say—I'll—be—here—at—the best time."

"That-filling-there-is-going-to-give-you-trouble,-Mrs.-Wane. Well, soon the trees will bud and everything will turn green. That tree by the hotel is always the first."

"Are there any good places to eat in town? I—don't—want-to-eat—every—meal-at-the—hotel."

"Have you been to the Willows?"

"You—hurt—that time. I heard about the Willows back in New York. What is it anyhow?"

"Dancing, eating, and gambling. It's supposed to be the best night club west of Chicago. Grand food. Do you gamble? Now-a-little-to-the-left-please."

"I—never—have. Say, that's a terrible tooth."

"Don't gamble at the Willows. They'll clean you out. They're too smart for the little New York boys and girls. Since gambling got lawful, there's been a lot of tin-horn sports with no money to spend. So the Willows clean out anybody who's got real money."

"Do you go there?"

"Only Saturday nights. Then I stay till daybreak. I'm the guy that puts the birds out every Sunday morning. Do-you-feel-hot-and-cold-on-that-tooth,-Mrs.-Wane?"

"I'll say I do. Is the gin good there?"

"Good as you can get, although the bootleggers gyp

you. They figure women don't know one drink from another. You must go out to the Willows—that is, if you really want to see things. A woman can lead just the kind of life she wants to in Reno. Some come out here and live as if it were an Old Ladies' Home. Others whoop it up out at the Willows from their first day. Now-if-you-will-take-a-drink-of-water-please."

After the dentist, Elisabeth took out her new car. The hotel clerk had told her that Carson City was only thirty-five miles south on the main road. She drove slowly past the white stone Courthouse . . . a garage . . . a watering trough . . . houses with signs in a lace-curtained window: ROOMS or BOARDERS. There were apartment houses, too . . . "The Marie Antoinette" . . . "Kensington Court." The buildings were mostly frame and looked very much like any other town. About the doorways were skeletons of shrubbery.

In a few moments, she was out of the city limits, running along flat brown fields covered with bunch grass. There were a few tents. The hotel clerk had said that some of the gamblers lived in tents. Far to the left was an air field. She could tell by the high spindling beacons. She passed a riding school . . . a day nursery for children . . . meager orchards . . . a large white house surrounded by a white picket fence. The tree trunks in the yard were painted white; the barn, woodshed, dog kennel were all white. That was what they called a ranch, wasn't it?

Now she was out in the open. The road cut across a wide desert that rolled away miles to meet those low liverish hills with the snow-covered tops that Elisabeth had seen from the hotel, from the Truckee Bridge, from Virginia Street. Now on either side of the car was the brittle stalky sage brush with soft gray leaves like huddled rabbits. Every so often was a line of naked white cottonwoods, marking some watercourse. The infrequent houses were each set in a circle of dark leafless poplars, brown fingers uplifted from the earth. Everything was brown or yellow or white or gray. There was no green.

She passed a plateau of rock and sand where steam puffed out of the ground in great white clouds. There was a bath house and a sign—"Steamboat Springs." Yes, it was like a buried steamboat, puffing underground. All over this cold unfruitful country were these buried hot springs, grotesque scalding fires under that insensible crust. Here was Nature's Coney Island, filled with God's own freaks. The road curved down a valley, across a railroad track, and into a deserted town. It was one of those western ghost towns, where men used to find gold, abandoned when the frenzy was over. It seemed appropriate. If one were to follow the road through almost anyone's heart . . . the ghost towns . . . the places where they lived, found gold for a while, then moved away.

Around the next curve, Elisabeth saw the High Sierras. Phantoms in peaked hoods they were, shouldering up in the sun behind those liver-colored hills. At first they seemed insubstantial, an icy blaze of light, a white mist frozen in the blue air. But now, a few miles further on, their massive fronts descended in great folds to the desert, thousands of feet of snow broken with rough black pines and spruces. All the evergreens were scratched black on the snow. The car sped along what seemed an endless uninhabited plain under the white colossal stare of those burning towering immortals.

Elisabeth wanted to howl. It was too much to bear. She sent the car up to fifty miles an hour. It was all very grand . . . but so bleak. It dazzled the mind, but did not comfort the heart. Ever since Richard wanted the divorce, she had been asking herself those two dreadful questions —"Who Cares?"—"What Does It Matter?" These great shapes, this cold fire of snow, these leagues of desert, all seemed to answer—"Nobody"—"Nothing." It was much too stern for an unhappy person. One should not have sorrow in a scenery so withdrawn, insoluble, inhuman. Pain should be borne in a luxuriant country that made you think of Providence . . . trees filled with fruit bending low, lush ferns, small brooks . . . an intimate country.

It was good to be back in Reno, in the brick hotel, away from the stupendous. Before she went up to her room, she stepped in the hotel florist's and bought a little

bouquet of violets. She did not know why—she suddenly wanted violets—something that she could hold in her hand and smell and put away in a cup. You know—she should not have gone out defenseless to meet the Rocky Mountains. Someone should have warned her. It was like turning the corner and seeing Heaven. After seeing Heaven, you would want to throw yourself down on the earth, smell the earth, claw the earth, and say something common. How sensual one would be after a day in Heaven!

The night maid came in to turn down Elisabeth's bed. She had a withered foreign face, curled black bangs, and gold earrings.

"What lovely violets, madame. Violets are my favorite flower. You should see the Parma violets in Paris . . . Pardon me, madame, but are you interested in French lessons?"

"I can read French, but I can't speak it."

"Lots of them take French. It's such a fine opportunity without interruption."

The night maid had a business card in her pocket. She laid it on the desk.

"Some occupation makes the time go faster. After the first week, time will go faster."

"Everyone says so," Elisabeth said, trying to keep the sigh from her voice.

The maid was smoothing the pillows. Her voice was gentle.

"I know it will be so. I am a French woman. I was married to an American. I came here for divorce. It was hateful to me at first, but I grew to like the country and I stayed on. One gets a taste for this country."

"How long have you been here?"

The maid straightened, pushed the short black hair from her forehead, turned up her eyes, moved her lips.

"Four years next month, madame. I give French lessons in the afternoons."

"Don't you miss France?"

"Ah well, life is life on any ground. My present husband——"

"Then you're married again?"

The maid flushed red. Her earrings trembled. She looked down at the violets with her dark French eyes.

"Yes, madame. A year ago. I thought that all such things were over for me. I did not expect to find happiness, but I found it as the blind hen finds the grain of corn . . ."

CHAPTER IV

THERE was a garden, reached through French doors in the hotel dining room. It was a lawn with a narrow gravel walk, broad empty flower beds, and a privet hedge surrounding. Just inside the hedge stood two massive willows whose long delicate undulating branches floated and trembled in the wind. There was a fountain, too, filled with withered leaves.

Elisabeth had a bell boy bring out a chair from the dining room. Though the wind was cold, the sun was delicious. Somehow, whenever she sat in the sun, her mind refused to be troubled. Her eyes closed; her face warmed; her thoughts melted. In that hot yellow glow it seemed as if she lived only as a berry or a blinking toad on the gravel walk, breathing in and out, feeling the light on his paws. All her life she had crept out into the sun for healing. . . . "I'd be all right if I could only sit in the sun."

On the fifth day, there was another person in the garden. She sat in one of the dining-room chairs, bareheaded, wrapped in a beaver coat with a yellow lining. She had a thin puckish face with deep dimples. Her head

was covered with short light yellow curls. Her eyes were closed; her rouge was very pink; she could not be over twenty-two. In her lap was a cheap edition of "The Story of Philosophy."

"Isn't it grand, soaking in this heat?" Elisabeth said.

The girl's eyes opened. They were a vague slumbering blue. She put her hand to her mouth and yawned. She had a lovely mouth, the same color as her rouge, small bony hands fashionably manicured.

"It seems better when you come outdoors."

"A person does get tired of staying in. I tell myself I might as well pretend this is a rest cure and——"

"How long have you been here?"

"Five days."

"I've been here three days. Isn't it foul?"

"The first week is the worst. They say after that time passes better. I think it will. Yesterday passed almost without my minding. When I can be in the sun——"

The girl gave a wan smile.

"I've thought maybe I wouldn't be able to stick it if all the time went like this. Every night I think I'll go home tomorrow."

"That's how I was, but I'm better now. I mind it most when I hear that eastbound Overland pull out in the morning. Can you hear it from your room?"

"They should have it so we couldn't hear the trains. It's the thought you *can't* leave—that you must stay——"

"It's like a jail sentence. A week is nothing back home, but a week is a lot in jail. Say, do you sleep?"

The girl moved her head wearily from side to side. She ran her small bony hands through her hair. All the while they talked she kept fumbling with her hair until the curls were broken and disheveled.

"I can't sleep."

"I dream so much."

"I wake up in the night and think of things my husband and I used to do. I have terrible indigestion."

"Well, who wouldn't, eating in that dining room with the phonograph?"

They were both speaking so breathlessly . . . there hadn't been a pause . . . as if each were afraid the other would stop talking.

"Do you know—you're the first person I've met?"

"You're my first, too. I have said hardly a word since I left New York. I feel all bottled up. When I go to my dentist I talk so much that I'm ashamed of myself. Yesterday in his office I just babbled."

"By the way, my name is Millicent Hawes and I'm from St. Louis."

"I know my chambermaid's life story and I know all about the little divorcee down the hall who's got sore throat. What do you take for your indigestion?"

"They say you shouldn't take aspirin on account of the altitude. I wouldn't mind anything if I could sleep.

When I do drop off, I dream such ghastly things. Last night I dreamed I was leading a child along the street and there was something ailing the child and I didn't know it and I wondered why everyone kept looking . . ."

They were still talking very fast. Their voices were high and nervous.

"When do you eat breakfast? The coffee here tastes as if molasses were poured in it."

"The elevator girl told me that most of the women make breakfast in their own rooms. Orange juice and that instantaneous coffee. You make boiling water with sterno. It saves money and you can stay in your negligee all morning."

"I've been trying to—well—not to stay undressed too long in the morning. I've been extra careful. I—you always hear stories about women in kimonos who've come down in the world."

There was a little silence. Millicent unbuttoned her beaver coat. The yellow lining fell away from a yellow wool dress.

"I never kept my clothes so mended in all my life. I actually hunt for holes so as to take up time. And I'm always washing my stockings. I spread out my handkerchiefs flat on the bathroom walls and they dry ironed."

A robin was tilting and bowing on the lawn, the first Elisabeth had seen this year. It seemed strange to see such an ordinary human bird as a robin.

"Are you going to take French conversation? The night maid——"

"No, but I'm going to take a secretarial course. There's a very good business school here that a person can use if she wants to do something—afterward. A lot of women go there who aren't expecting alimony."

"You must come out motoring with me some day. I've been on all the main roads. All of them, except the Lincoln Highway, lead into California after a while. Whenever I cross the California line, I feel like a child out of school."

Millicent shook her head.

"Don't take me out into that scenery. It gives me the willies. The hotel manager was trying to tell me that Reno is further west than Los Angeles. He told me to take a look at the map."

"Tell me—how do you like that book you have there? I plan to do a lot of good reading here. I got two books the first day, but I haven't opened them yet. Right now I feel too much up in the air. But later on——"

Millicent turned her vague eyes down toward the book. She shuffled over the pages. She was keeping the place with a yellow handkerchief.

"My husband was crazy about philosophy. My husband was an intellectual——"

"There was never anyone in the world who could be

as sweet as Richard when he wanted. He was always bringing me books——"

Millicent's dimples faded. A deep line came between her eyes.

"My husband was a very brilliant man—far more brilliant than I could ever be. I never really—you know —was on his level."

"My husband . . ."

On the days following, other women came out into the garden who were trying to pretend this was a health resort. Most were new arrivals, but one named Gretchen Vaughan had a fortnight to her credit. She assured the others that time went faster and faster, in her pink flannel beret and camel's hair coat, smoking one cigarette after another and throwing the butts at the robins. She had a hoarse voice and a truculent manner, not at all like the bracelet on her right arm. It had a tiny bangle in the shape of a gold clock, and around the disk were the words: "I think of thee every hour."

There was never such a wind as in these late April days. It was always blowing, blowing, beating in your face every time you stepped outdoors. You heard it whimpering at the sill when you sat in your room. Whenever you opened your window, it sprang in, smelling of snow and sand. All night it whined along the river. The day maid told Elisabeth these desert winds made many di-

vorcees nervous . . . "Some of them just can't stand it, they get so blue." . . . Every time Elisabeth went over the bridge, the Truckee was muddier and swifter. The snow, melting in the mountains, was running down into the river. Every day there was less snow on those brown hills. The tree by the hotel was in sudden bud. Along the Carson Valley the bone-white cottonwoods were blurred with green. Spring was coming, as the head waiter said, with a bang.

Those who came regularly to the garden began to seem like a Club. There was Gretchen in the pink flannel beret and the bangle; there was Millicent with her light lovely hair and bright rouge, her dimples deepening and fading as she talked. There was a third arrival, Nairn Shelley, more quiet than the others, brooding and blowing smoke through her pursed lips, complaining of the cold. They sat in a sheltered corner by the hotel wall. The wind made tossing floating streamers of the willow branches. They were budding now, shaking yellow-green manes of hair like restless women.

When they all four talked together, Elisabeth knew she would never hear such conversation again in this life. There was no hiding and coiling. Thoughts were down to the quick. Each one told what had happened to her, quite simply with no tears, only little silences, little changes of voice. As the afternoons went by in the garden, all four

knew that Millicent's husband had run away . . . Gretchen's had stayed in bed for weeks with bottles of Scotch . . . Nairn's took her money.

They told each other as the common survivors of an earthquake might each tell what had happened at *her* house. In all their minds was the knowledge they would never see each other again, after Reno was over. It was not like talking to a person in one's own set who might blab. They were meeting in these unnatural weeks, only to be caught up afterward and whirled apart to separate patterns . . . Gretchen's Chicago, Millicent's St. Louis, Nairn's Baltimore, Elisabeth's New York . . . And even if it had not been so safe . . . God, one had to tell somebody!

"They say you have a good time here," Millicent said. "A girl in St. Louis told me she had the time of her life here."

Nairn turned her bright tired eyes on the speaker. Elisabeth always had a deep prescience that she would remember Nairn. And all her life indeed she did remember Nairn's eyes, her fondness for blue and violet, the amethyst set in gold on her little finger. Nairn's smooth dark hair and white skin had blue lights. An artist painting her would have used blue with all his colors.

"I don't see how that is possible if you are sensitive," she said. "Sometimes I'm doing amusing things here—horseback riding, movies, and so on. I'm even beginning

to play golf. I wonder why I don't enjoy my amusements more and then I find I'm suffering far down inside."

"I know," Elisabeth said. "There's a kind of grinding . . ."

Gretchen leaned back and yawned audibly. Today she was wearing a bright pink dress and pink angora socks. She had short shiny red hair combed close to her head and variable eyes that went green and gray. Her hands were large and carefully done with red mirrors of nails.

"Have you seen the hard-faced souls at that center table in the dining room? I can spot the alimony hounds. Every last one has a silver fox scarf."

"I've made myself a calendar," Millicent murmured. "The way I used to at school. I cross off the days."

"I've tried not to do that," Elisabeth said. "I believe it's better just to sink into the time here. I mean—make it a sort of real life. Sometimes I'm crazy for the time to go—and then—I dread the end."

Elisabeth could never keep her eyes off Nairn, lighting a cigarette. First she smoothed and opened her dark brilliant onyx case with the bouquet of tiny sapphires. Then she took out the cigarette, tapped it delicately on the lid, inserted it between her lips, held up her hands cupped with the tiny fire, sucked in the smoke. There was something desirous about Nairn's lighting a cigarette when it was contrasted with Gretchen's quick rough way and Millicent's fumbling. Elisabeth remembered what Rich-

ard had said . . . "You can always tell what a woman is like by watching her smoke."

"I wonder where all the wildness is," Nairn said. "My part of the hotel is as quiet as a tomb around nine o'clock. And I was told to beware of Reno!"

Gretchen gave a short laugh, like a bark.

"My part isn't. The people in the room next me were playing strip poker till three o'clock this morning. Mixed company, too."

"There are noisy brutes in my hall," Millicent agreed. "I heard a man telling somebody in Anglo-Saxon that a girl named Grace was going for a ride to Truckee today, and she wasn't coming back the same as she started out and she didn't want to."

Nairn shrugged her shoulders.

"There's about seven women here to one man. No wonder the men are hounded to death. There's supposed to be more kept men here than kept women."

"Well, a lot of the women who come here are ignorant and unstable anyhow——"

"And this divorce getting makes them feel they are free to do anything——"

"It isn't only Reno. Standards all over aren't as high as they were. Standards are so low that life's got uninteresting—if you know what I mean."

"But this place has some sort of hideous resemblance

to a female college. I remember at Wellesley we used to be so thrilled every time we saw a man . . ."

That was how they talked in the garden, under the violet April sky, beside the streaming yellow-green willows. Now and then a mail plane droned overhead. In the intervals of silence Gretchen smoked and swore under her breath . . . Elisabeth stared at the hills . . . Millicent shuffled over the pages of the book she never read . . . Nairn worked on a needlepoint ottoman cover, bending down over the wreath of blue roses her large smouldering eyes.

Spring was late in Reno, but when it came, it rushed. Every day the grass under their feet was greener. There were folded tulip shoots in the flower beds, pricked through the bare soil overnight. The management put out two red-and-white striped hammocks. They took each other's pictures by the fountain filled with withered leaves. They called themselves the Quartet. They began to speak of Reno as "the old school." Why not have a class flower and a yell and vote on the one most likely to succeed?

Various lewd suggestions were made for the class motto. It was fatally easy in Reno to talk lewd. It seemed to Elisabeth that she had never thought of so many low things. Her thoughts instinctively bent that way. Gretchen was so brilliant at livery-stable talk; Nairn was mediocre; Millicent was apt to be—well—just common. They all

tried for a double meaning to everything. They were obsessed with it.

After a while they got conscious of the way they were talking, and they wondered why . . . "Why are we vile?" . . . "Is it some kind of Reno vibrations?" . . . "Is it because we're all surrounded by sex problems and we feel the influence?" . . . "No, I think it's that we haven't any mutual friends to gossip about, and what is left to say, now we've told our life stories?" . . . "It's such an easy way to get a laugh, and we all crave to laugh" . . . "It's nervousness."

During the second week Gretchen and Elisabeth discovered they had adjoining rooms. They proposed Nairn and Millicent should move into the rooms next, if they were empty. They could open all the doors and have a suite. They considered taking an apartment out of the hotel but—oh, well—it was too much trouble. They were not trying to economize. And it was easy to see the hotel was the center of Reno life. In an apartment house one would feel away from the main current. There were divorcees, living in apartments and boarding houses on back streets and rented houses on the banks of the Truckee, who were never part of what was going on. All the excitement whirled about the hotel.

The rooms they wanted were empty. They began the new arrangement that evening. With a flourish, just before dinner, they opened the doors. Elisabeth saw Gretch-

en's wardrobe trunk standing open, the further vista of Millicent's room, then Nairn's. They walked around each other's rooms, looking at the pictures on the bureaus. Nairn and Gretchen had men on their bureaus . . . "That's the one who gave me the bangle. His name is George. He's sort of fat and sappy but I like him. We're engaged." . . . "Yes, I'm expecting to marry Basil as soon as I get back. I would never have come out for a divorce if it hadn't been for Basil."

Each one had those blue window curtains and gray furniture. Each one's bed was against the wall . . . Bureaus opposite with the drawers painted in a design of yellow roses . . . desk diagonally across the corner . . . the blue easy chair . . . the low table with the ash tray. But it was astonishing how different the rooms looked. One remembered Gretchen's room by the wardrobe trunk standing open, the gin bottle on the desk, and the cold fresh air . . . Millicent's by a peach-colored silk-and-lace boudoir doll and a thin smell of rose perfume . . . Nairn's by the bed heaped with violet pillows.

These evenings, after the movies, they sat in Nairn's room on that violet-heaped bed in their negligees. It was all hideously collegiate, running around in each other's rooms, staying up and discussing the world till all hours, playing jokes on each other. It was alma mater . . . with a difference. There was no illusion in their talk . . . and they drank gin now instead of cocoa.

CHAPTER V

GRETCHEN said the Willows was some joint. News of the place clanged through Reno talk. When Elisabeth called on her lawyer to see if the power-of-attorney papers had come back from Richard, he asked her to go to the Willows . . . "Tomorrow's Saturday. That's the big night. I'm going to take you there if it's the last thing I do."

News of the invitation was not received calmly by Elisabeth's friends . . . "You've met him only twice and the old sex appeal has come into its own" . . . "He's taking you to the Willows tomorrow and fishing next week. Woman, you're getting more than a divorce for your money" . . . "And you with those prissy gray eyes. You burn me up" . . . "Has he got a wife?" . . . Elisabeth knew, on account of the child's picture, he had a wife, but that seemed strangely unimportant. Reno was a fabulous city, like Oz, set apart from the world, where no one expected the natural to happen, even among the regular inhabitants.

On Saturday night it was like getting ready for a Mount Holyoke Prom. The others bustled around her . . . Millicent slightly envious, Nairn critical, Gretchen

smoking and wise cracking . . . "Of all the luck! I wish I had a young lawyer. Mine asked me to go to church with him and his wife last Sunday" . . . "If you'd only comb your hair so as to show that widow's peak" . . . "If this were New York, he'd send you flowers, but of course a big wholesome Westerner wouldn't think of it. These jolly forgetful boys always manage to save their money" . . . "You must wear my earrings. The costume will fall flat without them" . . . Secretly Elisabeth hated the fuss made because she was going out with a man. It seemed . . . flimsy.

At eight the operator telephoned from the lobby that Mr. Winter was waiting. But he was nowhere in sight when she went down. She trailed out of the elevator in her long gold lamé dress painted with the wild roses, her sapphire coat smothered in sable that was the color of dark gold. She was very conscious of Nairn's sapphire earrings. Her ears hurt . . . But no Mr. Winter. She paused . . . piqued. Then she saw him over in the corner, talking to a woman with that grayish-yellow complexion which means cheap gin and late hours. As soon as he saw Elisabeth waiting, he came over, tanned and gangling in his evening clothes.

"Hello there. Say, you look great! You eastern girls sure can put on the dog. What's that on your coat anyhow—brown rabbit?"

"You know very well it isn't."

"I'm going to add a hundred dollars to your bill on account of that fur. You're a rich woman and we lawyers charge according to our clients' bank accounts."

"I should have come out here to Reno in rags and told you how poor I was."

"We're on to those little tricks. Plenty have tried doing that."

While they stood there talking under the lobby lights, Elisabeth suddenly felt smothered. It seemed as if she were standing in a thick dream, as if the glare and Mr. Winter's face were all part of an impenetrable hallucination. She had that dreadful sensation of knowing she was in a nightmare and being unable to break into reality. If she were only back in real life, walking out of her apartment house, waiting with Richard for a taxi under the awning . . . but here she was sealed in a trance with rubber walls . . . "Come on, Mrs. Wane. Let's be moving."

As they walked out of the hotel, he said in a low tone: "Do you know that woman?"

"What woman?"

"The one I was chinning with when you came down."

"Why, no," Elisabeth answered impatiently, rolling her blue chiffon handkerchief into a ball. "Shall I make inquiries?"

"Now don't be like that. I was standing in the lobby and she came up and called me by name. She said she'd

met me at a party, but I can't remember. I must have been swacked. She said she'd been here only two weeks and I told her she'd soon get acquainted and she said she was terribly lonely. Kind of barefaced, wasn't it?"

"You'd think—six weeks isn't forever—women could do without men for that length of time."

"Don't you kid yourself. They can't and they won't. There's plenty of polite soliciting goes on in these parts. Now this Willows where we're going—a lot of the women will be paying the men's way. They can't get them to go unless they pay. A rich divorcee will come out here and take a poor University student or a cowboy . . ."

"Well, of course, there's a lot of paid escorts in New York—all over the United States. Modern women have made them an institution."

"Say—call me Ted, will you?"

"I like people. I don't want to think so many are rotten."

"You see they're spending these weeks far from home and in a bad frame of mind. They're grabbing at all they can get."

"I know that grabbing feeling——"

They drove outside the town. There was a fresh earthy smell in the air. Elisabeth could see dim hill mounds . . . scattered stars . . . bony cottonwoods . . . withered leaves in hollows. It was not a long ride. Around a sharp curve (the headlights flashed on cottonwood trunks), they

came in sight of a long low yellow house with strings of colored lights. It was in a sandy yard surrounded by a wall and trees that must be willows. Here and there in the yard were tall lamps with moony globes, like street lamps. It was all strangely quiet and filled with the wind blowing.

They walked up the steps and the lawyer rang the bell. There was a window to the right of the door made of ground glass, except for a narrow cross-stripe of the clear. An eye came to the stripe; the door was opened. . . . "You see the gambling is all right but they have to be careful on account of the booze. Wouldn't it make you laugh?" . . . They walked down a long hall spangled with lights and came out on a narrow shadowy dance floor. At one end on a dais sat the orchestra. Before the dais was a large black wooden cat with a red open mouth. Elisabeth wondered why on earth . . . The dance floor was surrounded by booths with wicker tables and chairs. Beyond was a small dining room.

This was the dive. This was the resort famous all over America. People said there had been enough broken hearts here to fill all the rivers in the country. It was almost empty at this hour, for it was only half-past eight, and things really did not get into their stride until midnight. There were only two couples in the booths. The orchestra was silent . . . Only every so often someone plucked the guitar . . . the saxophone ran up the scale . . .

At a side table in the dining room, Elisabeth decided the chief decorative idea was Moorish. The doorways were curved at the top; there were pillars and colored filigree; the walls were covered with gilt; pink lamps were set in niches. Everything was either purple or pink or gilt. There was a purple carpet. In the center of the dining room a table with a mound of pink carnations was set for a party. Elisabeth had never cared for carnations but these were fluted and glowing as taffeta. While she was eating her avocado compote (they knew what food was at the Willows), the party came in. The women were a glare of vivid trailing gowns, cleft bosoms, and dripping jewels. The men were all shirt-front.

"That's Frank Putney, the millionaire," the lawyer said, pointing out a small meek man. "He's here for a divorce. Right next him is the woman he's engaged to. She's living with him until he gets the divorce. A lot of sweeties do that."

The millionaire's promised future was the least attractive woman in the party . . . red hair with a silver wreath . . . a face haggard with powder . . . a mass of blue tulle . . . large freckled hands.

"She's terrible looking, isn't she? I mean—you'd think with all his money—millionaires are supposed to marry beautiful chorus girls."

"They say he's afraid of her. Don't know why. I suppose she's got something on him."

When the party had taken three cocktails, Mr. Putney smiled timidly at his fiancee, the smile of a child who wants a stick of candy. A gray-haired woman in a gown all silver and purple beads spilled her cocktail. She threw back her head and laughed until all her beads shook and glittered.

"That's Mrs. Amsterdam. You know the Amsterdams. Supposed to be one of the snootiest families in the country. And that's one of our Reno Judges sitting next to her."

At that moment the Judge rose and asked the fiancee to dance. He was a man in his seventies, with white hair, an eyeglass, and a shrewd distinguished face. The orchestra was moaning . . . "What is This Thing Called Love?" . . . The Judge could not seem to wait until they reached the dance floor. He took the fiancee's hand and they ran out of the dining room like a pair of children. She did not run as lightly as the Judge. She tottered on slippers with blue-jeweled heels.

Elisabeth watched. The Judge was doing a series of complicated steps that faintly resembled the tango, lifting his knees very high and setting his feet down with all the proud deliberation of an old fighting bird. Elisabeth felt a little giddy . . . depressed . . . her head was tired. After all, he did have under his control the futures of people all over the country. The accumulated unhappiness of forty-eight states was his to untangle. American

women came to him with problems that were tearing their hearts out . . . "What is this thing called love . . . this funny thing called love . . . Oh, who can solve this mystery . . . And how it's made a fool of me . . ."

"I suppose I'm fussy but you'd think he'd have more —value. When you think what depends on him——"

"You would think so," Mr. Winter said, fiddling with his glass. "It's an open disgrace how he comes out here and cuts up. After all, even if the gambling is legal, this is still a speakeasy. The district attorney won't come here out of some respect for the law. The other Judge won't either. He's a very decent fellow."

"I don't see how you respect this man in Court."

"Gosh—you ought to see the difference in him in Court. He's as dignified as they make 'em. He's a great actor, that boy. You couldn't ask for anything grander than his Court manner. Of course, every so often he kisses a divorcee when he gives her the decree. But that's all in the day's work. I suppose he figures that if a bride can be kissed, so can a divorcee."

"Will he always be Judge?"

"Lord save us—no. He's likely to be retired at the next election, although he's been on the bench for years and years. But people are getting fed up on his being so thick with the divorcees. There's been a lot of gossip about how he talks to women in his chambers before their cases come up."

Elisabeth told herself she must be intolerant and overwrought to mind so much. But when she thought of the heartaches under the thumb of that tripping Judge . . . There was such a chance for a great man, out in Reno, but no such man existed. The law had been carefully administered to bring money to the town. Every broken life means so many dollars. . . . All the members of the party were dancing now except Mr. Putney. He was pouring himself drinks, staring into the bottle. The mound of pink carnations was a ruin. It had contained platinum cigarette lighters. There were trampled carnations and tissue paper under the table.

"Reno is some place for us all to come," Elisabeth said bitterly.

"Now don't you criticize Reno. What about your New York Judges and your New York courts? What about 'em all over the country? Reno is so small that you can see the funny stuff going on under your nose. That's the only difference."

"But what are we going to do about it—we people who want things to be better?"

"Oh Lord—don't get serious about life. If you're that kind of a girl, you'll never get on in Reno. Ideals are going to pot all over the country, but what of it? Waiter, two Martinis."

"But can't some of us want things to be better——"

They danced. Elisabeth learned what was the reason

for the black cat with the open mouth. There the men threw money. Elisabeth grew used to the harsh clank of the money thrown, but at first it was strange to hear it with music. The lights were turned out in the waltzes. Couples drifted over the floor, eyes closed. . . . Shreds of words . . . "Huh, what do you expect?" . . . "Baby, can I rely on that?" . . . "What I say is, you can't ask everything of a man." . . . There was a mirror on the wall where all the glimmering colors floated and melted, forward and back, round and round.

"The world and another man's wife are here tonight," the lawyer said. "It's a howl when you know the inside stories. Now there's Johnny Blount over by the pink lamp. He moves from divorcee to divorcee like a bumblebee. I happen to know he doesn't give a rap for the skirt he's with tonight. But he's brought her along so as to make the girl he really cares for jealous. And she's here with another man who's got still another problem. There's nothing simple out here. Now there's Tom Parks, the boy in the blue shirt. His woman is paying his way or I'm not Ted Winters. Rollo Lane is here with a wife he divorced three years ago and——"

Elisabeth felt a distinct physical nausea, as if she had eaten something poisonous.

"I wish you'd point to some couple and tell me they are happy. I want to see someone happy."

"Well . . . I don't seem to see anyone just now . . ."

They visited the room with the long mahogany bar where a crowd was standing and drinking. Many of those who came to the Willows spent all their time at the bar. Elisabeth noticed how much better the women were dressed than the men. Imported women and native men. The women had the money. The men had . . . well, what did they have? Something the women wanted.

The gambling room looked like Monte Carlo. (Some people liked to call Reno "the Monte Carlo of the Western World.") It had more class than the gambling rooms in other Reno houses. Elisabeth had a whirling impression of green baize, a ring of tense faces, hands laying silver dollars on the numbers, wheels, rakes that scratched in the money, and dice out of a cup. The women in this room were much older. Roulette, keno, faro, and the dice did not engage youth. These women had made the emotional transference from sex to gambling. When they won, it was like being kissed. When they lost, they cuddled the chips in their hands. The croupiers with the faces of malevolent horses had their pockets stuffed with greenbacks. . . . "You must remember all the people in this room are supposed to be the cream of society."

There was the famous Blue Room, too . . . blue walls, a piano, rows of gilt chairs. A man was seated at the piano, singing something smutty in a thin hoarse voice. Every night he sang in the Blue Room. A plump woman in a low flowered gown with a red band around

her head turned his music . . . "She's a Denver society dame. She got her divorce here two years ago and she's so crazy about Reno that she keeps coming back on visits." . . . Someone in green lace with a train kept banging her glass on the piano and bawling out: "For God's sake, give us 'You Brought a New Kind of Love To Me.' " . . . "She's from Indianapolis. Only nineteen years old."

They sat in one of the wicker-furnished booths by the dance floor. In the interval between dances, the orchestra leader came around to each booth in turn and sang. Again, it was music for money. He asked each couple what song they wanted, and they sat, conscious and uneasy, while it was given. Their choice was almost always mournful . . . "Am I Blue?" . . . "Nobody Knows, Nobody Cares If I'm Lonesome" . . . "I'm Only Painting the Clouds With Sunshine" . . . Why did they all want mournful songs? Did they want to listen to their own bitterness singing? Was it a way for some ache to ooze out of their hearts? Or was it only gin and a sensuous minor tune?

"I feel sorry for people" . . .

"Don't you get all steamed up. Folks have sold themselves the idea that all this gaiety covers an aching heart. A lot of these fourflushers haven't any hearts to ache."

It was past midnight. The crowd grew thicker; there was no more room in the booths; the air was a gray cloud

of smoke. Hair began to straggle. A woman's hair always began to straggle as soon as she was drunk. There was bumping and pushing on the dance floor. So many of the couples were unsteady now. Some faces went spotted. There came an interval when the orchestra leader did not go down into the booths. He stood on the dais . . . the orchestra murmured . . . he sang:

"I have you now,
Right close beside me,
And you know how
You help and guide me,
I wonder whether
We'll be together
A year from today?"

There was a little silence at the end of the verse. It was a favorite Reno song. Elisabeth had heard it whistled on the streets, a lovely tune, light and mysterious. There was just something about it . . . Nobody could hear it without . . . A window had been opened somewhere and the cool Nevada night wind drifted through the room. Everyone sang the second verse:

"With every tear
We shed in sorrow,
I always fear

About tomorrow,
Will we be parted
Or broken-hearted,
A year from today?"

They sang it over and over, their voices swelling on "a year from today." Among the pink lamps, the smoke, the itching and deceit, the song rang true. A year from today all these players would be swept to the four corners of America and the stage would be set with new unhappiness. No one in the place was too drunk to know that. They sang, their hot arms around each other's necks, feeling gin tears in their eyes, staring at time and death . . .

"I wonder whether
We'll be together
A year from today" . . .

"That last song sort of got me," Elisabeth said, when they were back under the hotel awning.

"We all get swacked when we think what a short time we have. But don't let it make you blue. You'll go lots of places and do lots of things."

"There wouldn't be another night club like the Willows anywhere. Do you know I never had a heartache in my life that I didn't end up in a night club?"

He seemed troubled and uneasy.

"I'd like to go around with you. I think you're a swell girl. But we lawyers have a sort of a code here in Reno. You aren't supposed to go around with your own client. You can go around all you want with somebody else's client. But not your own. So you'll understand, won't you, if I don't take you around? It's just a form here in Reno—I——"

"You have a wife, too," Elisabeth said.

"Say—that doesn't matter. All that conventional stuff means nothing to me. I'm broad-minded. But you see we lawyers in Reno have this code . . ."

CHAPTER VI

All her life, whenever Elisabeth thought of Reno, she remembered how ashamed she was of her pink kimono. It had seemed all right in New York, but here. . . . Every time she put it on, there was that little fright and uneasiness. She grew to loathe its naïve skimpy folds and that absurd apple blossom on the shoulder. She wondered if Richard had known it was naïve, had loathed the apple blossom.

She had never seen such lingerie, except in windows, as the others wore. Nairn had green and violet satin pajamas. Millicent trailed about in negligees with bunches of tinted perfumed flowers and long streamers of gold ribbon. Nairn went in blue velvet to answer the bell boy's knock. Millicent wore mules with ostrich feather rosettes. And Gretchen. . . . She called Elisabeth's kimono "Pansy's Delight."

Boyish hoarse-voiced Gretchen was the most gorgeous. Every night she drank her gin in gold and white fox fur. There were real diamond buckles on her slippers. Her nightgowns were webs of rosepoint lace. (She had spent five hundred dollars, she said, for her wedding

nightgown.) She lounged back on Nairn's violet pillows, slick red hair, deep lace and bosom, thick white fox sleeve sliding up her arm, tinkling bangle. She burned cigarette holes in the Empire dressing gown that was trimmed with mole.

"Why do you waste this gorgeousness on us?" Nairn said.

"I know it's casting pearls before swine," she answered. "But I'm in a jam. I've been married only two years and all this is part of my trousseau and I'm trying to wear it out. I spent ten thousand dollars on my wedding lingerie, so you see I had a pile of it and I couldn't get around to using it all up. But when I go back and marry George, he won't want me to be running around in my first husband's lingerie."

"Say—you're in a mess."

"Next time I'll stay married long enough to wear out my trousseau."

Gretchen had it all, as the Reno saying went, "cut and dried." She would be married as soon as she returned to Chicago. Every day an airmail letter came from the intended George. Every night she wrote him, sitting humped over at her desk with a glass of gin beside her. She dreaded those nightly devotions to George, because she never could think of anything to say, and she could not spell, especially after she had taken the gin. She was forever calling out to the others: "Darling, how do you

spell filthy?" . . . "How do you spell putrid, darling?" . . . "Are there two p's in compromised?"

"What queer words you use in your letters to George," Nairn said.

"Well, I always start off by saying: 'It's a filthy day and I feel putrid.' Say—how I hate all the things you have to do for a man because you're engaged to him. Letters, calling him on the telephone, sending him wires. It isn't worth the trouble. Here I sit, night after night . . ."

Gretchen usually said she was "mad" about George, but Elisabeth felt she cared for him only as a symbol of social success. She spoke with more real affection of a chow she had left back home. Once George called her by long distance early in the morning, and she scolded him for waking her up. She was leaving her first husband with no more feeling than if he were an old fur tippet . . . "I married him because my family were terribly respectable and I was a coward."

Elisabeth always remembered Gretchen, drying that crimson hair after a bath, wrapped in something pale and delicately embroidered in rose vine. It clung and spotted where her body was still damp and Gretchen said: "Thank Heaven I can throw it away." Every morning Gretchen stood naked in the sunlight, doing her deep breathing exercises. Gretchen had no reticence about her body. There was one historic night when she ran from room to room, naked, trying on everyone's hat.

Nairn had her future cut and dried, too. Whenever there was a high wind, she was nervous . . . "The mail plane will be late." She was always uneasy until Basil's daily letter arrived. Then she shut herself up in her room to read it. If the letter did not come, she could not sleep. She told Elisabeth that in secret. Nairn and Elisabeth had begun to have their little asides. For some reason that she could not understand, Elisabeth felt vaguely frightened whenever Nairn spoke about Basil. There was something too desperate and intense . . . He had raised her from the dead, she explained. After Keith Shelley failed her, she had sat for a year in her Baltimore house, not seeing anyone . . . "I think I was out of my mind that winter" . . . "I love Basil too much. I know I do. But it's my way of loving."

These mornings they all had breakfast together in Elisabeth's room. But Gretchen never helped squeeze the oranges or put out the coffee cups. She always stalked in at the last moment, pink hair and crumpled lace, her freshly painted lips wide open in a yawn . . . "I simply couldn't get up any sooner. I'm slain with sleep. Won't you give me some coffee?" . . . The others always talked over afterward how they were going to make Gretchen do her share. Millicent was willing enough but she kept breaking dishes. She broke that nice sugar bowl with the strawberry on top.

After breakfast they smoked, flicking the ashes into

their coffee saucers. They read each other parts of their morning mail. It was queer what letters sorrowing relatives and friends wrote. There was the condescending type . . . "My dear, Horace and I have always been so happy that I can't realize" . . . The mournful . . . "You can always say to yourself that at least you have loved" . . . The slightly reproachful . . . "Of course, you must have given thought to this important step" . . . Nairn said that she tried to make allowances. Writing letters to divorcees was a new exercise for the American mind. No one had come forward as yet and said just what the etiquette was, so correspondents had nothing to guide them but their instincts.

Millicent was getting letters from various men, more or less intrigued. She always read these aloud, then looked up piteously and said: "What shall I write him now? You girls know so much more than I do about handling men. I married my Encyclopædia Britannica when I was only seventeen and I've been out of circulation for so long—it makes me furious how a husband can get you out of practice——"

"You'll always be the kind of girl who wears bunches of flowers on her underwear," Gretchen growled.

"You're fortunate," Nairn said. "You've got all these men as your spare tires. But if my one tire bursts . . ."

Nairn never read aloud a sentence of Basil's letters, but Gretchen read George's, word for word. One had a vision

of the fat affectionate George who gave her the bangle, dining at his Club, playing squash, putting over mysterious deals at his office, hearing that old speakeasies were padlocked and finding new ones. He always called Gretchen his "Gretsy" . . . "He'll get over that after we're married. I'll knock him down if he says it then."

There was always an unacknowledged rivalry between Nairn and Gretchen over attentions received from their lovers . . . "I've had a wire" . . . "George always wires me on Mondays" . . . "Basil talked to me fifteen minutes the other night from Baltimore" . . . Whenever George sent Gretchen flowers, she always showed them to Nairn first, running into Nairn's room with the box . . . "Hmmmm, those long-stemmed pink roses are nice. Basil sent me some violas. They're a new flower, a combination of pansy and violet" . . . Both rivals always spoke in very sweet voices. But Gretchen was quite bitter the day Basil sent an opal pendant . . . "Of course it's swell, Nairn, but opals are bad luck."

The morning after Elisabeth's visit to the Willows, her telephone rang. It was a woman's voice.

"This is Marjorie Lane. Aren't you——"

"Marjorie! Of all the——"

"I saw you at the Willows. I couldn't believe my eyes. I saw you just as you were going out the door or I'd have spoken. When did you get here?"

"When did *you* get here? I thought you and Leslie——"

"Wait. Don't spill it on the telephone. The operators listen to every word. I have an apartment just up the street at the 'Marie Antoinette'——"

"Come on down."

"I was just going to say—I'm bringing a man with me, my Reno beau. He's a honey. You'll like him. I'm thinking seriously of him for marriage. Now don't be shocked because you'll have a Reno beau yourself some day."

Marjorie Lane was a Boston girl that Elisabeth had known at Wellesley. She had belonged to Boston's accredited list of debutantes. Elisabeth had spent week-ends at her home and knew the sort of men she went around with. Marjorie had never been able to bear a man who was not sophisticated, possibly because she was a large masterful girl with oily hair and a bad complexion. Men who came to her house were always sufficiently sophisticated to value her father's position in the City. After a girlhood of rather alarming length, Marjorie had married an accredited young man. It was supposed to be a love match. They called each other "sweetheart" even at the symphony concerts.

Soon after telephoning, Marjorie came. At first glance she looked the same as ever. Her clothes had always been

smart. Now she was wearing a bottle-green costume that must have come off the last boat from Paris. Her complexion was still bad. Perhaps there were a few lines around her eyes, a look of strain about the mouth. She was more heavily made up, too, with yellowish powder and an orange rouge. Her hair was cut off close to her head.

"Don't tell me I look a wreck," she said. "I know it. It's the gin the bootleggers give you."

Then she remembered the man behind her in the doorway. She took him by the arm and drew him forward.

"Meet my fate," she said. "Sam Galloway."

He was a short stocky boy dressed in imitation Bond Street fashion. His suit was a smart color. His shoes were almost good. Even the handkerchief in his pocket was an excellent copy of a really good handkerchief. His tie was an approved pattern done in cheap silk. He had sandy hair oiled into a pompadour.

"You don't like Reno yet," he said, drawling his words. "I see it in your face. But you will. After a while you will realize it is an escape from the stuffy atmosphere that exists in other towns. Here everyone does what he pleases. Reno is an experiment in letting people do what they please."

As Sam spoke, Marjorie beamed on him with the air of a magician producing the rabbit. It seemed a wonder and delight to her that Sam could use his vocal organs.

"You'll like it so much that you'll hate to leave," Marjorie agreed. "It seemed awfully cheap to me at first. But then I met Sam and he showed me what it really was and —well—I'm crazy about it now."

"It's the new free atmosphere that you are not accustomed to at first," Sam went on.

"It isn't the freedom," Elisabeth began slowly. "It's just that everything seems—untrue. I don't want to be prissy, but I like a feeling that—things are——"

"Things seem untrue because they do not fall in with your preconceived notions of proper conduct. You see a new pattern of behavior. Your conventional instincts are revolted. Your present attitude is your defense mechanism. Now I should say that all the various influences made the atmosphere of Reno opalescent . . ."

As soon as Sam used that last word, Elisabeth placed him. It was such a fake word. She was sure that back in Boston Marjorie would have been appalled at this gilt gingerbread. Marjorie had met so many genuinely distinguished people, and Sam was so shoddy. Fortunately he had to keep a tennis engagement in Wingfield Park.

"Isn't he sweet?" Marjorie said, as soon as the door closed behind him.

"Well, I hardly know what to say. He's——"

"Go ahead. Say what you think. I don't mind if you don't like him at first. He grows on you, just as Reno does. I saw him on the street the day I got here and

thought he was nothing at all. But after I'd been here awhile, I met him and liked him."

"He—he just seems different from the men you know at home——"

They were sitting on Elisabeth's bed. Marjorie was silent for a moment, fussing with the green-beaded bag on her lap, snapping it open and shut. Yes, there were lines about her mouth. And her eyes were so restless. They kept darting about the room. When she talked, they flickered.

"I suppose he *is* different. I can't seem to remember. All my life in the East seems vague to me. I feel a long ways from home and as if I'd been gone a hundred years. I've been here almost my full time. Life speeds up so here——"

"How old is he and what does he do?"

"He's thirty-one. Cashier at the Grand."

Elisabeth had a vision of Marjorie's family . . . the horror . . . the smelling salts . . .

"Isn't that the restaurant with the daisies painted on the mirrors?"

"Yes, and the little curtained booths upstairs."

"Well, of course, he's all right to go around with while you're here. But you couldn't think of marrying him——"

"Why not? Don't be such a snob. It doesn't matter what a man does."

"I'm not being a snob. But a man's work shows what the man is. If he's contented at his age to be Cashier at the Grand——"

"He's doing writing on the side. Short stories. I could transplant him to Boston and have father give him a job. You know that Galveston heiress who was here last year. She took a garage helper home with her and set him up in the airplane business."

"I think when you got him home, you'd be disappointed. It would be like choosing something in a funny light in a store and then taking it home and seeing it by daylight. Please don't be angry, but he seems such a fake——"

"I'm not angry, but I really don't see why you think he's a fake. When I first came out here, I met a girl who was just ready to go home, and she told me to watch out for losing my discrimination. But I don't think I have. You just don't know Sam. He's been so kind. I want somebody to be kind to me."

Elisabeth clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back against the wall. She could see herself in the bureau mirror . . . rumpled brown hair, black dress . . . Marjorie kept looking at her own green reflection as she talked.

"Marjorie—what makes so many women here man-crazy? I never realized before how much women want men. It gives me a queer feeling about women. After all, you'd think they could—six weeks isn't such a long time

—Of course six weeks in Reno is an eternity—but——"

Marjorie stopped fussing with her handbag, and looked down into her lap. When she spoke, she had lost that shrill crackling voice. It was her real tone, hushed and secret.

"I know what you mean . . . I've thought of it myself . . . I've wondered why I was so—anxious for men. But it isn't only the ordinary sex thing. It's like this: every woman who comes out here feels secretly that she has failed. Even though her husband was an impossible brute, she feels that. Something she started didn't work out——"

"I've felt that way—as if I didn't 'make good.' Like a stenographer who's been fired."

"It's horrible for all your complexes."

"It makes you distrust yourself. You keep wondering if there's something queer about you . . . something impossible. Marjorie—no person in the world has a right to destroy my confidence in me. It's worse than losing a reputation."

"Don't I know it? A woman in our state of mind doesn't know if she's attractive to men. She sort of goes after men to prove to herself and other people that she's —all right. She keeps saying: 'See—I can get a man!' After I met Sam and he told me he loved me, I felt much more sure of myself."

"It seems dreadful that you should need Sam to make

you sure of yourself. I mean—isn't it a pity we haven't each got some sort of a core that holds together and makes us know what we are?"

"Well, I think most women need a man to keep them feeling adequate."

"Don't say it, Marjorie. I like to think women are more complete."

"A good-looking man anywhere in America who knew how to dance and make love could come out to Reno and never do an honest day's work for the rest of his life."

"He could open an office and put up a sign saying: FAITH RESTORED IN TEN LESSONS IF YOU PAY MY EXPENSES."

"But you mustn't think Sam is a sponger. Sam is terribly proud. The only thing he accepts from me is money for drinks, and you know I'm ratty with money."

As soon as Marjorie mentioned Sam, her voice took on that hideous cheerfulness again. Her face went false. Once more she snapped and unsnapped her bag. Whenever the bag was open, there was a scent of black narcissus.

"Does he love you?"

"I never knew an American who could make love so well. He puts all the Boston boys in the shade. You don't know the half of it. And he tells me when to go to bed early and when I'm looking badly—it must be love."

"Between you and me, what is love anyhow? Is it a

muddle of sex and pity and vanity? Is that all it is? I've always wondered if I were on the wrong track."

"Aw, don't be so serious. After all, what does it matter? Haven't you learned that nothing matters very much?"

Elisabeth shook her head.

"I refuse to. That takes all the—brilliance out of life. I've got to cling to believing that some things are better than others."

"Nothing will matter when you're pushing up the daisies."

Marjorie was restless again. She was swinging her feet. Her eyes were always moving. It is difficult to talk to anyone with moving feet and eyes. Now she was trying her hat brim a different way.

"I must go, darling. I'll be seeing you. You know you always were one of God's children."

"Don't say that. It sounds so pious. I just meant that out here I wanted to be extra particular. If I were in a place where everyone was using cheap perfume, I'd want to use the most expensive kind. And when everyone talks about how nothing matters——"

At the door, Marjorie paused. For the first time her eyes held steady. She looked strained and haunted. She squeezed Elisabeth's hand.

"Underneath—I know there's something ghastly about it all. Really I do. But I've never been able to figure out

what it was. So I've just let it go. A person has to do *something*. I can't let myself sit down and think of the past and the future. If I can just keep my mind on Sam . . . just keep from being afraid with Sam. . . ."

When Marjorie had gone, Elisabeth went to her window and looked down at Virginia Street, so wide-awake and ordinary. Along the curbs, cars were parked, without a space between. The sidewalks were crowded. The noon sun was shining on the Truckee River. A voice was calling: "Eskimo Pie." What was there in this sunny Nevada town to make a woman go haywire?

Perhaps Reno was not entirely to blame. Was it, as Marjorie had said, the sense of failure? Women here were apt to fall in love with waiters and cowboys and garage helpers and riding masters, men they would not have looked at in their home towns. Marjorie had fallen in love with Sam and it was not conscious sex desire in Marjorie, nor was it perhaps with these other women. It was that sense of failure. Moreover, they were all away from their backgrounds. Their usual environment was no longer directing their choices. Without background, they had no method of discrimination.

While Marjorie was there, Elisabeth had the door closed between her room and Gretchen's. Now she opened it. She called, but no one answered. Then she heard a muffled sound from Millicent's room . . . Millicent was sitting at her desk, her arms folded across the blotter

and her head down on her arms. It was not unusual for the Quartet to find each other in tears, quick tears that came in the midst of laughter. It was all part of the Reno state of mind. Only yesterday Gretchen had cried, briefly and gruffly, because her husband was refusing to sign the power-of-attorney papers . . . "Say, I don't make a habit of this. I don't know what's got into me."

"What is it, Millicent? The same old thing?"

"It's a letter from Dean. You know—my husband."

"Nasty letter?"

"Perfectly nice. Only it began 'Dear Millicent' and I thought of how his letters used to begin——"

Elisabeth shut her teeth hard.

"There's too much weeping for men going on in Reno," she said. "I don't believe a man jack of them is worth it. No, not even Richard is worth it."

Millicent raised her head from the desk.

"I wish there were some town in the United States where men got together and wept for women."

Elisabeth looked down at Millicent's flushed face, wet blue eyes, disheveled curls.

"Men can talk all they like about the tricks women play. All right, women do play tricks. But men always win out in the end. They have so much longer life than we have. They've got time in their pockets."

"When they're seventy, they can still marry a young woman——"

"See how much our first marriages have taken out of us, Millicent. Richard looks better than the day I married him. I was three years younger than he, and everyone thought I was older."

Millicent reached over to the bureau for her mirror and her pink rouge. She began reddening her cheeks, turning her face anxiously this way and that.

"Say—you don't know what trouble is unless you've been married to an intellectual. I didn't pretend to have any brains when we were engaged. But after we were married he was sore at me because I wasn't his own kind."

"I do believe if husbands and wives wouldn't try to make each other over . . . the awful missionary instinct that seems to be a part of a good man's love."

"He used to give parties and the talk would be way over my head and then he'd say afterward that I was so dumb."

"Friends don't try to make each other over. That's what makes friendship so grand."

"Then he got a notion about the equality of the sexes and he wouldn't open a door for me or pick up a handkerchief or move a chair. What I went through . . ."

Millicent was done with the rouge. She laid the mirror down gently on the glass bureau top. Her eyes were still wet with tears. She began with the lipstick, running her little finger around her mouth, staring out of the window.

"Honest, Elisabeth, you don't know what it is to live

with a man you love and be so shut away from his mind —as if he were living inside a wall that I couldn't climb over. I always went around feeling—inferior. I picked up some of his words. I read some of his books. Of course, I got sore, too . . ."

They went out for a ride in Elisabeth's car. No matter how many storms there were in anyone's heart, the weather now was always beautiful. May had just begun, and those spring winds were still. There was a bright liquid honey warmth in the air. The sky was a thick purple-blue. The snow had run from the hills. On Reno lawns, dandelions and lilacs bloomed. It was surprising to see such human flowers in Reno. One would expect camellias and orchids to wreathe along the fences. There seemed hope for the world, too, because all along the Truckee River white cherries were blossoming.

Millicent said she could always forget Dean for a while, just after she had a good cry about him. She seemed more cheerful now. The car sped along the Carson Valley. It was spring, too, in the desert. All through the valley glimmered veils of purple and red-pink . . . mists of tiny flowers breathed out from the earth overnight. The cottonwoods had shaken into full foliage. Plumy green and white bouquets, they marked the water courses. The poplars were wrapped in dark oily leaves. The flocks of sheep were grazing carelessly, not huddled before the wind. Down by the deserted village, men in blue overalls

were burning the sage. There was a smell like petals in an old jar.

"Don't take me near those mountains, Elisabeth. They give me the willies."

"I'm beginning to like the scenery better. I'm getting used to it. Anyhow, it's clear and bare and simple, and life isn't that way for any of us now."

"We're awfully self-conscious about the way we feel about Reno. We watch our reactions, don't we?"

"Well, we were all brought up to believe that divorce is horrible. So we watch ourselves to see how we're living through it, just as we watch ourselves when we're sick."

Millicent lowered her voice to a whisper that was just audible above the hum of the motor.

"I don't like to admit it, because we've all been talking about how we hated Reno, but I—well—I think I'm going to have a good time here."

"You mean—because there aren't any intellectuals?"

"Last night I was at the soda fountain, working one of those gambling machines. An awfully nice fellow was watching me. After a while, he asked me to step over to Molloy's and have a drink. I went because he seemed nice and—it's one of the ways to meet a man in Reno. You know a lot of the dates are made at the soda fountain."

"Some lawyers introduce their clients around——"

"So I think I'll like Reno. His name is Jimmy. He says he'll take me to parties. It's a new experience for me."

"Why new? You've been rushed before, haven't you?"

"Not so I could really enjoy it. You see I was brought up in an awfully strict home and I went to a dull boarding school and right after graduating I married that encyclopædia husband. I've never really had any girlhood——"

"Even a modern girl——"

"I've always been watched by a parent or a teacher or a husband. Now I'm out here where nobody can see me. I'm free. I can do all the things I've always wanted to do. It came over me all of a sudden last night, when I accepted Jimmy's invitation. I can do all the things I've always wanted to do—get 'em out of my system."

"So many husbands are like parents. I believe lots of women feel that teacher can't see them in Nevada."

They rode along in silence. They were down by the High Sierras, but Millicent was so absorbed she did not notice. She stared down into her yellow linen lap. Suddenly she giggled.

"Isn't it funny?" she said. "When we talk about doing what we've always wanted to do . . . it's rottenness we mean."

CHAPTER VII

THAT first May Sunday small clouds wandered in the sky, like white sheep grazing; the garden was delicately colored with tulips; the air smelled of mock orange. Some of the divorcees went to church, walking down Virginia Street two by two, carrying little prayer books fished out of their trunks. Nairn and Gretchen both had gardenias from their lovers. Even Elisabeth had a corsage—from Richard. The box came to her door early in the morning, pink roses and heavy-scented white freezia. Richard probably meant it to be thoughtful, but it was difficult. All day Elisabeth felt the weight of memory on her shoulder and the gold ribbon stirring in the Nevada air.

That Sunday night Marjorie telephoned.

"You must come to Dick and Delia's party tomorrow night. They're the lewdest talking people you ever met, but they're terribly good-hearted."

"They don't know me."

"That doesn't matter. Didn't I tell you they were good-hearted? They don't care who comes to their parties. Sam and I'll come by for you at eight."

Monday evening was clear and brilliant, cool like all

Nevada evenings. One has to get accustomed to the nights being so much colder than the days. Elisabeth wore a light green mist of a dress, flounces of green net caught with tiny wreaths of satin roses . . . light coral beads . . . a coral velvet wrap. She climbed into the rumble seat of Sam's coupe, her green heels catching the net.

They rode by the Truckee River, spotted gold from the lights along the bank, and stopped before a shingled bungalow that reminded Elisabeth of realtors' developments in eastern suburbs. Sam and Marjorie did not knock on the door. They simply walked in. It was the living room of a thousand bungalows . . . Chinese rug, maroon overstuffed sofa and chairs, a mantel with a gilt clock, a walnut smoking stand, a radiola, vases crammed with wax roses. By the lighted fireplace, busy with a tray and glasses, was a blond powerfully built man of about thirty-five. His skin was yellow; his eyes were puffy underneath; there were deep wrinkles at the corners of his mouth.

"Hello Dick—you old so-and-so. Are we the first?"

Dick did not stand. He smiled and showed his very good bright teeth.

"Sit down and have a drink. Delia's upstairs powdering."

A loud musical voice came from the upper floor.

"Don't lie to them, Dick. I'm struggling with my bloomers."

"Who's the wench you've got with you, Marj?" Dick asked.

"My error. This is Elisabeth Wane. You've heard me talk about her."

"She's dangerous. All girls in net dresses are dangerous. Can I shock her?"

"Nothing shocks me," Elisabeth said, tilting up her chin. If Sam and Marjorie had been saying she was a back number . . .

"That's too bad. Shocking is my specialty. Sorry you can't oblige."

He handed them tall ice-wet glasses of gin and ginger ale, yellow and cold.

"Here's when—everybody knows how," Dick proposed.

"I don't agree with you there, but let it pass," Mariorie said. "May we all love often."

"I'm never happy unless I'm in love," Sam mumbled to the rim of his glass. "Fresh love."

The other guests arrived. Millicent had been invited and she came wearing pale yellow with blue sweetpeas on her shoulder. All evening she sat on the maroon sofa . . . light tumbled rings of hair, bright rouge and crimson mouth, trembling blue sweetpeas, pale yellow melting down to her blue slippers, the tall glass in her small bony hand . . . "This is fun, isn't it? This is Reno" . . . She was evidently with the young man Jimmy she had

met at the soda fountain. He had an ingenuous charming face and roving hands. He was always finding a pretext to touch Millicent somewhere—her chin, her shoulder, her foot.

There were six other couples, young and noisy. Some were natives of Reno, others part of the colony. The colonists were telling about the machinery of their divorces . . . their power-of-attorney papers, their complaints, how much longer they had to stay. Elisabeth wondered how the natives could endure the subject of divorce after years and years. Oh well, it was the way a mining town endured the subject of mining. It was bread and butter.

"Dick was a good architect until Delia got hold of him," Marjorie whispered, under cover of the guests' arrival. "They say he was married to a girl who had given him the money to set up in business. Delia came out here from Nebraska for a divorce and she saw Dick and it was all over but the shouting. She simply annexed him. She broke down that marriage like a battering ram. Wait till you see her. She and Dick do use foul language, but they're terribly kind. They've been married a year and——"

Delia walked into the room.

"Hello, boys and girls. Sorry to be late but my bloomers simply wouldn't go on. Don't know what's the matter——"

Delia could only be described as a large magnificent

animal about thirty years old. Ash-blonde hair, long hazel eyes, gardenia skin, glowing shoulders, satin arms, predatory hands with no rings. She wore a black dress of a dull sleek material that fitted her as the skin fits a water snake. There were thick round pearls in her ears, around her neck, on her slippers. But what she wore did not seem important. It was that air of large animal magnificence. Before she spoke, one felt about her an aura of sex and craving.

But there was nothing in her eyes. They were long and gray-green, surrounded by a heavy fringe of darkened lashes. They turned to the right and left. They widened and narrowed. But there was no expression. It was like looking into the eyes of a cat . . . or the cup of some striped flower . . . or ocean water.

"How do you like Reno, Mrs. Wane?"

"I've been here only seventeen days. I——"

When Delia spoke, her mouth opened, her lips shone, her cheeks lifted, but her eyes did not change. There was a falsity in her courteous manner, like desire trying to be courteous.

"No place like it, Mrs. Wane. Cosmopolitan crew. People from all over the country. None of your small-town stuffiness."

She seemed suddenly aware of her husband. She threw her arms around him, closing her striped eyes.

"I haven't seen you for two hours, Tiger. Last time I

saw you . . . well, girls, you don't know what you miss."

Everyone laughed. She sat down by the fire with her gin. The light smouldered on her hair, those gardenia shoulders, the red nails at the ends of her long possessive fingers. Her pose was beautiful and relaxed as an animal's pose. About her wide mouth was disturbance and excitement. One watched her foot tapping on the fender, followed the movement under her dress to the knee. No one could look at her without thinking of sex. Instinctively one knew it was what she lived for.

Her child, who came into the room to say good-night, was pale and meager. He had the undersized second-rate look of an unwanted child. He kissed his mother timidly on the cheek. Delia treated him with that condescension which women, who make a career of sex, use for their children—by-products of the main industry. No, Delia was not a perfect animal because she could not reproduce healthy young. A stock breeder would have shot her.

She was over-conscious of Elisabeth. She kept sliding her eyes around to Elisabeth, talking about New York. Elisabeth felt a tingling in her blood. It was an instinctive antagonism, as if they were on opposite sides of some battle. Delia was talking about the plays in New York. While she spoke one could feel again her thick imitation-velvet society manners. Nothing was real about her except desire.

"I do miss the theatre here in Reno. Last night we went to the most stupid movie. I almost expired in Dick's arms. It was called 'The Case of Captain Bishop.' I couldn't make head nor tail of it."

"That wasn't the name," her husband said thoughtfully. "It was 'The Case of Captain Grischa.' "

"Not Captain. The Case of Sergeant Somebody," Millicent's escort volunteered.

"Anyhow, I couldn't make head or tail of it," Delia said. "It was taken from a book. That book must have been dying on its feet."

" 'War Nurse' was a swell movie."

"I cried over 'War Nurse.' Shake 'em up, Dick. Boys and girls, there isn't a better sound in the world than the sound of ice in a cocktail shaker. I can hear it in my sleep, when I get any sleep."

"I know better sounds," Elisabeth said.

She did not know why she said it, except that every word Delia spoke made her want to contradict with a small unreasonable grinding anger. She was appalled at the silence which followed her words. Delia turned, and Elisabeth could see by the twist of her mouth that she, too, felt they were enemies.

"What's a better sound?" Delia asked sweetly. "Bubbling brooks and wind in the trees?"

Elisabeth flushed. It was just what she had been thinking . . . the Truckee River . . . the cottonwood by

the Hotel . . . But it would sound driveling to say so now, driveling and prissy. With all that little grinding anger, she felt cowed by the sneer in Delia's voice. She had a sheepish desire to appear well before Delia, whom she hated.

"I was thinking of other sounds yet," she said, rolling her eyes. "Use your imagination."

Delia gave an approving yelp.

"The kid's one of us," she said. "Give her some more gin." She leaned forward and slid her hand along her husband's arm. "Speaking of sounds, let's play 'em our new bootleg records."

Delia was out of her chair and down on the floor with a crawling pounce, like a cat. The records were under the sofa. Now Dick was filling all the glasses again and everyone was screaming . . . "Have you got 'Empty Room Blues?'" . . . "Gee, I've heard of those records" . . . "Did you get 'em in that little shop in Sacramento?" . . . Elisabeth had not known before that bootleg phonograph records were bought and sold.

First they played "Empty Room Blues," sung by a negro woman. Elisabeth began to finger the tiny wreaths of roses on her dress. She felt that fluttered impulse to rearrange her hair that she always had when she was nervous. She was fixing the little tendrils around her ears when she saw Delia's striped eyes. She lowered her own

eyes and drank more gin, biting hard on the edge of the glass. The ice burned cold against her upper lip.

"I can tell what sort a woman is by the way she listens to these records," Delia said. "I can spot the Revenue Agents."

"Empty Room Blues" was mild compared to the others . . . "How Long, Lover" . . . "Here You Are, Boy" . . . Although Elisabeth was used to the conversation at New York parties and could hold her own in any discussion of the new abnormalities, she had not imagined that such things could be said. Her ears shrank from the words. Her whole body crawled. She wanted to get up and call out in a high thin voice: "Turn off that record."

But she felt Delia's stare, and of course it was silly to make a scene. She was a guest. She was anxious not to be . . . like a woman with a little mouth. There were eleven roses in each wreath on her dress. She ran her fingers over the light stiff net. There was an uneasy silence through the room. Elisabeth could hear Sam breathing. Marjorie was listening with a queer slack smile. All the men seemed more embarrassed than the women. They looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

"I guess the party can go on from here," Delia said.

It was so peculiar, Elisabeth thought, that it was all taking place in this bungalow, like a thousand other bungalows, with this stupid furniture and the vases of

wax roses. There was no originality even in the lamps. A set of Elbert Hubbard stood on the table. The pictures on the walls were landscapes and kittens in baskets.

"They're always like this," Marjorie whispered. "Aren't they a scream? Everyone feels they go too far, but that's their way."

"Why does everybody stand for it?"

"They're terribly good-hearted."

"But Marjorie—I don't believe that being good-hearted makes up for everything."

"Well, what of it? What does it matter?"

Somebody suggested they go on to the dance at the Golf Club. There was a scramble for coats . . . "Hey, girls, upstairs if you want to powder your nose" . . . They all went out into the cool dry air . . . the dim rounds of the hills . . . the blazing sky. The cars were crowded. Elisabeth sat between Dick and Sam. Delia sat on Dick's lap . . . Sam put his arm around Elisabeth . . . "Marjorie's going home next week. Why don't you and I get together?"

The Golf Club looked like any other Country Club. There was a large cloakroom for both men and women. The orchestra was playing in a long low-ceilinged room with chandeliers, a mantel filled with silver trophies, and a fireplace. Around the walls were wicker chairs where dowagers were sitting with gray pompadours and little lace shawls . . . permanent residents. Elisabeth was al-

ways hearing about the permanent residents. They had handsome homes high above the Truckee River.

Elisabeth saw her lawyer dancing with a dark vivid girl in cerise taffeta, turquoise earrings, turquoise slippers, tanned skin. When the dance was over, he hurried across the floor and asked Elisabeth for the next.

"Did you see that girl I was dancing with? Wasn't she a knockout?"

"Where'd she get all that tan?"

"Came straight from Palm Beach. That's George Beverly's new client. She's just eighteen. She only got here yesterday and she sure has him going."

The orchestra was playing again. Elisabeth saw the new client dancing with George Beverly, smiling straight into his eyes. He had the maudlin expression of a man in his early fifties who has been "got going." The cerise taffeta whirled about his knees.

"As soon as the boys saw her, George could hardly save a dance for himself. And of course she's his client, so he'll have to let us have her, according to the rules. I heard the rumor yesterday that a peach had come to town. You know—those things get around."

"I suppose——"

"Sure they do. The boys are always anxious to look the new crop over. The old hands watch a new arrival pretty close and try to get her number. If she's obviously the

sort that won't play, then everybody lays off her. But you can't always tell with a woman."

"What do they do if they can't tell?" Elisabeth asked, feeling like an interlocutor.

"Well, this is how it works. A man looks the new crop over and picks out—that is, if he's decent—a girl who looks sort of healthy as well as good-looking. Then he goes around with her and if she's willing, his love life is taken care of for six weeks. Then she gets her divorce and takes the Overland home and he goes around with an ache in his breastbone for a while. You get awfully fond of a girl you've known that way. Sometimes it takes as much as a week or two to get over the whole thing. Then the man looks around him, picks another, and so on . . ."

"Mohammedan heaven. But suppose the girl isn't willing?"

"Well, then he calls himself a bad guesser and finds another. There's always so many girls that nobody needs to worry. The funny part is that our local girls don't stand a chance. Everybody makes for the outside talent."

"You've been telling me what the decent men do. What about the others?"

"They pick the rich ones and get their expenses paid. They play the old army game. The rich divorcees around forty-five are easy meat. This winter there was one hussy around fifty who used to give the men twenty dollar bills when they came to her room. And to see her in public

you'd think she was a handsome silver-haired society leader. She had an estate just outside of Philadelphia. Some of the men try to get the rich women to set them up in business."

"Don't tell me any more right now," Elisabeth said. "I feel that just one more dirty thought would finish me."

The stag line was over by the fireplace. The men were obviously looking the crop over. The women might as well have been in a slave market. Every feature, every line counted. It was all right for some women. That cerise-and-turquoise client of George Beverly's looked as though she could take care of herself, even if she were only eighteen. But it was different with Millicent. She was being given a whirl by the stag line; she smiled up into everyone's face, showing her dimples. That pale yellow gown with the sweetpeas never stopped floating under the chandeliers.

Delia did not allow Dick to dance with any other woman. They circled slowly about the floor, pressed close, his eyes roving a bit sulkily, her mouth in a set red smile. Marjorie and Sam did the tango . . . Sam who was already trying to make his plans for next week . . . Elisabeth went from one member of the stag line to another and the man always said: "Where've you been all my life?" Of course no one was expected to talk about anything but love.

The dance floor thinned and emptied. Around mid-

night Elisabeth went into the cloakroom. Couples were sitting in corners, along the walls, drinking out of flasks. Evidently the cloakroom was the only place they could drink in this Country Club. She saw her dentist, very pale and polite, with a girl who was all red hair and blue ruffles . . . "Good evening, Mrs. Wane. What do you think of our good clean fun?" . . . She almost fell over Millicent, sitting on the floor in the corner.

"You'll ruin your dress. Somebody's stepped on it already."

Millicent lifted defiant eyes.

"Who cares?"

"I'll watch out," her escort said stiffly.

Dick and Delia came into the cloakroom. They leaned against the wall, their arms sliding around each other's waists.

"It's a foul party," Delia said. "Nothing doing. A lot of old grannies. Let's go on to the Willows."

"Our flasks are empty anyhow."

"I'll sit on your lap all the way to the Willows and burn you up."

Elisabeth's head swam with sex and gin.

"It's late," she said. "I'll go home."

"Are you drunk?"

"I'm tired of being asked where I'm going to spend the night."

No one could find Sam and Marjorie, so Elisabeth was

taken home by a weedy boy in spectacles and a white muffler. He said he was glad to leave—he'd had enough. They drove back to the hotel in his Chevrolet.

"Dick and Delia are always a perfect show," he said in a soprano voice.

"Why doesn't somebody tell them to shut up?"

"Oh, well, it's only their way. They're good scouts. They'd take the shirts off their backs if you were in trouble. Besides, no one could reform them. They're psychopathic cases, and psychopathic cases always do run parties."

"Tell me—what do the permanent residents think about the divorce colony? I mean—the older women in those lace shawls."

"A lot of them try to pretend they're above it all, but they know darned well how Reno makes its living. They can't act too high-nosed."

"Do they have a closed social group that divorcees never see?"

"A few of them do. But the divorcees seep pretty much through the whole town. Besides, a lot of the divorcees are swell people to know. After all, they come from the best families."

"What do the women do who live here all the time?"

"Usual thing. Bridge and sewing clubs. Churches and social centers. I've heard it's all very dull. One divorcee came here from Fall River, fell in love with a Reno man,

married him and found our respectable people so deadly that she ran back to Fall River."

They were in front of the hotel now. The long curb, so crowded with cars by day, was empty. There was a light in the soda fountain, but all the other shops were dark.

"Well, you've been to a typical Reno party."

"But Dick and Delia aren't at every party."

"There's always dirt and drink. Those are our simple pleasures."

"But when you have that all the time it makes life so empty."

"What else can you expect when you get a lot of nervous excited unhappy people together? We can't play pencil-and-paper games."

"We shouldn't all be out here together. We're like people in a Sanitarium. We keep talking about our disease."

"A woman has to have both feet on the ground to get through Reno straight. A weak one doesn't stand a chance——"

"Are most women weak?"

"I'd say so. What's it matter? They enjoy themselves."

Gretchen and Nairn were asleep. Elisabeth undressed very slowly. Thoughtfully she hung up the coral velvet wrap, the green net with the roses. She drew off her stockings, rubbed her knees. Her feet were cold. She had never realized before how tiring it was to hear and see

other people's sex. She took a drink of water. She felt like washing her hair. Suddenly she burst into a fit of weeping . . . "Richard" . . . "Richard" . . . She went in a heap on the bathroom floor and whimpered . . . "It was so beautiful with you, my darling. I want it back again . . . Let me hang on to it . . . beloved. Don't let anything else get me . . . Richard . . ."

It was beginning to be light when she awoke. She had fallen asleep on the bathroom floor. She sat up, cold and bewildered. Was Millicent in? She tiptoed across Gretchen's room (Gretchen's red hair on the pillow, the shade rattling in the wind) to Millicent's room. Evidently she had just come in. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, trying to kick off her slippers. Her hair was out of curl; there was a streak of rouge across her face; her eyes watered; the sweetpeas were dead.

"I'm a corpse."

"Headache?"

"No—I just can't see very well."

"You should be careful what you drink. You can't tell what you're getting."

"I didn't take anything after I got to the Willows. I'm not as pie-eyed as I was in the cloakroom. I thought I was going to pass out in there. I've never been so drunk. Now I know what it's like to be drunk. Three cheers."

"How was the Willows?"

"One night's the same as another. When that orches-

tra fellow came to our booth he sang: 'I Want to Look in the Book of My Memories.' One of the girls got a crying jag. Delia lay all over Dick. They make me tired. I suppose they're in love."

"They're not in love. They're in heat."

Millicent was in bed. She had not bothered to do more than take off her dress and slippers. She huddled the blanket around her shoulders. Even her blanket smelled of that rose perfume.

"Stay here a minute, Elisabeth. Hold my hand. Talk to me. Honest, I'm a corpse."

Elisabeth sat down on the floor and Millicent reached out her hand. It was ice-cold.

"I'm so ashamed, Millicent, of the way I acted at the party."

"Will you put that coat over me? I'm frozen. I don't know what's the matter with me . . . Why, what do you mean? You were all right."

"I was a coward. I should have said I didn't like those bootleg records."

"You couldn't very well. They were beastly. But it would have made a scene."

"I always excuse myself for being a coward by saying I don't want to make a scene."

Millicent's voice came sleepily from under the blanket.

"Poor Elisabeth, she's all hot and bothered. Will you

hand me that little embroidered pillow? But we can't force our ideals on other people."

"I don't see why I can't force my ideals on them as well as they can force their dirt on me. A party is always set to the level of the worst person there. Everywhere the worst person does the bossing. I suppose it's because the others, like me, are cowards. I even laughed at that record. I was so afraid they'd think I was a back number. Isn't it funny how dirt can win out like that?"

The sun was rising in Millicent's room, gilding the curtains, the pillows, the bureau with the pictures of her father and mother. It would be another beautiful day. More lilacs would bloom on the Reno lawns. The wild cherries along the river would open wider.

"I've been here a long while now," Elisabeth said, "and I've seen so much that's—second-rate. Sometimes I long for a sight of truth and faithfulness just like a person might long for water. I get a thirst for—clear goodness. Do you ever get that way, Millicent?"

But Millicent was asleep, the sun on her eyelids.

CHAPTER VIII

THE weather had cleared for the summer. Every day the sky flowered in a deep lustrous blue. The sun was a marigold. The banks of the Truckee River were red and white with hawthorn. There were cascades of wistaria in the hotel garden. The fountain had been cleared of withered leaves and the open mouth of the frog spouted water. The great wavering yellow-green willows were almost still in the transparent sunshine.

Millicent did not sit in the garden now. She was playing tennis with Jimmy in Wingfield Park. She was taking golf lessons at the Club. She had stopped her secretarial course at the business school to go in for sports. She was going to join the class in tap dancing. Millicent had tried for a day every course in Reno except Beauty Parlor Management. The others never saw her now, except when she fluttered into her room to dress for engagements with Jimmy. One heard her bath water running and the clatter of her comb on the glass bureau top, smelled that rose perfume, had a fleeting glimpse of the slippers with ostrich

feather rosettes, and flying streamers of gold ribbon on a flowery negligee.

Gretchen was away from the garden, too. She was going with the "society" bunch now, a crowd of wealthy people from New York and Chicago. She stayed in bed these mornings until ten o'clock, then dressed and went over to that speakeasy called Molloy's. The crowd met there at eleven in the morning and stayed most of the day. They were pleasantly stewed all of the time.

Gretchen's crowd were sons and daughters of families that were called most prominent all over the country. They were the ones most often in the society columns; they considered themselves the American aristocracy. They were thought of as the aristocracy by a great newspaper-reading middle-class. And what were they? They were a dreadful lot. They had the manners of swine. They boasted about not having manners. Gretchen said: "Only social climbers are polite." They were strident and insensible, as if the hearts had been left out of their bodies. They spent their days at Molloy's, half-drunk, telling dirty stories. In all their sex intrigues there was nothing strong enough to be called passionate. They were emotionally impotent.

The hero of the crowd was Edgar Ray, who had come out here for a divorce because his wife was seduced by a woman. He came to Molloy's every morning at eleven, his cocker spaniel trailing behind him, paws clicking on

the floor. The dog, an intelligent animal named Sappho, always sat on a chair and waited while his master drank. About four o'clock Edgar was drunk enough to tell everyone how it happened . . . "The funny part of it is that I can't seem to be jealous. Put yourself in my place. Would you be jealous?"

The heroine was Irene Lang, aged nineteen, who was here with her father, a distinguished sentimental and submissive gentleman. She ordered him about as Edgar ordered his spaniel. Looming up beside her cultivated father, she was strange and unhappy and coarse and beautiful. She used the worst language of any woman in Reno, and that was saying something. He seemed to know, in a half-conscious way, there was something wrong with Irene, because he kept telling everyone how she had been spoiled by her rotter of a husband . . . "He taught her all this. She's been hurt. Every woman in Reno has a hurt look in her eyes." . . . People smiled when he said he had come out here to protect Irene's reputation, because everyone knew that her reputation had gone far beyond the need of protection . . . "Her mother died when she was a baby. I've brought her up by myself."

Elisabeth and Nairn were left alone in the garden. They had the waiter bring them out lunch every noon. It was so much better than eating in that gloom with the phonograph. Elisabeth always brought a book into the garden, but she had not read further than the first page

of Boswell. She had almost given up the idea of getting a lot of solid reading done. She found herself, with the book in her lap, going over the same greasy thoughts, hunting back into the causes for everything, getting into a panic about the future. What could she have done to keep Richard? Now Nairn had a lover. There was a door for Nairn. But Elisabeth felt as if she were moving steadily toward a high stone wall.

Nairn would sit working on the wreath of blue roses in her needlepoint cover, talking about Basil. Little by little, she told everything about him . . . how they happened to meet . . . his taste in music . . . how fond he was of blue . . . how all the women were mad about him. Nairn's voice went on and on in the warm sun-lighted air. Sometimes she leaned her head back in the hammock and smiled, and Elisabeth knew what she was thinking. She was not seeing that yellow hill . . . the willows . . . the American flag over the Courthouse dome.

There were strangers in the garden, now the days were mild. Over in the other hammock was what Nairn called "The Hag Club." They were the discarded-looking women one might expect to find in Reno . . . leather complexions, tight eyes and tight mouths, mushroom hats. They sat in their hammock and looked upon all the others in the garden with open disapproval. They left in a body when Nairn brought her portable victrola down on the lawn.

Elisabeth could not help feeling for them the instinctive dislike that anyone has for the ugly and unsuccessful. They must have been a trial to their husbands. It was easy to imagine almost anyone luring those badgered men away. But one afternoon Elisabeth saw a hag burst into tears and cry hideously into her handkerchief. Well, it must be dreadful to lose out at that age. Elisabeth found it hard to get accustomed to not belonging to anyone. Now these hags knew they would never belong again. Did they mind?

On the morning of May tenth, there was a mother and daughter in the other hammock. The mother was thin, scraggy and nervous; the daughter was a drooping wisp with a bloodless face. She sat beside her mother, turning a spray of lilac about in her hand, looking toward the Courthouse. The mother was talking and talking. One could see her lips moving without a pause. The daughter did not say a word . . . turned the lilac in her hand.

"That mother and daughter should be separated by force, Elisabeth. Why doesn't she let her alone?"

"I despise these mothers and daughters who come out together. If a girl isn't capable of getting a divorce by herself, she doesn't deserve it."

"Perhaps this mother is trying, like poor Mr. Lang, to protect a reputation."

The girl in the hammock left her mother and strolled

over the lawn, dragging her feet. She did look lost and tired and yellow. With a languid gesture she threw the spray of lilac into the fountain. She had scarcely disappeared inside the screen door when the mother came over toward Elisabeth. She crossed the lawn in short choppy steps, digging her heels into the turf . . . "Can I speak to you a minute?" . . . Elisabeth moved over for her to sit down.

"I just wanted to ask you," she said in that careless nasal tone which accompanies the dialect of some New Yorkers, "how far is Reno Hot Springs?"

"Ten miles. Straight along the Carson Highway."

"I was thinking those hot baths might do Cora good. She's that thin! She won't eat and she wakes up in the night crying. I'm terribly worried."

Across the fretful managing face of the mother drifted a weary look.

"I'd like to make Cora happy. I'm her mother and I've got her best at heart. I'm hoping she'll make friends out here. You know—nice friends to take her mind off herself. I was hoping you girls would talk to her. You look so refined. You're just the kind of girls I'd like Cora to know."

"I'm sure——"

"I'd give anything to make Cora happy. Have you girls any children? Well, if you had you'd know how I feel. Ever since she was a tiny baby . . . Just before we

left New York the doctor gave me a tonic for her. She's that thin! She's only eighteen and of course she takes it hard."

"Most women do take it hard. We try to pretend we don't."

The mother wiped her eyes with a pink scented handkerchief.

"Her husband treated her like a brute, but I do believe she still loves him. She stayed with him till the last minute. I can't understand it. If my husband had treated me that way, I'd have snapped my fingers at him."

"Lots of women out here still love their husbands," Elisabeth said awkwardly.

"But you can't sacrifice your future to your past," Nairn murmured.

The mother seemed to clutch at Nairn's words.

"I wish you'd tell Cora that. She's always wanting to go back because she says she keeps remembering little things her and him did together. I came out here with her because I knew she'd never stay unless I was along."

She was silent a moment, opening her handbag and putting back the pink handkerchief. Her face was pinched and strained.

"Well, I must run along and see that Cora takes her medicine. You know—I keep telling her what a brute he was and how he took her money but she still—I wish

one of you girls would talk to her and tell her she'd be a fool to go back. She won't talk to me. She blames me, her own mother. She . . . girls these days . . ."

There was a heavy silence while the mother walked over the lawn to the screen door. Then Nairn exploded.

"I could wring her neck!"

"She'll dose the poor girl to death."

"Talk her to death, you mean."

"But Nairn—the awful part is that she loves Cora."

"I wonder how many divorces have been brought on by scraggy mothers."

"She wants to make Cora happy. What a pity she——"

"You can see her life from now on, can't you? Cora'll go home and live with papa and mamma. She's likely not to marry again. She's not pretty and she's unhealthy and she's soured. She'll watch her girl friends have their babies and she'll talk about the year she was married until her friends get tired of hearing. She'll be the kind that is always too glad to see men—so glad that she'll frighten them."

"And mamma to her dying day will believe that she delivered Cora from a brute. And Cora will hate mamma for it. Nairn—why are we so ignorant in what we do for the people we love!"

"She'll get bitterer and uglier. Can't you see her aged

forty-five in a resort hotel, following in her parents' wake, carrying magazines and shawls, with a face like a dill pickle?"

"Nairn—I never knew until I came out here what life could actually do to people. Now I'm spang up against it—Life is such flint——"

"Cora should have been allowed to live with that brute until she decided of her own accord to leave him. If she liked brutality, let her have it."

"If I were a mother, I wouldn't want it on my conscience that I broke up my daughter's marriage. It's so beastly."

Nairn sighed and opened her cigarette case, took out a cigarette, went through the ritual. She blew the ashes from her lap.

"My mother taunted me with not being able to keep my husband. She said she'd kept hers for thirty years. I hate to say it, but that was rotten of her."

Elisabeth leaned her head back against the warm hammock canvas and closed her eyes. It was very quiet in the garden. Only the fountain made a hissing sound on the stone. She felt the inward rising of an old childish exasperation.

"That's what mine said. And yet in the next breath she'd admit that Richard was a cad and no woman could live with him."

"Mothers and daughters do unspeakable things to each

other in the course of their lives. Ask any woman. There are scenes they both turn away from, if they're decent. They love each other and they hate each other."

There was a bitter note in Nairn's voice. A shadow passed over her face. It looked gray, even in the sunlight. Her hand shook a little with the cigarette.

"Families," she said slowly, "ruin a marriage more often than any infidelity."

"You're bitter, Nairn."

"I know damned well I'm bitter. I had the sort of family who poured poison into my ear about my husband from the moment I married him. They were always making fun of him, showing me his defects, telling me that he wasn't treating me right. While they were talking to me, I'd fight them off and wouldn't believe them. But when I got by myself, their words would stick in my mind and I'd think about them, and the next time Keith did anything queer, I'd remember. It was just like pouring poison into me, drop by drop. I was too young then to see what they were doing. But I see now . . ."

Nairn was trembling. She dropped her cigarette on the lawn and ground it under her heel.

"And yet they do it all in the name of love," Elisabeth said.

"Oh God—ninety-nine people out of a hundred don't know what unselfish love is. Do I? Do you?"

"I wonder——"

"That's one of the horrible things about it all. A mother, who would go crazy if her daughter had pneumonia, doesn't think anything of smashing her daughter's marriage . . . the best thing the girl's got . . ."

"But families are always horrified when you finally come to the point of getting a divorce."

"Oh—all they want to do is to take the bloom off your marriage. Destroy the romance. They don't want you to stop living with your husband. They don't treat you very well when you go back home to live——"

"But Nairn—there are wonderful families—darling families——"

"I suppose I'm prejudiced. I married Keith to get away from mine. Lots of girls do."

"There ought to be less of that sort of influence in these modern times."

"There's more of it going on than anyone will admit."

"Nairn—you don't really believe that families have broken up more marriages than unfaithfulness."

Nairn shook her head. Her face was hard and unsmiling.

"Very often unfaithfulness was the result of a long family campaign. In the beginning some kind relative said to John: 'You know, John, Bessie isn't as thoughtful of you as she should be.' Or else Bessie's mother told her that John would never be a business success and Bessie began being over-critical of John and he got uncomfort-

able at home and found some woman who said she understood him."

"Nairn—we shouldn't be influenced—we should be complete in ourselves."

"That's easy to say. There aren't many people who have gathered themselves up into anything definite. Most of us are just indefinite—the prey of life——"

"What a horrible expression—the prey of life——"

The waiter came with their lunch. Over their tomato salad and iced tea, they agreed not to mention the family subject again. It made them both feel so small and dark and exasperated. What they said might be the truth but . . . In order to bear life one had to resolve to keep some truths under. It was a struggle to be gentle, to have your mind pliable and loving. While they were leaning back in the hammock with their chocolate cake, Cora came out on the lawn. She smiled faintly in answer to their hello, and disappeared through the hedge.

After lunch Nairn was working again on the wreath of blue roses when a shingled blonde in a pink dress came and sat on the grass near the hammock. She was bare-armed, bare-legged; her pink dress was cut low in the back. Her teeth were bad; the color of her skin was bad; there were scratches on her legs. She wore green raffia shoes. She sat plucking the grass blades, looking up as if she wanted to talk.

"I understand," she said suddenly, "the riding master is some baby."

Nairn looked up from her work. Elisabeth started out of her reverie on what had made Richard leave in the first place.

"Gee—a girl does get lonely out here."

"How much longer have you got?" Elisabeth asked. That was the first question always put to a stranger.

The girl was rubbing her hands over her bare ankles. She laughed.

"It's my mother who's getting the divorce. Two weeks from now. We've been living together in a boarding house on Sierra Street. She's getting married that same day. They don't want me on their honeymoon, so I'm going back to Minneapolis alone. Guess I'll visit the Grand Canyon."

"Have you liked it here?"

"Oh, sure. But my sugar got his divorce yesterday and left for Dallas. He was swell. So I'm kinda lonely now. You know how it is without a sugar."

She lay back flat on the ground, stretched out her bare sallow arms, and looked up at the ineffable sky.

"Gee—I don't know what to do with myself today."

Cora came back through the hedge with a white kitten in her arms. She tried to make it drink out of the fountain, but it mewed and struggled. She carried it into the hotel.

"I don't know what to do with myself," the girl on the ground continued. "I feel like reading a bad book. You girls got a book like that?"

Nairn had such a book, but she shook her head. Anyone could imagine how this girl would read . . . funny smile . . . moist eyes . . . You could not mention anything physical to a girl like that. She'd clutch at it so. She'd grin so . . . She raised her feet in the air and stared at her green raffia shoes. Then she yawned and rose.

"Guess I'll go out to the soda fountain and have a look at the magazines. Maybe there'll be something snappy. I gotta date with the riding master tonight."

"Why was she born?" Nairn said, when she had gone.

"She's lonely. You can see that."

"We've been hearing of nothing but mothers today. Can you picture hers? Frizzled hair, gold teeth, strong lily-of-the-valley perfume——"

"I've a notion this girl is dreadfully unhappy."

"Don't waste too much sympathy on her, Elisabeth. She'll be happy with the riding master."

"But I can't help feeling sorry for people——"

"She isn't as much use to the world as a good dog or a good horse or a performing flea——"

"But people do suffer, Nairn. There are times when they get alone and feel things——"

"Well, I won't abuse her. The point is—who's to

blame for her? Her mother—or society? Who's to blame for Cora, and Irene Lang?"

Since they could not answer those questions, they stared up at the sky. Elisabeth felt she was always staring into that luminous Nevada sky until it seemed as if the blue were pouring down over the earth, washing the willows, the roses and wistaria, even the hotel wall in its deep bright color. They were both conscious the afternoon lay ahead to spend, and they both hoped it would go adequately. They were always abnormally concerned with the question of time—seconds—minutes—"How much longer have you got?" And with the consciousness of time went the consciousness of space. One always felt the miles of desert around the town, the thousands of feet of mountain.

"It's so queer," Elisabeth said. "The days drag like iron, and yet as I look over last week, I don't know where it's gone."

"That's because nothing much happens. There aren't any landmarks to remember the days by."

"You and I have kept so quiet, Nairn. We haven't gone out like Millicent and Gretchen. Sometimes I wonder if I'm missing something."

"I don't get any comfort out of going around with anyone except Basil. I'm—immune."

"As I sit here and watch everything going on, I feel

sort of fascinated by it. It's like watching a lot of people swimming. I want to go get my bathing suit."

"Give yourself time. You'll stop watching and begin living before your term is up. They say the last three weeks are the dangerous ones."

Elisabeth found a piece of molasses taffy in her pocket. Taffy was her favorite candy. She liked her tooth marks on the soft sticky yellow, and the feel of it pulling.

"What I can't understand, Nairn, is why you—why all of us—are so anxious for our second marriages. Every last woman out here talks about the man she is going to marry next time. You'd think we'd all say 'Never again.' But I haven't heard one person in Reno say that. Everyone's crazy for another plunge. I want to marry again myself."

"I had a pet cat once and when she died I wanted to get another right away. I had a habit of cats."

"No, I don't think it's all habit. It's like Marjorie said. It's showing the world that we can still make a success—that somebody still wants us. Isn't it horrid that we have such messy instincts?"

Nairn pricked her needle thoughtfully in and out the blue wool rose.

"I'm afraid of being lonely when I'm old, and having no one to love. If I didn't have Basil, I would probably become the sort of old woman who doted on a canary. Then it would die and I would kill myself."

"But it's so dangerous looking on husbands as life insurance. You might marry three husbands and outlive them all. Or you might marry a wretch and die young yourself."

Nairn laughed and laid down her work.

"I don't know how I happened to think of this just now, but I heard that Mrs. Sidney—that fat dark woman from Oregon—has a bellboy complex. She told me she thought the bellboys were just too sweet."

"Nairn—what's the worst thing about Reno?"

"Say, you're always stirring me up just as I get comfortable . . . Oh, I don't know. I used to think it was gossip. It's worse than any other town on the map for that. Mean gossip, too. If you're seen talking with a man on the street, everyone believes——"

"The divorcees boast about how unconventional they are, but when it comes to gossip, they judge everyone by rocking-chair standards."

"Remind me when I write to Basil that I want to ask him for another photo . . . We're all victims of the machine. That sounds melodramatic but I mean we're all caught in the legal machinery of marriage and divorce. You'd think that people in the same mess would give each other a break——"

"Well, I suppose gossip gives us all something to talk about when we've told our life stories. Don't you re-

member how dirty we all talked before we got to know people well enough to gossip?"

"I know. There's an excuse for it. I don't think gossip is the worst thing here. I don't even think it's shallowness *or deceit or hardness. It's something that combines them* all. I can't quite say it . . ."

Elisabeth flushed. She was always afraid of appearing sentimental. Richard had taught her that by making fun of her sympathies.

"I've been thinking it over all the time here. The worst thing is—the lack of love. There's plenty of sex here. Everyone's saying 'I love you' all over the place. But——"

"There's no tenderness here——"

"I mean the love that keeps things together—makes things bearable—the kind you can build your life around——"

"My love for Basil——"

"Out here, that sort of thing is being destroyed day by day. This is a place of—destruction and change. There's no building going on. Everything in our lives is disintegrating. I suppose that's why it's so easy for us all to act inferior. The destructive forces have got hold of us——"

"Oh, well, there's a lack of love all over the world."

"Of course there's good here, too. There's bravery and the way we talk to each other without our masks——"

"Don't go pitying all over the place, Elisabeth. Plenty of women here are perfectly happy and about as sensitive as concrete."

"It's easy for you. You have a lover waiting. You've got a door in the wall."

"Don't you fool yourself. I know it isn't as bad for me as it is for you. But it's hard to get away clean from any marriage. The Bible was right when it talked about the two becoming one flesh. It's like extricating yourself from your lungs."

"It's mysterious how you grow on to a person. I don't like it. I'm not going to grow on to my next husband."

Nairn went upstairs to write to Basil. Elisabeth was left alone in the garden. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes again and listened to the fountain. It seemed good to be alone for a while . . . all the drama out of sight. What an achievement it would be if a person could learn actually to prefer loneliness, look it in the face, and not be afraid, and kiss its mouth. Loneliness might not be so dreadful if one held it close . . . deliberately . . . and listened to it whispering.

A young mother with a toddling baby crossed the garden. He ran after her, crumpling a tulip in his pudgy hand. He screamed at the fountain. Elisabeth wondered if a divorced woman with children were in a better way. At least she had something to show for the years. And yet, a child was always a link with the past. She could

never make a fresh beginning. Elisabeth's mind curdled when she thought of the children Richard and she might have had.

Of one thing she was certain. She was tired of sitting in the garden, day after day, watching. She was tired of all this thinking and endless talk. It was all right for Nairn who had Basil to dream about. But she . . . was she missing something? Through her blood these days were running those two streams of fascination and revolt. She would like to break through into real life from this artificial spectator's place. It got on your nerves . . . And what if she did begin to run around? She needn't lose her head. Her sort of woman . . .

Late in the afternoon, when she went upstairs, Nairn was crying at her writing desk. Elisabeth could not help but feel irritated. All this melodrama . . .

"Nairn, darling——"

"I know I'm a pest, but I got Basil's letter and there was something in it I didn't like."

Elisabeth threw herself down on Nairn's bed among the violet pillows. Her head ached. The room seemed very dark after those hours in the sun.

"But Nairn—you know how letters are. We always take them wrong. You remember last week Gretchen flew into a rage over something George never meant."

"It really wasn't anything. I wouldn't have noticed it at home. But I——"

"We're all so sensitive here in Reno. We're on the hair trigger. We take ourselves and everything else so seriously. We can't help it, with our lives changing."

Nairn's eyes filled with fresh tears. She looked at Basil's picture on the desk.

"He doesn't know what it's like to be here. He thinks I'm just living in a nice western place for a while. He doesn't know how we pick over the letters we get and how little things tear us to pieces and everything's magnified . . ."

"Nobody knows, unless they've been here. I sometimes wonder if a woman who has been through it should marry a man who hasn't. There'd be such a difference in their ages."

Nairn beat her closed hands on the desk.

"But I want him! I don't know what I'd do if I lost him. I'd be so lonely . . ."

Elisabeth looked down at Nairn's quivering mouth, her distracted eyes, that blue-dark hair.

"Oh God, Nairn, why are we lonely? The thing must be to cultivate a self-supporting heart. Why don't we cultivate such hearts——"

"If we only could without getting hard and small——"

"We should get over wanting to belong to anyone but ourselves. If we love—well and good. But let's keep ourselves intact, be complete in ourselves."

"It's impossible to love and be complete in yourself at the same time."

"But I believe there's a certain slavishness we could all get over."

"Huh—what good is all this talk?"

Elisabeth walked over to Nairn's table. There was a tiny nude statue of a figure with wings. Why had Nairn brought it to Reno with its cold sides and its blind eyes? There was nothing more useless than a nude statue when you were in trouble.

"People are fools, Nairn, who say the children suffer most in a divorce. That's silly. Children adjust easily. Children forget. Divorce harms most the person who gets it. There's such a damage that unhappiness does to the heart. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

MILLICENT treated the Quartet to a chocolate mint in the soda fountain. They sat by the veined marble counter, spooning up the green syrup, talking about Cora. They had all tried to talk to Cora, since her mother had picked them out as refined friends for her daughter, but Cora was not responsive. She smiled; she answered questions; she even laughed in a limp uneasy way. But she could not carry on a conversation. Her talkative mother had destroyed all that. She sat in the hammock beside her mother, stroking the white kitten, while her mother's mouth moved in some endless harangue . . . "She found the kitten on Virginia Street. I had to let her keep it. She's that fond of dumb animals."

There was always some man in the soda fountain, pouring quarter after quarter into a gambling machine and getting nothing back. One heard the clank of the money in the slot, the whir of the machine, then silence. This morning it was someone that Millicent knew—Jack Downs. She called him over to the counter. He was a dark young man in white flannels with a tennis racquet under his arm—the passably handsome lean type that one saw all over Reno—at the Willows—riding along

the Carson Highway—leaning over the tables in the better-class gambling rooms.

He said what every colonist says in the first five minutes of acquaintance. He was from Wilmington, Delaware. He was in the antique furniture business. His wife was refusing to sign the power-of-attorney papers. Wasn't that ghastly? She was a lovely person, no doubt, but they just couldn't get along. . . . "Life is too short to spend it quarreling." . . . While he spoke, he kept hitting the toe of his shoe with the racquet. He kept looking at Elisabeth to see how she took everything he said. Other friends of Millicent's had done that, but Elisabeth had discouraged them. She had answered too politely and walked away with Nairn. She wasn't going to get mixed up with any of this Reno business. But this morning she smiled. After all, a person might as well see what was going on. What was the use of watching and watching?

Finally he asked if she would step into the Oriental Shoppe and help him choose a present for his aunt. The three others were in a sudden tearing hurry to get away. They disappeared inside the elevator—Millicent amused —Gretchen cynical—Nairn somewhat reproachful. Nairn would have to spend this morning alone in the garden. Elisabeth felt sorry to leave her, but she couldn't always . . . Wasn't it queer that no matter where one went, one became involved? After a while, in any place you developed private little messes . . .

They spent an hour in the Oriental Shoppe, with jade earrings and rose-quartz perfume bottles and plum-blossom shawls. Elisabeth tried on amethyst and ruby rings. She admired a set of antique seed pearls. There was a black pearl necklace, too, and cigarette cases with gold dragons, ivory cigarette holders carved in lotus, dolls dressed in silk smelling faintly of incense. Elisabeth noticed that Mr. Downs seemed to prefer only the most expensive things. But she had her eyes open. That was the first step, wasn't it? She noticed, too, they finally went out of the shop without buying . . . "There are some fairly pretty things, but nothing that would quite satisfy my aunt."

When they stepped out into the street, women passed who knew Elisabeth, and she felt sure they were whispering. By now—no fooling—they would be saying he was her lover. There was a look in their eyes . . . "Well, you've done it at last, after all your quiet ways" . . . Yes, Reno was, in its fashion, the most narrow-minded city in the United States. There was a flicker of envy in the women's eyes, too, the sort of unnatural envy that grows rank in a place where there are seven women to one man. Ah, it was like dear old Wellesley.

They walked along the Truckee River, all a soft gauze of green. The blue sky trembled and shimmered in the running water. They passed the blowing feathers of the white spiræa, the clustered red hawthorn, the tossing

purple lilac. Elisabeth felt absurdly aware she was out walking with a man. Even the spiræa and the hawthorn and the lilac seemed theatrically romantic. Every man-and-woman encounter in Reno was concerned with sex. No one accepted any other basis for acquaintance. So naturally one felt conscious . . . How is he going to go about it?

They both said one could not ask for a better climate to get a divorce in. It was finer than California. They discussed an article on Reno which had come out in one of the recent magazines and showed plainly the author had never been to Reno . . . "Do you believe that many women do throw their wedding rings in the Truckee?" . . . "I don't think so. Gretchen sold hers and Nairn sent hers back to her husband. I'm wearing mine, I don't know why, and Millicent has hers put away in a sachet bag."

He asked her to go to dinner with him that night at Hutton's Hut. That was characteristic. In Reno everyone made engagements for tonight or tomorrow, never for next week. It was because everyone was so conscious of the passing present. One kept away from thoughts of the future, even of next week. And then, everyone knew there was only just so much time left before the date in the Courthouse and one wanted to crowd in all the experiences . . . And then, everyone was idle.

An affair between a man and woman here was stripped

of all those time-wasting preliminaries when each pretends to be indifferent and sees the other occasionally. There was no halting here, while the woman posed and was difficult. Everything was speeded up to double quick tempo. Life in Reno was like a motion picture reeled off at three times the normal rate. A lover crammed into a day what would take him a fortnight in any other town. . . . Well, leisure in loving had gone out of fashion everywhere to a certain extent. All emotions were rushed.

While Elisabeth was dressing for dinner, a corsage of gardenias came with his card. Gardenias were all things to all men. She carried them in to show Nairn, who had gone to bed with a headache. Millicent was out with her Jimmy. Gretchen was padding about her room in bare feet, the gold and white fur hanging from her shoulders.

"Doesn't it seem queer," Nairn said, "to get flowers from a man and know your husband wouldn't care?"

"The gardenias are always beautiful even if the love is false. That's a nice thought."

"At last you've become human," Gretchen said. "Every girl's got to have a Reno beau or go crazy. Jack Downs is your convenient little love life."

"Just because I'm going to Hutton's Hut——"

"Don't pretend you don't know what it's all about. Why shouldn't you have a good time? What you do is nobody's business."

"This western scenery is immoral," Nairn said. "It makes us all feel how small our sins could be."

"Well, it won't be long now," Gretchen went on, powdering her body with an orchid puff. "Seductions are very brief nowadays. Fifty years ago women wore a lot of clothes and their minds wore a lot of clothes, too. A woman had to be unwrapped, layer by layer. But nowadays when our minds and bodies are both so naked . . ."

It was cold for May. A wind had risen over the High Sierras, always chill when it blew down from those unmelted snows. There was a thin glaze of ice over the stars. The river sounded harsh. Jack Downs was officiously tender as he helped Elisabeth into the car . . . "Are you sure you are going to be warm enough?" . . . She was wearing that sapphire-blue coat with sable that she had worn to the Willows, and that same gold lamé painted with the wild roses.

Elisabeth felt her heart melt a little at the words: "Are you sure you are going to be warm enough?" It was so long since anyone had cared whether she was warm. For over a year, Richard had not noticed. One grew very susceptible to kindness during a divorce. Elisabeth had heard women say that a man could seduce them simply by being kind. Marjorie had said: "Sam was kind to me." Gretchen said that clever Reno men knew how a woman craved gentleness now and played that game. This man must be clever. He kept saying she should not take cold.

Hutton's Hut was another of the famous places, an inexpensive imitation of the Willows. It was a one-story log house on the road to Truckee . . . gambling machines, bare tables in booths, a dance floor, a recess with faro and roulette. At the table Jack showed Elisabeth a slot where she could slip in a nickel and get a record played on a machine which looked like a coffin. That was the dance music at Hutton's Hut. Jack put a nickel in the slot and the machine obediently roared out: "Nobody Knows, Nobody Cares If I'm Lonesome."

There were two dinners, steak or chicken. They took the chicken. Before the machine had finished the record, the waitress appeared with large plates of white meat fried brown, thick baking powder biscuits done up in a napkin, pitchers of thin hot butter. It was the Reno custom to eat the chicken with your fingers and dip the biscuits in the butter. The biscuits had that bitter taste which comes from the wrong baking powder. All through the table conversation . . . the metallic taste of those biscuits . . .

No matter how she might try to avoid it, Elisabeth had that inevitable sudden sense of intimacy one always felt with another member of the colony. One couldn't help admitting a bond. It was their common predicament and idleness and the desert. It was a jumble of heartache and sun and high surrounding mountains and loneliness. At any rate, it broke down defenses. Elisabeth felt nearer

to this man now than to people she had known for years in New York.

They both felt easy in their minds, eating the chicken. They talked about books and movies and how different the eastern spring is from the western . . . "There's an extravagance about the eastern spring" . . . "But the effect of any green out here is electrifying" . . . When the chocolate ice cream came, he was very particular about the little crackers, wanted to be sure that Elisabeth had enough, ordered the waitress about. It was the old impressive game. Elisabeth smiled privately around her spoon.

"You must have just what you like," he said. "I want you to be happy."

It was so easy to put on an air of noble suffering. There were two feminine rôles in Reno—Noble Sufferer and Plucky Little Woman. Elisabeth sighed into her ice cream. Wasn't it funny how a person could be suffering and playing the part of suffering at the same time?

"What does it matter whether I am happy or not?"

The cue was familiar. He made his entrance. He lifted his water glass and set it down again, as if he were weighted with emotion.

"It matters—to me. You were made to be happy, not to suffer."

Gretchen had said there were two stock sentences that

Reno seducers used. Jack Downs had just used one. Elisabeth lowered her eyes.

"Ah well—happiness——"

He put another nickel in the slot and while the music lasted, they sat there, glooming over their ice cream. Now couples were dancing. As usual, the women were in evening dress, the men in sack suits, soft collars, loud ties. The men did not feel they had to dress. The women were so easy.

"If I had been your husband, I would never have let you go," he said in a low tense voice.

That was the other stock sentence. Nevertheless, it was one that every woman liked to hear. At last she had met a man who appreciated her, knew she was valuable and unique. Every woman was hoping secretly that some day her husband would find out he had let something priceless slip from his life.

"That husband of yours must be a brute," he went on.

"Oh, Richard's a fine—" Elisabeth began, springing instinctively to his defense. Then she laughed, rather unsteadily.

"Force of habit," she said.

"Let's go riding—Elisabeth. We don't want to dance with this cheap crowd. I want to get somewhere alone . . ."

Outdoors, with the wind blowing, it was more difficult to play the part of Noble Sufferer. Over a warm dinner table, any rôle was easy. Dinner tables were so artificial.

The knives and forks, glasses and plates, were all familiar stage properties. But outdoors . . . He was real. She was real. Something actual might or might not happen between them. Every so often, out here in Reno, Elisabeth had to stop and make herself know that she was real. Life seemed so stagy, queer as a nightmare. Jack closed the car windows. Elisabeth wondered if any place on earth were as dark as Nevada. It was snowing now, one of those sudden freezing storms that rush over the High Sierras in May. The snow whirled faintly against the windshield, into the glare of the headlights. They were driving along endlessly through pouring whirling fountains of white. And then, suddenly as the storm began, it was gone. The snow vanished; the sky thinned; there were stars.

"I say, Elisabeth, let's go downtown tomorrow and get our fortunes told. There's a wonderful woman near the Elks' Club. Some of my friends have been raving."

"I've never had my fortune told, but I feel as if I'd like to. The future—you know—the future——"

"Poor darling."

Elisabeth believed she was feeling the way people do who are crying drunk. She was filled with loneliness and a thick sort of craving. She felt like whimpering that she was lonely and Richard had never understood her. It was awful to feel so common.

"I wonder if you're as lonely as I am," he said. "One

human being is so separate from another human being. My wife never really—she was cold——"

Hearing those words that she might have spoken herself, Elisabeth suddenly felt ashamed.

"Let's not be theatrical any more," she said.

"What's on your mind?"

"I mean—we won't get anything out of knowing each other if we keep lying."

"I wouldn't lie to you——"

They rode along the Truckee River, a pale winding light in the dark trees. Huddled in her sable fur, looking through the car window, Elisabeth saw the pale river, ranch house lamps, hills lying along the horizon like women asleep, faint stars, leaves trembling in the lighted road. They passed the little town at the river's edge where the saw mill ran so noisily by day. Now it was all quiet. The sprinkled street lamps stared down into the water.

Now Elisabeth's craving and loneliness had skimmed away from her heart, like those flowery fountains of snow vanishing in the starlight. Reno moods vanished in a breath. Everything was dull again. She could not feel romantic. She tried to conjure up romance by remembering that here she was . . . There were stars, a river, fluttering shapes of trees, lights on the hills like fallen constellations, the smell of flowers on her dress. But she was not moved now by the sight of beauty. She was not craving now. All that sort of feeling was on the other

side of the looking glass. She could not melt through into glamor.

"You're so beautiful," he said. "One is almost afraid to touch you for fear you'll disappear like a phantom."

So that was the line. Gretchen said there were two lines for men who wanted to achieve women. . . . "You're-so-beautiful-I-am-afraid-to-touch-you" or "I-must-have-you-woman-you-madden-me." Elisabeth heard afraid-to-touch with a start of recognition. She was conscious that her face must be wearing a horrible knowing expression. It was unpleasant to be so knowing. It took away the shine. One felt withered at the heart.

"I never met anyone so fragile. Are you real?"

Elisabeth mumbled into her fur. But he did not seem to notice she was horrible and knowing. He kept up that same line . . . now and then brushing her coat as he shifted gears . . . touching her cheek to see if she were cold . . . "You're one of those ghost women, aren't you?"

Withered away at the heart . . . unbearably wide-awake . . . she watched him there in the darkness. She saw every move he made, knew what it was meant for. No, he did not fool her. But she wanted to be fooled. There was no romance, but she would like to believe there was. She wanted what all virtuous women have always wanted—to be made to stop thinking.

And yet she was not without a certain sort of feeling. As the night grew later, as they put the miles behind

them, as it began to seem as if she had sat here forever with the hum of the motor and the smell of thick white flowers, there was a feeling . . . Even while her mind worked so clearly, a low eager side of her began to stir. When he brushed her dress, touched her cheek, talked about love, there was a sensation she could not seem to help. She felt sensuous, heavy-hearted, knowing, all at once. She saw him for what he was, and yet something in her was pleased.

A woman with a code . . . When he said good night at the hotel, he kissed her hand, turning it palm upward. Even though the gesture was professional, there was a shiver that ran through her body down to her feet. Upstairs in her room she leaned her cheek against the cold gardenias. She had always despised women who let the physical . . . Was she about to find out she was that kind of a woman? . . . Was she so near? . . . Was there such a short way to go?

CHAPTER X

"I WISH the men around here wouldn't use the word love," Elisabeth said, when she was giving the others an edited account at breakfast. She told everything except that low eager feeling, the quiver when he kissed her hand. Women, in their confidences with each other, always tell the truth up to a certain point. Then they begin to lie. They represent themselves as remaining absolutely calm and collected through the most violent scenes of passion. "We ought to put the word love away and only bring it out——"

"For weddings and funerals?" Gretchen said. "That wouldn't make our morals any better."

"But we don't have any word left for the good occasions——"

"By the way, ladies, I was proposed to last night."

They all sat up at that . . . Nairn in her violet negligee with the green leaves . . . Millicent in her ribbons and bunches of roses . . . Elisabeth in that pink china silk. All the colors fluttered in the bureau mirror.

"It was Edgar Ray—the man whose wife was seduced by a woman! I can tell by your eyes," Nairn said.

"Was it the man whose wife got measles on her wedding night?"

"I saw you going to the movies with that Chattanooga hypnotist. Was it him?"

Gretchen was wearing a red chiffon dressing gown, embroidered in tiny strawberries. One of the embroidery threads had come unravelled. She began to pull it, enjoying the astonishment she had caused.

"It was Sidney," she said.

Sidney was a weedy nervous fellow, one of the hangers-on in Gretchen's set, with a tittering laugh and a way of showing the roof of his mouth as he talked. It was rumored that his wife had beaten him. The Quartet shrieked over their coffee cups.

"Sidney—of all the brass—he——"

"What did you do? Knock him down?"

"Stop ruining that strawberry, Gretchen. Don't you want to keep looking nice for Sidney?"

Gretchen took her coffee cup and deliberately dribbled on the red chiffon. Yes, one felt like destroying things. There was a cruel delight in seeing the red chiffon go spotted.

"Don't yell at me. I told Mack I'd divorce him the night I was wearing this negligee. What do I want it for? And I can't pass it on to the respectable poor."

"But did you kill Sidney?"

"No. I was nice to him. No matter how funny a man

is, he doesn't look funny when he's saying that I'm his heart's idol. My pride won't let him look funny. Sidney was very sweet when he was proposing."

"Oh—yeah?"

"Well, I told him I must be faithful to George. I asked him if he hadn't noticed I was wearing this-here bangle."

"What did he say then? Cut his throat?"

"He said it was just his luck to fall in love with a girl who was another's. But he's not so dumb. He spent the rest of the evening talking about what is fidelity in its largest sense."

"You must have encouraged him——"

Gretchen set her coffee cup down with a bang.

"Woman, don't you know that you don't need to encourage men here in Reno? They'll propose marriage —or anything else—at the drop of a hat!"

"Especially the men who are out here for divorces," Millicent said. "I'd rather go around with a native than I would a male colonist. They are all so queer."

"The sort of men who come out here for a divorce are crazy lonely. They're like widowers, in a way. That's why they're such easy marks. Now Sidney's in the state of mind where he'd like anybody he got close to——"

"Normal men don't usually come out here. They send their wives. They're too much tied up in their business. The men who have a couple of months to spare are apt

to be bounders or intellectuals or . . . anyhow, they're all lonely."

"This drivel about love and marriage," Nairn said, crushing her cigarette in her coffee saucer. "It's a disease. It's Reno-itis."

"Reno isn't a town. It's a state of mind."

"Oh, Lord, Millicent, that bromide——"

"Speaking of marriage," Gretchen said, "Mr. McLean has asked us all to ride over the Geiger grade this afternoon to Virginia City. He told me down in the lobby."

"Who's Mr. McLean?"

"He's the old bird that's been running around with Irene Lang's father."

"You've never talked about him——"

"Sure I have. He's the one who waited until his sons were grown before he tried for a divorce. His wife was their step-mother. One day, when they were little, he caught her holding their hands over a gas flame. But she would never let him get a divorce. Now he's getting it by default."

"I remember him now," Elisabeth said. "You introduced him to us last week. He's the one with the toupee."

"What human nature can go through and still want to wear a toupee," Nairn murmured.

"Didn't his wife say if he ever came back to Connec-

ticut she would shoot him?" Millicent asked. "The story is all over Reno."

"Wait till you hear him talk. She hasn't broken his spirit. What I can't figure out is why he asked us to go to Virginia City. He's never liked me especially and he's only met you people once."

Millicent had what she called a heavy date, but the others were down in the hotel lobby at three. Elisabeth felt rather formal in her spring suit and bangkok hat and gloves. Nairn was wearing her fox neckpiece, as if it were a special occasion. Even Gretchen was more subdued than usual in dark tweeds. All three were wearing stockings, a great concession to the proprieties at this season of the year. Hardly anyone wore stockings after the first of May. They all felt quite reserved and stuffy.

Mr. McLean walked into the lobby with a divorcee the others had seen at the soda fountain having maple fudges. He was a tall sparse man in his sixties, with a hatchet face, eyeglasses, and a coal-black toupee. His companion was about twenty-five . . . blonde, plump, pasty, with china-blue eyes and pink hands with a ruby ring. He introduced her as Ruth Brown.

"So nice of you to ask us," Elisabeth said.

"I believe in giving everybody a good time. That's been my motto all through life—doing good to others."

"It must have been a pleasure to have you around,"

Gretchen said in that solemn voice which always accompanied her sarcasms.

"Well—I've always had lots of friends. Now we must be starting. Promptness—that's another of my mottoes. If Ruthie will hop in the front seat with me, you other ladies can sit in the back."

He had a 1925 model of a very good car. He had driven it clear from Connecticut, he said, and no trouble at all on the way, except one front tire. They rolled along the Carson Highway at twenty miles an hour. It was another of those immaculate Nevada days that one would remember, back East. The purple sky . . . the plumy yellow-green cottonwoods . . . the dark olive spears of the poplars . . . sage brush rolling away toward Mount Rose, the highest of the Sierra Nevadas, burning in the western sunlight. It was called Mount Rose because its narcissus color changed to rose at sun down.

"Some mountain," Ruthie said from the front seat.

"You have a fine car, Mr. McLean," Nairn said politely. "I hear you need a fine car to go over those Geiger grade hills."

"It *is* fine," he said. They could see him smile in the reflecting mirror. "I think this make is a crackerjack."

He brought out the word "crackerjack" consciously, as if it were a mad prank.

"I call it a crackerjack," he said again. "What do you

say, Ruthie? You've been sitting here so quiet and the others have been doing all the talking."

"It certainly was swell of you to take us," Gretchen observed in that solemn guttural voice.

"You're a great kidder, aren't you, Mrs. Vaughan? What about it, Ruthie? Isn't she a kidder and isn't it a shame to tease a man like me?"

"Go on," Ruthie said affectionately. The others saw only the back of her blue knitted hat, but it was an expressive back. Mr. McLean patted her hand.

"Did some other fellow give you that ruby ring, Ruthie?"

But she became suddenly prim and drew away her hand. She turned around in the seat. Her china-blue eyes, set like beads in the plump cheeks, stared at Elisabeth.

"Do you girls feel the altitude at all?" she said. "I notice it in my ears."

"My throat gets dry," Elisabeth admitted.

"My throat is something dreadful, too," Ruthie went on. "I've suffered agonies."

"Was little Ruthie sick?" Mr. McLean inquired. "I'll spank the old germs."

Gretchen thumped back against the cushions and lighted a cigarette. Nairn and Elisabeth nudged each other inconspicuously, conscious of Mr. McLean's toothy smile in the reflecting mirror . . . "Why in the name of Heaven were we asked on this party?"

"I saw you with Mr. Downs," Ruthie said to Elisabeth, turning around again. "Is he really nice? I think every girl should be awfully careful of the company she keeps. I've been keeping myself *to* myself."

"It certainly is fine to see a girl like you in this day and age," Mr. McLean said. "When most women are so——"

"I haven't seen you at the Willows," Gretchen growled.

Ruthie shook her blue-knitted head. She spoke in a fruity voice.

"I've had lots of invitations to go to the Willows but I haven't gone. I—well, I haven't wanted to lead that kind of a life."

"Oh God," Gretchen exclaimed, involuntarily.

"Mr. Downs seemed mighty sweet on a certain party when he was walking around the Truckee River yesterday," Ruthie went on. "He was so absorbed that he didn't see Mr. McLean and me."

"Now don't blush, Mrs. Wane. I have a stenographer in my office back in Connecticut who blushes if you point your finger at her."

By this time the car had left the main highway and was travelling a side road through yellow willows and cottonwoods, between low reddish hills. Elisabeth gave up, after a while, trying to carry on a conversation. To talk with Ruthie was like handling damp blotting

paper. Elisabeth's mouth seemed to fill with mush. All thoughts went soggy in her mind, except the unmentionable thoughts. Of course Gretchen was no help. She was through with the whole party. Even Nairn was leaning back in her corner with the look on her face that she always had when she was thinking—frankly and sensually—of Basil. She always said that when time hung heavy on her hands all she had to do was to imagine Basil . . .

Fortunately Mr. McLean was too immersed in himself and Ruthie to notice the silence on the back seat. When he was not exclaiming over Ruthie, he was telling about the girls in his office at home. Evidently he was a benevolent despot in the business he had built up and owned. He watched over his employees' love affairs, straightened out their family muddles, visited them when they were sick. Elisabeth could imagine his stenographers calling him "Old Man McLean."

A person might like him in his Connecticut phase. But he was trying so awkwardly to be something else, something much younger that went with a blue knitted hat. He had picked up antiquated slang, not normal to his speech, and he brought it out every so often with a swoop. When the car went over a bump, he said: "Oy, oy." He said, "Attagirl," and "Peach of a view." He said: "Now that's what I call spiffy." Every time he used such a word, he flushed and looked at Ruthie. She sat rather stolidly in the front seat, eating chocolate cara-

mels. She passed the box around to the ladies in the rear . . . "I know little me shouldn't eat caramels."

The road had left the valley and was climbing upward. The hills were higher, streaked with yellow and crimson. Piñon bushes clustered among the sage. The air was sharper. There was a smell of evergreen. The road wound along a precipice with a hundred-foot drop to the right of the car wheels. Nairn, who could not bear high places, groaned and closed her eyes. Elisabeth, feeling a little squeamish, kept her eyes on the car door. If Mr. McLean didn't have his mind on the road . . .

"Isn't that Dead Man's Curve ahead?" Gretchen called out cheerfully.

"There's lots of cars gone off that curve," Ruthie said. "You can see their wrecks if you look down. But I'm not afraid with Mr. McLean driving."

He leaned over to pat Ruthie's hand and the car swerved. Nairn sat straight up in her seat, white as chalk.

"In the name of God, Mr. McLean, keep away from Ruthie until we get around this curve."

"Now you mustn't be nervous, Mrs. Shelley. I've never had an accident. Look—I can drive just as well with one hand. I remember once in Yellowstone Park . . ."

It was better when they were around the curve. Once more the sage and piñon sloped gradually from the road. Nairn opened her eyes. Elisabeth took her attention from the car door. Mr. McLean began to hum: "Sun of My

Soul, Thou Savior Dear." Then he remembered his youthful rôle and jerked into "Happy Feet." Elisabeth believed the secret of the man's present behavior was in his toupee. The groundwork for all this was laid on the day he bought it.

"This is my worst moment since I came to Reno," Gretchen muttered into her tweed scarf. "Riding on the edge of a precipice with a singing sugar daddy."

"The man must have suffered when he was younger," Elisabeth whispered.

"Well, what of it? Why are you always talking about how people suffer?"

Conversation was easy in Virginia City. Mr. McLean pointed out the sights and Ruthie gave little shrieks. The ladies walked behind. They went into Piper's Theatre, the honkytonk of the gold rush days. They visited the site of the International Hotel which had astonished the natives with an elevator. They went into one of the deserted houses and saw an 1880 bath tub ornamented with morning glories. They gaped at the empty mines . . . the Pony Express . . . Mark Twain's haunts.

"He wrote Tom something, didn't he?" Ruthie asked.

" 'Tom Brown's School Days,' " Gretchen answered hoarsely.

Gretchen also embarrassed Mr. McLean by asking in a loud tone where the Red Light district used to be.

"Somebody told me," she said, "that when the town

was in full blast there was a row of white cabins just below the main street. Every gold rush had its conveniences. I believe those old mining boys would have approved of us in Reno. They came out here for something, got it, and made tracks for somewhere else, just like we're doing."

Ruthie turned a deep scarlet. Mr. McLean said in a shaken voice that he knew nothing about the existence of white cabins. He looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid we must be going. I promised I would get you ladies back to the hotel by seven."

On the return journey, Elisabeth thought over what Gretchen had said about the old mining boys and Reno. They had come out to Nevada for gold and silver; this generation was searching on the Nevada soil for happiness. These gold rush towns, these boom towns, were all deserted, when their usefulness was past. Elisabeth knew Reno was afraid that some day it would be deserted in its turn, that its fine hotels and apartments would by some shift of fortune languish in the desert. When divorce became easier everywhere . . . Nevada had changed her residence time from three months to six weeks when she thought Arkansas and Idaho were going to lure the divorce trade away. Reno would go far to keep the divorce trade. Reno would offer all kinds of inducements . . . make it so you wouldn't have to give any reason at all for an uncontested divorce. Reno was scared.

Along the precipices of the Geiger grade, Gretchen

sang "Jingle Bells" to ward off "Happy Feet." Ruthie was lumpish and silent. She sensed by now the dry hostile atmosphere. She did not pass back any more caramels. Only Mr. McLean, unaware, babbled on about the stenographers in his office and how he had given young Leslie one more chance to make good.

Now they were back on the Carson Highway in the warm glowing brilliance of the late afternoon sun. At this hour all the hills were deerskin, heaped deerskin with purple shadows in the folds. Mount Rose had turned the color of its name. Ever since the precipice, Elisabeth had been thinking of Jack. There was a low murmuring feeling in her blood. How the minutes could slip by while you sat back with your eyes half-closed . . . in a dream . . . Worthless Jack . . . A lot of women killed time that way . . . imagining their lovers.

It was not until they were in sight of Reno that the ladies learned why they had been invited.

"You ladies would be surprised if you knew Ruthie here didn't trust me," Mr. McLean said.

"Shame on Ruthie," Gretchen observed.

"Ruthie here said she wouldn't ride with me alone to Virginia City. Said she wouldn't trust herself with any man so far out in the desert. Now any of you ladies could tell at a glance that I'm not that kind of a guy——"

"You're really very nice," Nairn said unexpectedly from her corner. "You've always been good to people."

"Well now—Mrs. Shelley——"

"At least Ruthie's bean has been working," Gretchen whispered. "I'm beginning to like her. I didn't know she was so bright."

It was obvious now that Ruthie was not born yesterday. Her object was matrimony. To make a man with a toupee believe that she feared for her honor was a masterstroke. All that talk, too, about keeping herself to herself and not wanting to lead a life at the Willows . . . The ladies stared with a new comprehension at the back of the blue knitted hat. But all the same they had wasted a perfectly good afternoon guarding an already adequately guarded virtue. From that moment on the Carson Highway to the door of the hotel, none of the ladies spoke.

And yet he had suffered, Elisabeth thought. He had come into his house and seen his wife holding the children's hands over the gas flame. He had passed through the sickening terror of that moment. He had lived, enduring his wife, watching his wife with the children, never easy in his mind when he was away from home. Would anyone think he could be silly afterward? And yet there was that indestructible foolishness . . . He was being true only to his toupee.

The burned child dreads the fire? Not in Reno. Everyone who had been scorched was anxious to try the flame again. Now this man, after such a wife, was immediately anxious to confide his future to a girl in a blue knitted

hat, eating caramels. Was it indestructible foolishness or indestructible hope? Was it that none of us could seem to get on without the illusion of being loved? Oh, there was no use laughing at an old man who was lonely and hankering.

"Come on over to Molloy's," Gretchen said, when they had taken leave of their host and Ruthie. "I shall die if I don't drink."

The sun was low. Virginia Street was filled with a golden dust. The river was crimson. All the shop windows that faced west were liquid fire. They crossed over by the Postoffice, past the Y. M. C. A. and the Assay office, past the Grand Restaurant where Sam worked. Gretchen knocked three times on a door. They were let in.

It was a room with a large old-fashioned mahogany bar —a vast mirror behind it—a shelf filled with glasses— a brass foot rail. On the walls were oil paintings of Lake Tahoe, birds and dogs, Jim Jeffries in tights. There were two bartenders and a crowd of divorcees. There was Irene Lang, and Edgar Ray, as usual, with his dog. In the next room was a crowd playing keno.

"Give us three old-fashioneds, Molloy," Gretchen said. "We've had an afternoon that would kill a horse."

Molloy had his hair parted in the middle and slicked back. He wore a striped shirt, a ruby-colored tie, a watch

charm that was a gold nugget, a white apron. Elisabeth liked the way he bent the cruet-shaped bottle down so carefully over the glasses. The drinks were just ranged on the bar when Millicent came in. She looked flushed and tired.

"I've had a ghastly time," she said. "I've been over to Truckee with a seventeen-year-old boy who's out here with his mother. She's getting a divorce. He told me that nothing meant anything and he was tired of life and thought suicide was splendid. How he bored me!"

"What'll we drink to?" Gretchen said. "Happy Days?"

"Normal People—May We See Them Once Again," Nairn answered.

CHAPTER XI

THERE was a side of Elisabeth's life that went on as it always had since she reached Reno. She still held conversations on the weather with the sleek head waiter. Every night at dinner she noticed once again his broad mustache, checked necktie, and Elk's tooth set in gold. She discussed movies with the same elevator girl. She occasionally visited her narrow-eyed lawyer. He was more tanned than ever now, because the fishing season had started. Men were fishing off the Truckee River bridge. The Indians brought in their catch from Pyramid Lake to sell on Virginia Street. He seemed to have forgotten his promise to take Elisabeth fishing . . . "If it's the last thing I do" . . . He gave Elisabeth news of George Beverly's cerise-and-turquoise client. She had lost five thousand dollars at roulette, and felt grand because she'd won thirty.

Elisabeth also continued going to her dentist, talking about the Willows and the Chinese Lotteries that were operated underground in Chinatown under the main streets. He said that he had heard she was going around with a man . . . "We keep track of such things, Mrs.

Wane. Dentists keep track of their patients; lawyers watch their clients; banks keep an eye on their depositors. It's all part of the game."

Moreover, Reno was having these May weeks a life of its own, quite separate from the divorcees. The Woman's Club had a fair. A circus pitched its tents out by the air field. The Elks had a convention and the town was draped in flags. The divorcees gathered along the curb to watch the Elks parade with a vague feeling that all this celebration was a bit impertinent for a town that existed on their account.

But in the week following the dinner at Hutton's Hut, Elisabeth carried on these customary occupations, distracted by wondering and that murmuring in her blood. She knew there would soon come a time between Jack and herself when she must decide. Two months ago, back in New York, the decision would have been easy. She would have said she was not that kind of a woman. But now she had seen so much, heard so much, felt so lonely, the future coming toward her like a blank stone wall . . . There were many voices, and everything seemed different. It wasn't so important that she was a woman with a code.

There was an afternoon when all the voices spoke at once. It was five o'clock, and Elisabeth sat in her room, mending a tear in the pink kimono. The yellow sun swayed with the wind over the blue rug, glittered sharply

on the glass bureau top and the silver bottles, glimmered on the low table with the orchids in a glass. She had worn those orchids last night at the Willows. She sat mending, remembering the darkness at the Willows, Jack's words and touches, now grown bolder.

She felt pleased and absorbed and somewhat mortified. She had not realized that women of her type . . . Well, what was her type? What was that mysterious "fineness" she was always talking about? Was it anything valuable . . . or was it absurd? Of course, she still kept on despising the falsity in Jack, his obvious shams. But she wondered if she had any right to despise him. Between herself and him there was just a step.

Gretchen had been writing to George, but now she strolled in with a glass of whisky and white rock. Whenever Gretchen changed over to whisky from gin, it was a sign she was low in her mind. She was naked except for gold kid mules and the bangle on her arm. She sat down on the floor in the sun with the glass beside her. She ran her hands through that brilliant red hair. It was all misty and disheveled, not fitting her head close and making it look like a shiny red egg. The sun made mauve and pink lights on her body.

"I saw old boy McLean in the florist's buying white carnations."

"He would."

"It's a wonder he doesn't get her Easter lilies. I bet

she has him believing that hers was a marriage in name only. I hear that's a favorite stunt. Honest—I could have punched her right in the blue knitted hat."

"I don't think she's as bad as the girl Nairn and I saw in the garden. The one with the scratched legs who wanted to read a bad book and her sugar had gone to Dallas."

"Oh yeah—I know her—they say she's in love with a waiter now——"

It had an effect on a person, hearing all these stories of low behavior. It made you feel there was nothing unusual or frightening in being low. So many were rotten . . . and nothing seemed to happen. Elisabeth held her mending to the light. The sun showed through the delicate silk in a pink glow.

"You remember the girl who has the scraggy mother and the white kitten?"

"Her name is Cora."

"Well, Cora escaped from her mother last night and went horseback riding with another girl. They took along gin and got drunk and fell off the horses."

"What did her mother say?"

"She didn't get home until midnight and her mother was pacing up and down their room, completely dressed, even to a black hat and gloves. I say Hurrah for Cora. Nevada's putting some starch into her backbone."

"Maybe Nevada will do us all good."

"Why—Elisabeth! And you're the one that's always saying Reno is Sodom and Gomorrah!"

"These days I don't know what I think."

"I bet you haven't been sure of anything since your husband sprang his big surprise. A lot of us women have been knocked into a cocked hat."

They were silent, Gretchen sipping her whisky. Elisabeth considered what inherited wealth had done for Gretchen. It had given her ease and insolence and a selfishness so complete that it was unconscious. It never occurred to her to wonder what anyone else wanted.

"The crowd was going out to Pyramid Lake this afternoon," she said gloomily, "but the Blue Beast broke her front axle. That's why I'm low in my mind. It was going to be a swell party."

"Who's the Blue Beast?"

"That's Irene Lang's car. She calls up the garage man as cool as you please and says: 'Have the axle fixed on my Blue Beast.' I wish I had her father. He gives her all the money she wants. My family are always writing me that I'm extravagant. Pater thinks I can get through here on three thousand. It can't be done."

"Has Irene's father kept her out of mischief?"

"Pardon me while I laugh. Has he kept the sun from rising? She's dead in love with one of the garage men."

Elisabeth laid her mending in her lap and looked down at Gretchen. She had finished her whisky and was try-

ing to make the glass stick to her face by holding her breath.

"Gretchen—I wonder why so many women here—from what we call our best families—fall for these second-rate men. I mean—garage helpers, waiters, clerks in the stores—all that. I've been asking myself that ever since I saw Sam and Marjorie."

Gretchen let the glass drop gently into her hand.

"I dunno. Perhaps it's because men like that are handy. Perhaps it's because a woman likes to play queen——"

"I think it's something else, too. It's a second-rate instinct. An inferior man is easy. We don't have to stand up tall for him."

Gretchen leaned over and took an orchid out of Elisabeth's glass on the table. She turned it around in her fingers, laid its petals against her throat. It made a purple shadow on her skin.

"I wish you wouldn't make my brain work. Every time I come near you, the old head begins to churn. I hate the sensation."

"I suppose it isn't given to everyone to know worthless things from valuable things. Or a woman might know and not care."

Gretchen began to pull the petals off the orchid, one by one. It would never occur to her that it was someone else's orchid.

"The crowd are going to Burr's dude ranch next week-end. It's in Washoe County, so it's all right."

"Are you going?"

"I doubt it. Most of the dude ranches are free love clubs. I don't care about that sort of thing. I'm not passionate."

"What's the matter with you today, Gretchen?"

"I dunno. I'm off my feed. Sometimes I get tired of doing the same things all the time. The crowd here does just what we all do in Chicago. I wish we'd think up something different. If we could think up another sex——"

Elisabeth moved the glass with the other orchid out of Gretchen's reach.

"Gretchen—don't be offended—but why do your crowd do what they do? I mean—all those messy little intrigues that nobody really feels——"

"Because we—got in the way of it."

"It's more than that."

"Well, what else is there to do? We know that God is bunk and nothing matters, so it would be silly for us to have all kinds of big ambitions."

"But you've got life so empty. Emptier than the Puritans had it. I wonder . . ."

Gretchen yawned and lay down flat on the floor. The sunlight glowed on her gold mules. Her hair was a bright web against the blue rug.

"You wonder a lot, don't you, Elisabeth?"

Elisabeth flushed.

"I have things to decide . . . and I don't know anything . . ."

"Why do you burn yourself up that way?"

"I'm so confused. It's so puzzling. I want to be as fine as I can, and yet I don't want to miss too much."

Gretchen shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't see why you get all hot and bothered. Who cares what you do? Who's going to know whether you're being fine or not?"

"I feel like a man who is worried about the carvings on the top of a cathedral where nobody will see them."

"Well, just the same I wish our crowd would think up something different. And I've got to stay here longer than the rest of you because Mack was so slow in signing his power-of-attorney papers. What a man."

"I suppose you can't wait to see George——"

"Oh, I can live . . . It's funny never to know whether a man really loves you or not."

"What do you mean? All those wires, telephones, flowers, that little diamond horse he sent you for your hat——"

"But how do I know he isn't after my money? Say, I always get a kick out of those magazine stories where a man meets a rich girl and thinks she is poor and loves her anyhow. I've got so much money and no friends."

"Gretchen—you of all people! You're always talking about your Chicago parties, and here you're going around with the swank crowd——"

"I don't fool myself. Whenever I get low in my mind, I see it. They only like me because I buy their liquor."

"Why don't you stop buying their liquor?"

Gretchen fingered the bangle on her arm. She drew her knees up under her chin. Her hoarse voice grew curiously soft. She kept her eyes on the floor.

"I never seem to have the trick of getting close to people. Even when I try. Now here I've been living with you and Nairn. But I haven't gotten as close as you and Nairn have to each other. Tell me—what's the trick?"

Elisabeth was silent. She was conscious this was only a passing mood of Gretchen's, induced by disappointment over the Blue Beast. She did not really care to know.

"What's the trick? I don't like to feel there's something I can't do."

"Perhaps it's because you don't really love anyone yourself."

Gretchen began running her fingers along her arm. Her voice altered. She stared into the sunlight with her indifferent blue-green eyes.

"Huh, I don't want to get close to anyone! I don't know whatever made me say that . . . I got to go put my

rags on now. Sidney's taking me out to dinner, the poor simp."

"Does he still keep proposing?"

"I treat him like dirt and he eats it up. Did you see those yellow roses he sent me?"

"Could you ever love him?"

"I don't pretend to have an eternal passion for George. I'd ditch him in a minute for a better man. But in the first place Sidney hasn't a cent to his name——"

"How do you know?"

"There are signs. I'm wise."

"It would take a lot of money to make up for the way he shows the roof of his mouth when he talks."

"You said it. He's writing me poetry now. He sent a poem along with the roses calling himself an 'unhappy pawn.'"

"Are you going to watch your step?"

Gretchen stood up and started to walk out of the room, swaying her white hips. At the door she turned.

"Now don't you go worrying, Angel Face. You've got to get over the idea that anything is important."

She disappeared, only to poke her head around the door jamb a moment later.

"I won't be unfaithful to George with Sidney. I haven't got the guts."

Elisabeth went on with her mending, thinking over what Gretchen had said. Yes, it took perseverance to be

faithful, courage to be unfaithful. It would take a special amount of courage to have Sidney for a lover, because he was so timid. A timid man always gave a woman so much time to waver and know what she was doing. If a woman could only feel she was being overpowered under circumstances over which she had no control . . . all her confusion settled by force . . .

In another hour, Millicent came in. She was wearing a close-fitting yellow knitted dress and a round white hat. Her eyes were very bright, her dimples deep. Her lips and cheeks were brilliant. She looked like a little girl who has been to a party and had strawberry ice cream and a cake with yellow candles. She bent down and kissed Elisabeth, and she smelled of pine.

"I've been with Jimmy," she said, in a sort of giggle. "Everywhere with Jimmy."

"You mean——"

"I mean the very worst. Now scream."

"In the afternoon?"

"We thought an evening affair was so conventional. So we went along the road toward the mountains until we came to a place where some water was falling down over the rocks. Then we got out of the car. It was all still, except for the water, that lovely sound of the water——"

"I can imagine. I——"

"The sun was so warm."

"I'd take an aspirin if I were you, just in case——"

Millicent sat down in the easy chair and laughed. It was a wonderful laugh. She threw her hat on the floor and all her curls stood up in a golden whirl.

"Honest, I'm so happy. I've been so caged up all my life."

"Teacher can't see you in Nevada."

"Elisabeth—life is so short and when you get a chance ——Nobody should turn down a chance to be happy."

"I've driven by that place where you were," Elisabeth said lamely.

Millicent got up from the chair and began spinning over the floor, spreading her hands like a child at dancing school.

"Nevada has got to me now. I don't ever want to go home."

"Well, you're happy. That's something."

Millicent stopped spinning and stared into Elisabeth's face.

"You bet it's something. When I think of the hours I spent weeping over my husband——"

"I know——"

"I gave myself a treat today. We all deserve a treat."

Millicent went off to her room, singing. She was going out to dinner with Jimmy. The smell of pine still lingered in the air after she had gone. Elisabeth heard her bath water running, her voice telling Gretchen, and

Gretchen answering: "That's the spirit." It went to Elisabeth's head to see how happy Millicent was . . . "I gave myself a treat . . ."

The other members of the Quartet had engagements for dinner, so Elisabeth ate alone in that familiar dining room, with white roses on the tables, and the phonograph playing: "I'm a Dreamer, Aren't We All?" By now Elisabeth knew every tune on the phonograph . . . every window . . . the entire pattern of the tapestry on the wall. She thought of her first day, when she had wondered at how happy the women looked. Now she knew almost everyone at the tables, and all their scandal. Cora was there with her mother, looking ashy-pale. Old Man McLean was alone. The girl who had wanted to read a bad book was there with a fellow all teeth and shaggy pompadour.

Elisabeth went alone to the first show at the Wigwam. It was so late in spring that now seven o'clock was sunset. The hills were mauve; the clouds were pink; the sky was wistaria. There was an odor of sage in the air. The river was deep purple water under the bridge.

Outside the Wigwam was a pinched stalk of a girl in a black coat and a little red hat and black satin slippers with rhinestone buckles. She could not be more than seventeen.

"Can I sit by you in the movies?" she said.

Elisabeth hesitated. Was this some new Reno game?

"I just came here day before yesterday. I'm from Brixton, Vermont. There were such rough men just went inside——"

Elisabeth looked down at the drawn pointed face under the red hat. For all the girl's timidity, there was a hard quality in that face, like the shiny red beads on her handbag.

"You needn't be afraid. Those are miners and sheepmen and so on. They wouldn't hurt a hair of your head."

"Well, you know how a girl feels. Did I tell you I was from Brixton, Vermont?"

Elisabeth remembered how she had felt when she was a Senior at school and saw a Freshman. She invited the girl inside and they sat together through the movies. It was a picture of life in Paris, with cafes and boulevards and romance and flower vendors selling violets. There were ranchers' wives in the audience, watching the romance. Elisabeth felt a queer sensation in her heart to see the deadness of their faces, as though they were irrevocably separated from laughter and passionate people who buy violets. It must be dreadful never to know again . . . Elisabeth wondered if she would ever stare up at romance with that dead look on her face. Such a thought made her feel afraid and hurried.

After it was over they walked together to the hotel door. It was black-dark now and the sky glittered. The

Elk celebration was still going on, so the banks of the Truckee River were illuminated. Strings of colored electric bulbs reached all the way down through Wingfield Park. There was also some arrangement of light under the falls, so the water fell in stripes, red, white, and blue.

"I live in a boarding house," the girl said. "It's awfully homey. The woman who runs it is so motherly."

"That's good. My hotel isn't very motherly."

"I've thought these first two days would never go. Does all the time drag like that?"

Elisabeth felt as though she were reaching back through the dim rooms of time and remembering herself, just arrived. Somehow it seemed so long ago.

"It gets better. I hardly think how the time goes now."

"You're the first person I've spoken to. You looked so quiet and kind. Last night I wrote and told my mother I could never stand it here and I'd take the Overland home any morning."

"Just you hang on a week. After a while, you'll like it too well. You——"

"My mother told me when I left: 'Now May, even if your husband don't love you any more, I love you, and I crave to hear what you do out there.' I've often wondered if I would be that way over a kid."

They were standing under the scalloped hotel awning. The harsh light from the door fell on the girl . . . red hat . . . eyes with puffy circles underneath . . . sal-

mon-pink spots of rouge . . . full purple-red mouth . . . thin hands around the red bead bag . . .

"Well, I guess here's where you live. Thanks for letting me sit next to you. I had kind of a nerve to ask you."

"Good night and good luck."

The girl hesitated . . . then she leaned forward and spoke in an unpleasant whisper.

"Tell me—is it easy to be good here?"

Elisabeth drew back a little.

"What do you mean—good?"

"Aw, you know. You're a good girl. I mean—are there lots of temptations? Do men——"

It was strange to hear "good" and "temptations" used in their tabloid sense. Elisabeth spoke in a hurried nervous voice.

"There are plenty of men. They'll ask you. It isn't easy."

"I want to be good, but I won't be able to. I see my finish."

The girl spoke as a malaria victim might predict one of his attacks. Now that hard look was plain under the red hat.

"I've always tried, but I never have been good. Every time I go out with a man I think this time I'll say no—and then I don't. I suppose I'm talking this way because I'll never see you again and I'm crazy lonely."

"Won't you come up to my room?"

"No—not after I've spilled all this."

"Forget it. I've heard so much since I came here that it all goes in one ear and out the other."

"Tell me—what's the knack of keeping good? I mean—if you're human and got feelings. What makes *you* say no?"

Elisabeth shivered there in the warm dark. If she only knew enough to say something valuable . . .

"I don't know," she said in a sort of wail. "I wish I did. I've never been tempted until lately. That's the only reason I'm what you call good."

The girl gave a little hiss through her teeth.

"Then you don't know what it's like to want not to be rotten and to catch yourself being rotten——"

"I know I can't take any credit——"

The girl shrugged her shoulders and pulled the black coat collar around her chin. She seemed to be folding her hardness around her. She made a grimace.

"Anyhow—who cares?"

Upstairs, the suite was empty. No one would be back before eleven. There was a light in Gretchen's room. As usual, her curtains were blowing in the wind, the gin glass stood on her desk. The yellow roses that Sidney had sent were already dead. Their petals were spilled over the bureau. Gretchen had not watered them. She

had cared for the roses only as signs of conquest, not for what they really were. Did people ever love each other for what they really were?

Elisabeth closed the door. She sat down at the desk and began a letter to her Aunt Evelyn. Every Monday night she wrote Aunt Evelyn. . . . "I'm afraid there isn't very much news this week. It has been a very quiet afternoon and evening. Nothing has happened. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

WHENEVER Elisabeth saw her husband's handwriting on an envelope, her heart opened, trembled, and shut. There was always the chance that he might be writing . . . "My darling, it was all a mistake. Come back, my darling, and everything will be as it was before." Or he might be writing those touching words: "Forgive me." She always sat for a while with the envelope in her hand, unopened, letting herself dream of such words.

But the stiffly pleasant letters never talked of anything but money, and then, in an obvious effort to fill up the page, gossip about their friends . . . "Old Duncan has gone to Europe." . . . "Mrs. Travers has broken her arm." . . . It was difficult to read about Mrs. Travers when she had hoped to read something else. The blue fountain pen marks on the paper flowed along to the margins, line after line, made by the same hand that used to write: "My life, my joy, my Elisabeth!" She read every letter over and over, trying to find some word that she could interpret as showing he missed her. It was not a proud thing to do, but no one is proud clear down to the core.

It always took her a while to get over a letter from Richard. Almost all the Reno women had that same trouble. If anyone looked especially depressed the others always said: "She must have just heard from her husband." At such times, women usually went off by themselves for a while and then made straight for Molloy's. Even though a woman really wanted to divorce her husband, there was just something about a letter . . . The pool was stirred. Feeling and memory were set afloat.

Millicent never heard from her husband. Nairn always went into fits of weeping and fished out an old snapshot in her violet writing case. Whenever Gretchen got a word from Mack, she put her thumb to her nose. Elisabeth envied her the ability to throw off Mack like an old fur tippet. Her disgust with him was refreshing.

The day after Elisabeth met the girl at the movies, a letter came from Richard, just at dinner time. It was a bad time to get a letter, at the end of the day, when one was apt to be out of control. He spoke of old Duncan and Mrs. Travers and then went on: "I've been out to the country. Lester has kept the place up very well. The real estate men say there should be no trouble selling it. Lester has cleared the leaves out of the brook. The plum is in bloom." . . . Elisabeth sat down at her desk to get over the sudden whiteness from the plum.

Their country place had always seemed more like home than 59th Street. In New York she was forever running

to engagements, having guests, being excited. But in the country she had sat long quiet hours alone on the lawn in the sun; she had planted the garden; she had gathered the flowers every morning with a basket on her arm. Down by the brook she had trimmed the long-leafed purple iris. There was always a certain day in the year when she gathered the iris and put them in a pale green vase. They always bloomed just after the plum.

She had not realized before that it was full spring now in Connecticut, because this desert weather was so different. Richard and she had always moved out to the country in April and watched the spring. She knew when the wind went soft, the elms misted, the grass greened in the rain, the leaf mould smelled like the deep woods, and the red maple blossoms littered the paths. She had timed the violets . . . the tulips . . . the wild azalea by the wall. She knew when all the fruit trees snowed with bloom.

Out here in Nevada, she sat turning the letter over in her hands. She remembered the early days of her marriage when life ran as mirror-bright as the summer brook, when she could look clear down to the silver leaves and pebbles under the water, before Fate muddied the stream and she could not see any longer and was carried on by the current. She thought of the country house, of the sun in the rooms, the way the elm looked from the south window,

the white clematis on the porch with that strange smell which always made her think of death.

So often she had lain in bed, out here in Nevada, imagining she was back in her country bed, and if she opened her eyes she would see the elms and a dim Connecticut sky. In her dreams she had gone through that country house, dusting and putting in order. It seemed as if the sounds haunted her most. The sound of the various doors . . . pantry, kitchen, oven, hall, bedroom . . . each with its own note. She had lain and listened to them close, one by one.

She thought most often of the plum tree. There had been other fruit on the land—pears, apples, a peach with deep pink flowers that all the week-end visitors admired. But she had always seen the delicate and timid plum outside the kitchen window. In the early days of married life she had not kept a maid and spent her mornings in the kitchen. As she went about her work, there was always the plum branch, tapping on the window glass, bare in the winter, budding in spring, red in the fall. When the blossom season came, she had sat out on the lawn in the afternoons and looked up at the sky through those dazzling white clusters. Then her heart had been open and full and blossoming as the tree. Anyone who had once experienced a blossoming heart missed it afterward.

This year she was not seeing the plum. It would tap on the window glass, but the room would be empty. It

would bloom, but not for her eyes. Somehow that solitary blossoming seemed more dreadful at this moment than her break with Richard. She did not know why it seemed so dreadful. She felt a gust of pain in her heart. She put her head down on the desk blotter in a rain of tears . . . like Millicent . . . like Nairn . . . like Gretchen when Mack would not sign the power-of-attorney papers. And now here was Nairn, patting her shoulder.

"Hold fast. Why do husbands write letters?"

"I'm not crying over Richard. It's the plum tree."

"Go ahead and cry. I had some lilacs."

"I always felt so badly when a heavy rain came and beat off the blossoms before they'd had a chance at the sunshine. . . . Am I funny?"

"I can't see lilacs yet, and it's ten years since I had the bush."

Elisabeth raised her wet face and stared at Nairn.

"Will I get over it?"

Nairn was silent a moment, looking toward the window filled with the westering light. She was very lovely in her cool blue dress. She turned the amethyst ring on her finger.

"I don't know. It depends on the kind of woman you are. It's hard for most of us to get over our first loves. As much as I love Basil, I'm not really over Keith . . . But if you're brave you'll make yourself care for some new man, and your feeling for Richard will be just something

tender and sweet and small in the back of your mind."

"Nairn—I'm so silly. I feel as if I couldn't bear not seeing the plum tree. I feel as if I wanted to take the train and rush out to Connecticut and scream: 'Here I am, Tree!' "

"Don't feel destitute. There'll be other things that you'll see blooming."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Nairn?"

They sat on the bed, talking, while darkness gathered over the town and the lights on Virginia Street flared down to the sign: RENO THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD. Elisabeth grew quieter. They even began to gossip about Ruthie Brown going through the lobby today with white carnations on her coat. As their talk grew gayer, Elisabeth looked into Nairn's face and knew she would love her forever . . . Nairn with her warm eyes, her pale face with the strange blue lights, her small long-fingered hands, her blue and violet, and that absorbing love for Basil. So many of her traits were swallowed up in that love for Basil. And somehow the thought that she would love Nairn forever comforted Elisabeth's heart.

Jack had asked Elisabeth to go for a ride that night at nine. Half an hour before, she was dressed, standing by the open window, looking down at Virginia Street. It seemed as if in difficult moments she always stood by the window, one hand holding back the blue curtain. She

watched the endless moving line of cars, heard the sound of the motors and the laughter. One never heard as much laughter anywhere as in Reno. From the tonneaux, the running boards, the rumble seats, this high laughter, screaming, tittering, giggling, jingling up toward the stars.

Suddenly she felt that she must telephone Richard—*must*. There was too much loneliness here, too much laughter, too many memories. And then the knowledge that Jack would want a definite answer tonight gave her a sense of panic. It was funny, wasn't it, to telephone a husband when one was wondering what to do with a lover? But it was not only that. It was the feeling, too, that if she telephoned Richard something might happen, something as miraculous as the plum tree breaking into bud from dark branches.

Richard had said he would be in the country this week. She gave the number. She waited, her heart furious. Then the words: "Ready with Connecticut." She could scarcely speak. All her nerves seemed drawn into a single skein. There was a humming in her ears. And then, out of a vacuum, came Richard's voice . . . "Hello, Elisabeth."

At the first word Elisabeth knew that nothing miraculous would happen. Her heart blackened. Her gathered hope dried. His voice sounded flat and careful, as it had all these past months. There was nothing in his voice, not even that old familiar irritation. She wondered blankly

why she had called him. She wished to God she hadn't called him. She had a small miserable feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Hello—Richard——"

"What have you got on your mind? Are you ill? Do you need money?"

Elisabeth felt the hot tears rolling down her face. Tears could be so hot. She hated the way her voice would tremble. She pressed her lips hard against the mouthpiece.

"I have enough money. I just—got thinking. Do you ever think?"

She heard the note of careful moderate pity.

"I'm glad you're all right. You must be sure to let me know if you need anything. I want you to be comfortable."

"Isn't it a miracle the way people's voices can go across the continent? I—I'll let you know if I need anything——"

"It's raining here. Been raining for several days."

"It's beautiful weather here. How does—the place look?"

"Never saw it look better. Your favorite plum is holding up fine in spite of the rain."

"Richard—promise me you won't break off any of the branches."

"What a queer thing to ask. You get such funny notions. I——"

"You're afraid of me, aren't you? You're afraid I'll ask you for some feelings——"

She crashed down the receiver. She gave a little groan. Well, she had made a fool of herself and that was over. She straightened and blinked. She felt a refreshing healthy burst of anger. Richard—she'd show Richard! There were other men beside Richard in the world . . . he with his little flat voice, so cautious. She'd show . . . well, whom would she show?

She threw back her head and dried her eyes. She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked well. There was a fine gay burning in her heart. Huh, there were other things in the world. Huh, she was sick of thinking about the plum tree. Huh, she didn't care if she never saw it again. She powdered her face over, put geranium on her lips, smoothing it all around with a shaking little finger. Huh . . . huh . . . huh . . .

Jack was on time. He stood in her bedroom doorway, looking very handsome in white and dark blue. He came over and took her hands. "Is something troubling you, my dearest?" Elisabeth was wearing a white silk dress embroidered all over with sprays of pink and blue flowers. She put on a white wool coat and a white wool beret. . . . "I won't let anything trouble you, my dearest" . . . He had brought her some scarlet japonicas . . . "Let me see you smile."

The night air was cool and dazzling. The car flew like

a bird—a sleek untiring bird—along the Carson Highway. All the lights flashed by. This road was always crowded with cars at night for ten miles out, coming and going. They passed the ranch where the tree trunks were painted white, the air field with the spidery beacons burning green, Reno Hot Springs with the tinny radio, splashing, voices, laughter. They turned the sharp curve past puffing Steamboat Springs, all lilac-color and indigo. Down by the deserted village were blossoming fruit orchards, sweet-smelling in the dark.

Then they were alone with the ornate sky. The cars were left behind. There was no sound but their own motor. Jack moved closer. Elisabeth smiled to herself. She was expecting that. Just at this moment she was amused, bitter, competent, and wounded. She did not feel as—physical—as sometimes when she was alone. She felt as if she had her life in her lap and could squeeze it up in a ball and throw it out of the window. But the wind was gentle and delicious. There was a glow of moonlight over the sky. The white trunks of the cottonwoods flashed and were gone.

"I want to take you up a little road I know where you can get a fine view of Reno," he said.

Elisabeth felt like saying something wise and vulgar, like Gretchen's crowd, but she kept silent. After all . . . He laid his hand on hers.

"A night like this, Elisabeth, always gets me to thinking of how short life is."

"Are you afraid of death?"

"I'll say I'm not. Tomorrow, a year from tomorrow, ten years—I'm ready whenever it comes. I'm not so keen on living."

"You're not telling me the truth. You're afraid. Everyone's afraid. I wonder why people always talk so much about death when they're making love."

"Golly, you're right. I never held a girl in my arms that I didn't—I mean—it seems natural."

He stopped the car on the crest of a low hill. Far in the distance were the torchy lamps of Reno. The moonlight spread over desert and mountain like a flock of lovely noiseless birds with white breasts and black wings, motionless, watching. Nothing stirred. As she sat there in the quiet, Elisabeth felt all her bitterness and competence draining away. Her heart went limp. A woman could be with a man in moonlight like this and think she loved him, and all the while it would be the moonlight she loved.

"Do you know you have a very beautiful hand? I like hands with narrow fingers."

He smoothed her hand, beginning at the wrist, ending at the finger tips, delicate, insinuating. Knowing it was all a game, Elisabeth felt those deft touches clear through

her body. There was a quivering in her throat. She did not speak a word.

"Let's get in the back seat," he said. "It's uncomfortable for us here behind this wheel."

When Jack opened the car door, Elisabeth felt the fresh night wind. For a moment she stood on the pale sand, looking up at the swirl of stars. One never knew what stars were like, until one came to Nevada. Then they were in the back seat where it was dark and warm and a bit leathery.

"Precious . . . your face is cold . . . your eyelids are cold . . ."

Then he kissed her. It was a long time since she had been kissed. For months now, Richard had not touched her. For over a year his kisses had been very brief, only a meaningless contact with his mouth. Elisabeth had almost forgotten what a long kiss was like. Why yes, this was what it was like . . . pressure, clinging, tingling warmth smoking through all the senses. It was good to feel aware again. Something young and broad-awake coursed back again in her blood. It did not seem to matter what Jack was, what the game was. Here were kisses. Strange old hungry feelings were being fed.

Jack was whispering and whispering. His breath was over her hair. In the moonlight his face was paper-pale, his eyes were very dark.

"Elisabeth——"

"Please—I——"

"Don't be like that, Elisabeth."

"But I . . ."

"Here—right now—in this car——"

There were always two emotions that a woman felt —yearning and dread—balanced delicately in her heart. At the word "car," yearning thinned away in Elisabeth, and dread thickened. Those sudden revulsions, those changes of balance, often happened to a woman, and men never understood. The wrong gesture, the wrong word, and passion is outweighed. Men should be careful of that balance. Elisabeth suddenly remembered all the parked cars that Richard and she had seen by the roads at night around New York. She had always felt they were ridiculous . . . "Imagine anyone on the back seat of an automobile . . ."

"Don't be afraid . . . Elisabeth . . ."

She turned her face away.

"I'm not afraid. It isn't fear—not the usual kind of fear."

Still he held her close.

"What is it then?"

"It's so hard to explain. I'm afraid for something in myself."

"You don't owe anything to your husband. He doesn't want you now, does he?"

"I'm not thinking of my husband. I'm not thinking of any man."

"Well—if nobody cares—what's cramping your style?"

There in the warm leathery dark, Elisabeth was silent, trying to gather the words in her mind, with Jack's insistent arms still around her. There was not a sound but the crisping of the wind in the sage brush. The lovely noiseless moonlight birds were still gathered through the valley. In the wind their breasts and wings trembled.

"Jack—it's just that if I accepted you—I'd go Reno. The town would have gotten me. Ever since I've been here I've felt a pull—I've rather liked feeling it. But I don't know—I've an instinct against it."

He put his cheek against hers, smoothed her chin and throat, used all the tempting ways.

"Give me a chance. I'll stop you thinking. You won't be able to think for my kisses. Suppose you did go Reno. What does it matter? A hundred years from now everyone will have forgotten we existed. What does it matter what we do with our funny little lives?"

Elisabeth sighed. It was strange to feel so old and quiet and decided, with all the fever cooled. She almost wished she were back at the moment where Jack's kiss was flashing through her body with a glint of strong eager life. Now her senses were vacant.

"Something seems to care and something seems to matter. I've got to hold hard to believing that some things matter more than others—some things are better than others. That's the way I'm made. If I let all that go, I'd be lost. That's how I'm put together. Do I sound queer?"

"You sound positively quaint. We're here—alone—there isn't a soul for miles—all this damned moonlight. You know you don't look to be the morbid type you are."

Elisabeth opened the car door. Again she felt the wind in her face, saw the streaming negligent glitter of the Milky Way, the pale reach of sand, the tiny Reno lamps in the valley.

"I wonder if all women feel like such idiots. I'm sorry, Jack."

He took her hand and pulled her back and drew her to him again. He kissed her. But the magic was gone. She was limp and cold in his arms. When dread once thickens in your heart, you can't be stirred.

"Damn you . . . Elisabeth . . ."

They got into the front seat. Jack was breathing hard. He turned on the headlights. He started up the car. Some four-footed creature scurried out of sight in the sage.

"You'll learn," he said, fumbling with the wheel. "You'll learn to grab what you can get."

The moon was setting in the west. The light that had

glowed in the desert was fading. The Carson Highway was black-dark. Again they passed the sweet-smelling fruit orchards down by the deserted village.

"I can't help believing in true love," she said. "You must know what I mean. You must have wanted it yourself. Something tender. What you feel when you hear music. I——"

"Well, what if you do? You could still have tonight, couldn't you?"

"I wonder. Perhaps some women could. What destroys one person sometimes doesn't destroy another."

"I hope to God you look back on this night and think what a fool you were——"

They passed Steamboat Springs, lilac-color and indigo. They passed Reno Hot Springs where the radio was still blaring . . . the green air beacons . . . the white ranch . . . Then they were driving down Virginia Street between the street lamps. They stopped at the hotel door. Elisabeth gave Jack her hand. Somehow she felt that she would like to do him a little favor, give him something to eat or drink.

"Has it been a waste of time knowing me? Here—I'll leave you the japonicas."

He forced a smile.

"Not at all. Only we could have been so happy."

It was difficult saying good-bye to a man in this situation. With a man who had just proposed marriage and

been rejected, there were so many things to say. . . . "I hope some day a nice girl will make you happy." . . . "I appreciate the honor you've done me." . . . "I hope we will always be friends. I feel like a sister to you." . . . But in this case none of those remarks would be appropriate. Elisabeth was not sorry she had refused. She was almost sure. But mingled with it all was a yearning.

He started up the car. There was a cloud of gas from the exhaust.

"Let me know when you find true love, Alice in Wonderland. I'll let you know when I get rubies out of the desert."

It was just past midnight. As Elisabeth crossed the lobby, she imagined the bellboys were wondering whether she had said yes or no. The elevator girl looked wise. When she opened her door, the room was lighted. Nairn sat in the easy chair, reading, in that blue velvet kimono with her hair down. Elisabeth never forgot just how she looked, under the lamp.

"Nairn—why aren't you in bed?"

"I knew you'd gone out with Jack. My insatiable curiosity kept me awake. Now—come clean!"

Elisabeth dropped down in the desk chair. Her dress, embroidered with the pink and blue flowers, was crumpled. There was a smudge on her coat. Her hat was pushed back on her forehead.

"I refused him. I don't know why. Just an instinct

when I was on the ragged edge—I might have come back as happy as Millicent——"

"You don't look as if you had refused, but I believe you. I thought you would. But I just waited up on the chance—want some gin?"

"A good stiff shot. And I want some of those fancy crackers you've got in your top bureau drawer."

Elisabeth undressed quickly, leaving her clothes a white pool on the floor. She bathed her face in cologne. Now it was all over, she felt noble and depressed. After all, the moonlight . . . It was not often that anyone was out in such moonlight, and no one was young forever. She sat up in bed with the pillow behind her back. Nairn brought her the gin and crackers. She ate and drank, describing it all to Nairn.

"I don't believe he's such a professional, Elisabeth. The way he took it was an amateur touch."

Elisabeth brushed the cracker crumbs off the counterpane. She had been trying to act rather dashing, but there was a tremble in her voice.

"I wish I did know—down in the bottom of my heart—whether I'd done something decent or just damned foolish. I'm glad I said no—and yet why was it all made so sweet if it was meant to be resisted?"

Nairn went over and raised the window. The sound of the river filled the room.

"Do you know what I think hell is?"

"Tell me. I've thought hell was—not being loved. I've thought so ever since Richard stopped loving me."

"It isn't that. It's being unable to love anyone. That's the pit of hell. Lots of men and women get that way. They can't care for anyone deeply."

"I know. I've seen such people, but I never thought—how do they get that way?"

Nairn sat down on the bed. She took a comb from her kimono pocket and ran it through her hair, now to the left, now to the right, with a delicate and weary motion.

"I think from spilling their emotions all over the place. You can fritter away your emotions just as you can fritter away your money. People who spend whatever love they have all over the place——"

"In little affections——"

"Getting burned up in parked cars. Compromising and taking the middle-sized instead of the large——"

"But it's so easy to compromise, Nairn, when you're in a hurry to be happy and someone says the real will never happen. You get afraid——"

"Well, that's the gamble you take with life. I put my money down on one number, and I wait for that number to come."

"That's brave, Nairn."

"It's the only thing to do. Women who have a lot

of love affairs never save anything up. Each affair takes something out of them. So they're drained dry after a while."

"Is it better to be drained dry or go around with a heart full of love that nobody wants?"

"Of course there's danger. But I think anything is better than getting into the state where you're lukewarm toward everyone, where you can't feel anything deep. A man comes along who deserves your love and you don't have anything to give him. You wonder what's the matter and you worry . . ."

"But how do you know this, Nairn? You're so mad about Basil——"

"I've had to choose. All of us who are really alive and out in the world have to choose. Everywhere people feel a pull. It isn't just in Reno. And how we are lost or saved depends on what we are. Some of us are saved by fear—others by instinct—others by grace."

"You were saved by grace, Nairn. Anybody can see that."

Nairn was through with her hair. She put the comb back in her pocket and folded her hands around her knees. She looked tired. Lately her neck and throat had seemed thinner. There were purple rings under her eyes.

"Nairn darling—please excuse me for being sentimental—you know I've hated coming to Reno. But—this place has given me you. I——"

"I feel that way, too. But don't say any more or we'll wallow."

"You've made me feel I wasn't such a fool with Jack."

"Well, don't get smug. You have a couple of weeks more, and anything can happen here in two weeks."

"We'll always remember each other."

Nairn turned off the light by the desk. Now she was only a shadow on the floor.

"Promise me one thing, Elisabeth. No matter what man is in your life—no matter what happens—we'll spend our last Reno night together."

"There won't be any man. Nairn, I love you."

Nairn gave a low unsteady laugh.

"Sometimes I hate happy people."

"But you mustn't hate them because they're happy."

"It isn't that. It's because they condescend. Haven't you seen them condescending?"

CHAPTER XIII

As ELISABETH thought it over afterward, she remembered she had always felt a dread for Nairn . . . a warning . . . a catching at the heart. Perhaps she had loved Nairn as we instinctively love things that are doomed. She had never been able to imagine Nairn happy. But she did not allow herself to accept it fully until those last two weeks. Now she watched Nairn as one watches a shadow creeping nearer on a wall.

There had been more and more dread about the mail. Gretchen continued to receive her daily letter from George with his invariable descriptions of squash tournaments and filet of sole at the Club. Gretchen continued to write him grimly every night at her desk, spurred on by gin . . . "Darling, how do you spell 'perverted'?" . . . But Basil's letters began to skip a day every so often . . . then two days . . . three. The envelopes grew thinner. Elisabeth remembered Nairn's face when she opened a letter after a three-day interval, and found only brief writing on one side of the page.

It grew so that Elisabeth hoped no one would mention

the mail. Nairn was so obviously eating her heart out. She looked for letters every time she went through the lobby, even when she knew it was not mail time. When she was up in her room for the evening, she telephoned down to see if anything had come. If her bell rang, she jumped, thinking it was a letter. Elisabeth could hear her, very late at night, walking up and down her room.

It was a weary draining sensation, waiting for mail. Every morning you awoke hoping . . . the thought of it held your mind in a vise . . . you wanted to run away where you could not see the mail and yet some fascination would not let you leave. All day long you wondered if the letter could be lost. The hopelessness when the last mail of the day came in . . . the dreary feeling when you finally turned out the light and went to bed. Such waiting gouged out anyone's nerves.

When the letters first began to skip, Nairn laughed. She said Basil was no letter writer. After a while, she stopped laughing and did not mention, except to Elisabeth, the days that were empty. Before Gretchen and Millicent she kept up a pose. She listened with fortitude to Gretchen's love letters at the breakfast table. She made excuses to Elisabeth for Basil . . . "He's busy on a special order." . . . "He's travelling for the company in Alabama." . . . "Love doesn't really depend on letter writing. Now—does it? I mean—some people find it harder to write letters than others." . . . But there came

a time when Nairn stopped making excuses. Then Elisabeth was frightened.

Elisabeth and Nairn often went to the first show at the Majestic that was over at nine. The last night mail came into the hotel at nine. All the way back to the hotel, Nairn would pretend she was not in a hurry. She would even suggest stopping for a soda. She would go into the drug store to get weighed, or make Elisabeth stop at the bridge to admire the river . . . "I like the color of water at night. Did you ever go bathing at night? It's uncanny."

But underneath all the pretending and the stopping, Elisabeth could feel Nairn's urgency. Nairn's voice always took on an anxious quiver. She wanted more than anything to get back to the hotel, and yet she did not want to. While she was here on Virginia Street, the letter existed in the mail box. Her mind put it there. But when she crossed the lobby, all pretense would be over. If the letter were not there, her last hope for the day was gone. . . . "Do you know, Elisabeth, I think some of life's greatest cruelties are practiced through the mail. It's so easy to be cruel in the mail."

Sometimes there was a letter. Nairn took it with a little murmur in her throat and instantly tore it open. But Elisabeth noticed that she looked up with a puzzled expression, as if she had asked for bread and been given a stone. She was like someone leaving a dinner table, un-

satisfied. But she always spoke with rather sharp cheerfulness of what Basil had said.

Elisabeth could have ground the absent Basil into mincemeat, when she saw how Nairn looked. Her body grew thinner, her eyes larger, her hands on the onyx cigarette case more transparent. The amethyst ring was loose for her finger. Now she was silent for a long time, now talkative. Even Gretchen and Millicent stopped mentioning their letters at the breakfast table. There was something in the atmosphere . . .

Basil's flowers still continued to come because he had a standing order with the florist. Promptly every Monday morning there was a box at Nairn's door. Elisabeth watched Nairn putting the roses and violets and tulips into vases with an expression on her face that no one could read, quiet and unsmiling. She would stand looking down at the roses with her great dark eyes, smoothing the petals with her fingers. Even the flowers looked as though they were watching.

In the few days following that final episode with Jack, a barrier seemed to build between Elisabeth and Nairn. It was only because Nairn was so cooped up in suspense. They went out to the Willows alone for dinner, and Nairn spent the evening at the roulette wheel. She had never shown any interest in roulette before. Elisabeth took her riding in the afternoons, trying to keep her from thinking. But when they rode through Dog Valley,

Nairn's favorite ride, Nairn kept her eyes in her lap. Even the grove of yellow virgin pine did not appeal to Nairn.

They never spoke these days of what they really felt. Only once Nairn mentioned the future. . . . "I'll be glad to get home again. Everything will be all right when I get home." . . . Mostly they gossiped. Elisabeth was careful to keep her conversation on all the rumors. There was the exciting news that Cora was going to have a baby.

"Cora's going home this afternoon, isn't she, Nairn? It's a pity she didn't tell her mother about the baby before coming to Reno."

"She was reconciled to her husband that last time only three days and I guess she didn't suspect——"

"Her mother wanted her to stay out here and get the divorce anyhow."

"No chance. Cora was like a maniac with joy when she found out about her baby."

"It was a deliverance for her, Nairn."

"God, yes. That was what she had married for—deliverance."

"Now she can go back and be happy and abused by her husband."

On the twenty-third of May, they were all having breakfast in Nairn's room on that bed heaped with violet pillows. Gretchen was wearily elegant in a webby affair of yellow chiffon and poppies. Millicent, whose face had

grown rounder and pinker since that afternoon with Jimmy, was wearing green polka-dotted pajamas with wide ankles trailing on the floor. Nairn was in her blue velvet, Elisabeth in that eternal pink. It was near the end of the meal and their saucers were thick with cigarette ash.

"The walls of this room must be plastered with secrets."

"There isn't a room in this hotel that hasn't been wept in and loved in and cursed in. The air must be full of spent emotions like stale tobacco smoke."

"Perhaps that's what makes us all so restless. People talk about the influence of old vibrations——"

"Irene Lang is leading papa a dance. He doesn't try to keep up with her any more. He's got to be a wreck of his former self from staying out nights and lapping up so much booze. Now he stays in the hotel and lets her go where she pleases."

"Isn't she having an affair with Edgar Ray?"

"She's beginning to understand why his wife left him."

"Have you seen those two girls who got here last week? They're rooming together and planning to marry each other's husbands. They live in Flatbush. Can't you see them making a foursome at bridge—afterward?"

"I'll be glad to get to a place where there is some impersonal conversation. I want to hear about the menace of the Soviet."

Millicent dropped her coffee cup on the floor. It broke, and she began, remorsefully, to pick up the pieces.

"I'm sorry, Nairn. I've always been so clumsy. I'll buy you another. But when you spoke about being glad to get away—if you want to know it, I'm dreading to leave Reno."

"Do you think you're telling us anything we don't know?" Gretchen carolled. "Never mind. There must be lovers in St. Louis."

"It isn't only that. Really it isn't."

"What is it then? What is this mysterious power that Reno has over women?"

Millicent began pleating the polka-dotted leg of her pajama.

"I've tried to explain it to myself, but I can't make it very clear. Reno is a sort of unreal world, all complete in itself, where I'm away from my past and I don't think of my future. Life here is hectic and intense and I'm a heroine. We all feel we're heroines. Well, when I leave here I go back to the everyday world, to my background. Life will be ordinary and monotonous again. I'll have responsibilities and a future——"

"There's something in what she says," Gretchen agreed. "Reno's a vacation from life. Poor Sidney was saying to me only last night——"

The door rattled. There was a knock. Nairn jumped to answer, her face gone red. It was the bellboy with an airmail letter. Nairn snatched it off his tray, fumbled in

her kimono pocket for a dime, closed the door. Then she came back to her chair, tore the letter open . . . Elisabeth could hear her breathing.

"Ruthie must be getting so she trusts Old Man McLean," Gretchen went on. "We haven't been invited——"

There was a low cry from Nairn. She started up from her chair, crumpled the letter in her hand. The others stood, too. There was a clatter of cups and saucers. Even Gretchen's ruddy face went white.

"Nairn—tell us——"

"Basil's married." She spoke in a low tone, paused, then shrieked the words . . . "Basil's married!" . . . Then, in a quieter voice . . . "Leave me alone. Don't touch me."

Gretchen and Millicent did not need to be told. There was something in her voice, in the way she held the letter, in the gesture of her hand across her forehead . . . They shrank away from the room. They closed the door. But Elisabeth knew she was to stay.

With the sound of the closing door, all that tense drama left Nairn. She collapsed into the easy chair, smoothed out the letter, and read it aloud in a shaking voice. Basil was married to a girl he had known a month. . . . "You wouldn't have wanted me to marry you if I did not love you. I couldn't have made you happy. I

shall always think you are a wonderful woman and I wish everything good for you. An attractive person like yourself should easily find . . ."

"Butter wouldn't melt in the little beast's mouth," Elisabeth said.

Nairn dug her nails into the arms of the easy chair. Her face was white and quivering.

"A month ago was the day we went to Pyramid Lake, wasn't it?"

Elisabeth was sitting on the bed. She trembled all through her body down to her feet. She could feel her chin shaking.

"Nairn—let's take my car and go away from here and stay all day. We've never been up the Donner pass over the mountains——"

Then Nairn began to sob—openly—without putting her hands over her face. Her head was laid back on the chair. Horrible choked sounds came from her throat. Elisabeth ran for the spirits of ammonia. She bathed Nairn's forehead.

"Don't . . . Nairn . . . He's not worth it."

"I know he isn't but that—doesn't—help. I knew a long time ago—he was a dangerous—person—for me—to have—around."

"Dangerous?"

"Because I loved—him—the—most."

"I know. I loved Richard the most, always from the

very first. He had the power to hurt me, but he was never hurt."

Elisabeth had never seen anyone sob like this. Nairn made no effort at control. Her whole body shook. Elisabeth herself was trembling. There was something so alarming . . . No, not even when she first knew about Richard had she given herself up to sobbing like this.

"All—my—life—Elisabeth—I've loved people more —than—they've—loved—me. It's the fate of some—women."

"But I don't see why. You're beautiful and——"

"I'm too eager. Men—don't—like—eager—women. They like women—who—dole—out—their affections."

"But eager people are so lovely. They're worth so much more than the cool kind."

"Not too eager people. I've—always been so anxious to be—loved—and have happiness—and I've shown it. That's my fatal mistake—I can't seem to help it. I—see—myself—making—the same mistake—over—and over."

"Oh, Nairn, and you saved up all your love for Basil. You didn't look at another man——"

"I told you—I put—all my money—on—one—number. Well, my number—never—came. But don't let it make—you—cynical. It's a good—plan—anyhow."

"There'll be other men. Better than Basil."

Nairn had stopped sobbing for the moment. She lay

back in her chair, eyes closed. Elisabeth brought her a fresh handkerchief. She was silent for a while, then spoke in a low altered tone.

"I've been expecting this. And now it's come. In some ways I feel better than when I was expecting it. The worst that can happen has happened. There's some comfort in that."

"You guessed from Basil's letters?"

"I just don't trust life to do anything good for me. When I had this prospect of happiness—well—I didn't believe it would ever come true. Long ago I stopped expecting good."

"But Nairn—that's so dreadful——"

"Oh, I know. When you lose your faith in life, you lose your youth, no matter what age you are. But I can't help it. All the mess has done that to me. It began a long time ago in dancing school when I was more anxious to dance with the little boys than they were to dance with me. Pour me some Scotch, will you?"

Nairn drank the Scotch as if it were difficult to swallow down a narrow throat. But at least she had stopped that sobbing. Only every so often there was a little whimper between her teeth.

"When I was married, I was always the one who went over to my husband and kissed him. I was always the one who said: 'I love you.' Damn me! I never learned to hold anything back!"

"But Nairn—there must be some man who wants to be loved and held close—without reserves."

"All the men I've ever known wanted a woman who hid her feelings a little. All that everlasting hiding . . ."

"It would have been a good thing if you had given Basil up before he gave you up. It would have helped your pride."

"Yes—I thought about it. But giving up in life is not the same as giving up in a book. A book heroine always walks the floor all night and in the morning she has decided forever. I'd walk the floor and I'd decide. Then I'd go back on my decision and have it all to do over. I couldn't gather myself up and stay gathered. I had too many loose ends. I kept on hoping, too . . . and hope doesn't snap out. . . . It gutters out."

"I've got a guttering hope about Richard——"

"When I think of all the women back in Baltimore who've never had anything hard——"

"Don't be lonely when you go back, will you, Nairn? Don't be lonely, will you?"

Nairn put up her hand and touched Elisabeth's face. It was the way an old woman touches the face of a child.

"I feel as if I were a ship that was just entering harbor and got orders to put out to sea again. I won't be lonely. I have plans."

Nairn grew quieter. Even those whimpers ceased. She lighted a cigarette. Her eyes were red. Her lips were pale.

Elisabeth bathed Nairn's face with cologne and as she dipped the cloth in the cologne she wondered what it would be like to get back to New York where life was not pared down to the quick and people were not always tragic. She wondered how all the New York reserve and dullness would seem, if she could get interested in conversations that had nothing pulsing underneath, and no one crying.

One got over emotions in Reno. There was so much drama that no one scene could take the center of the stage for long. Nairn finished her cigarette, sat up, looked in the mirror. Basil was married, but here was the day to live through. She had an appointment with her lawyer after lunch to settle financial matters. Elisabeth suggested they go riding until the appointment, taking sandwiches. While they were getting ready for the ride, they talked of inconsequential matters as people do in a house of death. . . . "Do you think I would look well with my hair parted in the middle?" . . . Elisabeth noticed that Nairn put the little nude statue away in a drawer.

All through the ride, Nairn seemed curiously happy. One could hardly believe that dreadful sobbing had ever happened. She looked intently about her at the desert and mountains, as if she were seeing them for the first time. Nothing escaped her, no sound, no color. She was unnaturally aware. She pointed out the desert lilies and the first buds of the poppies down by the river. There was

something childish and grateful in her face. When they got out of the car and ate their sandwiches on the shore of Donner Lake, Nairn was gentle and quiet. Elisabeth had seen that special gentleness come over those who have just been bereaved.

Elisabeth did not feel any longer that intangible barrier which had grown up in the last week. Everything between them was clear again. They did not mention marriage, but they said what they thought on all other subjects. Somehow their talk had never been so lovely. Elisabeth wondered why this was, and how Nairn could sit so calmly, with her back against the trunk of the yellow pine, looking out over the lake.

"You know—Elisabeth—we always say life out here is like a play——"

"Well, isn't it?"

"We think we're the stars of the play. We're not. Reno's the big actor."

"You mean we're only the noises off-stage and the people who carry the spears?"

"The town Reno—what it does to each one of us—the town is the villain."

Nairn looked up at the sky and took a deep breath.

"I don't believe I ever realized before how beautiful the world is—the sky and trees and water——"

"When I was at school, I used to think these Rocky Mountains were romance."

"I've known the world was lovely but it never seemed so beautiful as today——"

"Do you hear those pine cones dropping into the lake?"

"A tree, Elisabeth. If there were only one tree in the world, everyone would come to see it. But because we have so many——"

"We'd better be getting on if you've got that appointment at your lawyer's. I guess we ate all the sandwiches."

"Let's stay a while longer. Color's such a mystery, isn't it?"

"If you come to think——"

"It's too nice to leave."

Nairn wanted Elisabeth to go with her to the lawyer's office. So together they climbed three flights of dusty wooden stairs to his rooms. It was a very different office from Mr. Winter's—creaking floor, musty smell, books in dry cracked bindings, a roll top desk, scattered papers. Mr. Hershey was dressed in a shabby gray suit and high leather shoes that came up over his trousers. He was an old man with a deeply lined face and sparse gray hair. The only way anyone could have told that he was one of the smartest lawyers in Reno was by his eyes. They were small and glittering as bits of broken glass.

It did not take him long to settle Nairn's financial business, only a few minutes. When that was settled, like all Reno business men, he seemed disposed for conversa-

tion. He leaned back in his swivel chair and regarded them both shrewdly.

"Anyone can see you're anxious to get away from this town," he said. "Only don't tell that to the Judge. Remember you are out here to make Reno your permanent home."

"Six weeks here is a long time," Nairn said. "Too long. A person can grow away from the old associations. Why, a person can live a lifetime in a day."

"I'm in favor of the time being cut down still shorter. I believe if you are entitled to a divorce six weeks from now, you are entitled to it now."

"I suppose the time limit keeps people from rushing into a divorce," Elisabeth said.

"I don't think people rush to break up their homes as much as is generally supposed. A divorce is something that most people think over and haggle over and suffer over. Marriage creates a mysteriously strong tie that both parties find it difficult to break."

As he leaned back in his chair, his hands folded over his gray vest, his leather-booted foot waving gently, it was evident that he had used all these phrases many times.

"It's unhealthy having all these unhappy people herded together," Nairn said. "It does something to us all."

"It will be that way until all the states have similar divorce laws. It isn't Reno's fault. People come here for what they want and behave as they want to behave. A cross-section of America wanting to start over again, eh? A lot of people who come here are rank idealists. You're an idealist, Mrs. Shelley. You believe you can be happier under new conditions."

"I suppose you get bored with divorce cases——"

"No, I can't say I do. But I've gotten pretty clever. I can tell from looking at a woman just what the main trouble was in her marriage."

"What was my trouble?" Nairn asked.

The lawyer smiled knowingly and shook his head.

"You can't get me into that . . . But surely you know there is only one fundamental cause for divorce."

Elisabeth felt a prickle down her spine. Was everything going to be explained at last by this ferret-eyed old man?

"Tell us, Mr. Hershey."

"Sexual incompatibility."

"You mean——"

"If married people are truly happy in their sex relation, they never seek divorce. When they are dissatisfied in that particular, other troubles begin. All these admitted reasons for divorce that people give are a conscious or unconscious blind."

Elisabeth thought of all the life stories she had heard in Reno. After a woman told what was wrong with her

husband—bad temper, extravagance, neglect—she always said at the end . . . "Our relations never meant very much to us." . . . "It was a long time since Mark and I" . . . "You know that sort of thing never played much of a part in our lives. Edward was no lover." . . . "When the first excitement was over" . . .

"Consciously or unconsciously, my dear young ladies, sex dissatisfaction is at the bottom of every divorce. The woman who is not happy in her relations with her husband is apt for a physiological reason to develop nerves and a sharp tongue and not know why. We lawyers realize this. When a woman talks about how her husband gets on her nerves, she usually means something very different."

"What about the dissatisfied husband?"

"A man is not nearly so apt to be unhappy in the marriage relation. Obviously his demands are simpler. When he isn't satisfied, he gets a blonde."

Nairn seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. She was looking around at the walls, books, and papers with that childish peaceful expression.

"What are we going to do about it?" Elisabeth asked.

"There ought to be some sort of education in the marriage relation, so that people can learn to be happy in it as the years go on and the contact becomes commonplace. We Americans have always been too prudish and silent on that score."

Elisabeth thought of all the women she had heard arguing that foreigners make better lovers.

"They say that American women are cold, Mr. Hershey."

"Humph. Not a bit of it. They aren't cold. It's just that most American men——"

"Yes, and when an American man does have technique, he usually turns out to be a good-for-nothing," Nairn said with a sudden bitterness.

"Well, there ought to be more frankness on this subject between husband and wife. But the trouble is that both of them keep silent when they are disappointed. Or if one does speak, the other misunderstands and somebody's pride is hurt. The things that wives have told me about lying awake at night, disturbed and resentful . . ."

Elisabeth reddened. She looked down into her lap. She could have told this lawyer things about being nervous and resentful, even though she loved Richard. Men never seemed to realize, did they, that a woman did not like to be taken for granted . . . that a woman wanted nothing too sudden. Well, how can you expect a man who's been grinding at business all day . . .

"But I know both you ladies are going to be happy. You are young. You have life before you."

They walked along Virginia Street in the spun gold of the afternoon sun. After that single bitterness at the lawyer's, Nairn's gentleness had returned. They stopped

and looked in all the windows . . . the jeweler's with the dolls dressed as bride and groom . . . Gray's with the new spring gowns in the pastel shades . . . the glass door of that exclusive new gambling house on the corner. Nairn saw everything, spoke of everything, and yet Elisabeth had a strange impression that nothing mattered to Nairn . . . "Today has seemed so short, Elisabeth!"

They stopped for a chocolate mint at the soda fountain. For once the place was still, with no one working those machines. It was cool and rather dark and smelled of strawberries.

"What did you think of Mr. Hershey?" Elisabeth asked, when they had begun on the green syrup. "Funny his calling us all idealists. And what did you think of that sex stuff?"

"I think it's true."

"I don't quite believe it, Nairn. It doesn't seem as simple as all that."

"Everything is fundamentally simple."

"But—sex for people who aren't animals is largely an affair of the imagination. How can any amount of education make us control our imaginations?"

Along with her soda, Nairn had bought a box of candied fruit. They were her favorite confection. She began eating a red sugared plum, biting delicately into the glaze.

"Come to think of it, Nairn, things that happen every

day—external things—do affect the sex relation. If a husband grumbles over his dinner, naturally a wife doesn't feel too ecstatic afterward if he wants to take her in his arms."

"You can be trained to overcome that. I've read books on the subject."

"Men can talk all they like about how they want passion, but they are always a bit shocked if a wife shows it. In the back of their minds they have the idea that sort of thing belongs to the other type of woman."

"Now you've said something."

"Besides, all those books you've read, Nairn—sex is too big for a formula in any book."

"Big and ridiculous."

Nairn had finished the soda and the plum. She insisted on paying, pushing Elisabeth back, saying it was her treat. It was now four o'clock. They went upstairs and sat in Elisabeth's room. Elisabeth brought out the green scarf she was knitting. That scarf always gave her a sense of the futility of life, because she did not know anyone to give it to when it was done. It was dreadful, knitting along on something that nobody would want. Now if life were like that . . . Nairn worked on her usual needlepoint with the wreath of blue roses . . . "I'm going to finish this rose today. It always gives me such a peaceful feeling when a rose is done."

It was beautiful, sitting there together, with warm blithe airs coming in the window, stirring the leaves of a pink begonia Jack had sent before his disappointment. Elisabeth decided that companionship would be like this in the next world, if there were a next world. Everything she and Nairn said to each other seemed so clear and deep. They ate all the candied fruit. There was tenderness in the room, like the wind stirring the begonia. And yet, after a fashion, Nairn seemed in a trance. She did not shed a tear. All the afternoon she smiled. And it seemed as if her smiles were not the result of self-control but of her having reached some condition beyond either joy or sorrow.

They put up their sewing when the river outside the window was beginning to go crimson in the westering light and Nairn had finished the rose. Nairn gave a small almost imperceptible sigh as she folded up her work. She had a dinner engagement with some friends she had met through her lawyer . . . "I'm glad you're going, Nairn. It will take your mind" . . . "Don't wait up for me, child. You know we're going to the Willows afterward for roulette."

Elisabeth did not expect to see Nairn again that night, but at ten o'clock, as she was getting ready for bed, there Nairn stood in the doorway. She looked better than she had in weeks. Her eyes were brilliant. Her cheeks were

red. She was wearing a rose-and-purple dress and a black taffeta wrap drawn about her shoulders. She looked like a bird with folded black wings.

"We're on our way to the Willows now," she said. "I came upstairs to get my money. I'll need a pile. I'm going to put a dollar on every number."

"I haven't seen you look so well in weeks."

"I'll remember that. It comforts me."

"I like you with your hair——"

"By the way, will you keep my ring for me till I get back? I don't like to leave it in my drawer. I don't trust that Frenchy night maid. And my finger's so thin, I'm afraid it will fall off at the Willows . . ."

She gathered up her rose-and-purple train, looked back once from the doorway, and was gone. It was midnight when they brought her in—cold and wet and still—from the river.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE were only nine days more. They felt breathless at the thought. . . . "Nine days is a time you can take in your hand." . . . All the hours had warmth and bloom like velvet peaches in the sun. Out in the garden now, one chose a shady chair under the willows. Those delicate long green feathers were utterly still in the blue air. The fountain hissed and shimmered. There was a smell of tea roses.

On Virginia Street the sun was a stream of gold. Women were carrying parasols, wearing floppy hats. Reno Hot Springs, Bowers' Mansion, Moana Springs, all were shouting with bathers. Every noon was a glaze of heat. The nights were languid and sprinkled with starlight. Lying in her bed, Elisabeth could hear until dawn motors going by with mandolins and that high incessant laughter. She tried to keep her mind on the laughter. She could hardly bear the sound of the river. They said Nairn must have waded out to her knees . . .

Elisabeth had slept very little since the night Nairn was brought back to the hotel. She kept remembering how Nairn had looked with her wet rose-purple gown,

her streaming hair, and open unlighted eyes. Was this the Nairn she had talked to in the garden? She kept going over their last day together, wondering if she could have foreseen. Somehow she especially remembered Nairn finishing the blue rose. She could not bring herself to wear the amethyst ring. She locked it away in a drawer.

It had been difficult when Nairn's parents arrived at the air field. Elisabeth remembered what Nairn had said about families ruining marriages. The mother was a large nervous woman, high-voiced and fond. . . . "I can't imagine what made my poor daughter do it. She had all the money she wanted, and she certainly did not care for her husband. But probably he did something to hurt her. I shall lay it at Keith Shelley's door." . . . The father only rubbed his head and was silent. Elisabeth was unutterably glad when they both had gone. It would be a relief, too, when these last days were over. It was boring to lead this college-dormitory life when one was too old for it. Ah, Nairn . . .

Gretchen and Millicent had gone their ways with their own friends. These evenings Elisabeth was alone. This special Monday night she was writing letters, in her kimono, when she thought she heard a sound in Gretchen's room. She listened carefully, because she had often been deceived in sounds. But there was an unmistakable clatter. She went to the door. There on his hands and knees, searching Gretchen's closet, was a man.

"See here——" she said.

He jumped to his feet. He was crimson.

"I beg your pardon. I—this is terrible. Gosh, I'm—I was hunting for Gretchen's gin. She sent me—I——"

He was a large miserable embarrassed young man, black-eyed, husky-voiced. He stood with his hand on the door knob, ready to plunge out. Elisabeth thought with fury of her pink kimono.

"See—I have the key," he said, holding it out. "I told Gretchen something like this would happen, but she swore no one was here."

"That's quite all right. Gretchen keeps her extra supply in her bureau. I'll get it for you."

He backed away cautiously, when he had the bottle, as if he were still uncertain whether Elisabeth would telephone for the management. She had forgotten all about it in an hour, but the next morning at breakfast Gretchen said: "Burns Blake came back to the party last night as if he'd seen ghosts. He gave me the dickens for sending him after that gin. Sat in the corner all evening."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Burns Blake. He's not here for divorce. He's never been married. He owns a lot of ranches. He lives here when he's not out looking at them."

"He seemed nice—what I saw of him."

"He's not so dusty. He's the only one of the bunch who's been really decent to poor Sidney."

"Is Sidney proposing every week the same as he did?"

"He said he wanted to get me a wrist watch, but I told him I had several. I don't want him spending his money on me. I have a heart. He looks as if he'd have to borrow the railroad fare back home."

They did not linger over their breakfasts as they had when the Quartet was complete. The coffee saucers were no longer thick with cigarette ash. There were few discussions, no letter reading. They were always conscious of the door closed on that blue-and-violet room. Gretchen and Millicent usually went off early to be gone all day. This Tuesday morning, soon after breakfast, Burns Blake called Elisabeth on the telephone. . . . "If I promise not to go hunting for gin bottles, will you come for a ride? I'm sure Gretchen must have told you by this time that I'm quite safe."

Elisabeth did not feel as clever as she had when listening to Jack's voice on the telephone. She had always been conscious with Jack that it was her Reno Seducer talking. But this man was not out here for a divorce. He was one of the world of normal people, earning a living, not looking forward to a catastrophe. It seemed good to talk to a person without tragedy. God, she felt tired. It would be nice to escape . . . into almost anything.

He looked different, when she saw him. There was always the shock of the daylight in anyone's appearance. He seemed larger, more tanned. His eyes were startling

with the tan. They climbed into his open coupe and moved slowly down Virginia Street in the flashing air. The sky was the color of violets. The sun was falling gold. Elisabeth was wearing her white silk dress and that green straw hat with the wide brim that always blew back in the wind.

"Would you like to go to Lake Tahoe?" he said. "It's the best ride I know. Tahoe will be a dream on a day like this."

Elisabeth had not driven to Tahoe, although the road had been cleared of snow for a month now. Nairn and she were always planning . . . She thought of what the hotel clerk had said on her first day. . . . "Tahoe is one of the beauty spots. You'll be crazy about Tahoe."

They sped gently along in the streaming falling sunlight. The sky was all blaze and violet. Elisabeth could feel the warm gold on her face, her throat, her hands. Her white dress glistened in the light. The windshield glittered. She looked up at her companion, his flannel shirt open at the throat, his large tanned hands on the wheel. He drove the car easily and quietly, as if he were master of it. Yesterday she had not known this man was in existence . . . That was Reno.

"Isn't it a great day? Lord, this is a great day!" he said.

It was the first time she had been out riding since Nairn's death. Somehow she felt a quickening in all her

pulses. Now that she had seen death, it was suddenly good to see life, to know the sunlight and the hills, the cottonwoods following the river, the scattered ranches, the familiar immensity of the mountains. She felt a rush of all her senses toward life, clutching at light and color and sound, like Nairn on her last day, under the yellow pine, saying that color was mysterious.

"How much longer have you here?"

"Eight days."

"Gosh, can't you make it a little longer? Can't you pretend your power-of-attorney papers haven't come and stay a few days extra?"

"I know I'm going to miss this country. I think I'm just beginning to realize how beautiful it is. When I first came, it was too immense to take in."

He gave a low infectious laugh. His eyes looked amused.

"You don't know this country yet. Let me show it to you. If you had lived here as long as I have, you'd love every foot of it. I'm going to show you some of this country if it's the last thing I do."

"I want to go back East—but every time I think of going I get panicky. I keep wondering just how it will be —how my friends will seem after all this—if I will be too wretched settled down and doing business at the old stand under new management. I—I get cold chills."

"Don't you keep wondering if you will look back on

your life and think this was the place you took the wrong turn?"

"How do you know? You've never——"

"I've had important things happen in my life and that is how I've always felt."

His voice had a steadier sound than any she had heard in a long time. Voices in Reno were so apt to have that false fluttered note. It was a long time since she had spoken to anyone who was settled, happy, doing his work. He was planted in this soil, not uprooted like all the others. Elisabeth began to hum under her breath. The liquid sun . . . the running glittering sky . . . the shimmering river by the road . . . all shone and melted in her mind. The wind was always on her hat brim, pushing the green transparent straw back from her face.

"It's a marvellous combination of thin air and hot sun," he said. "Do you notice how black all the shadows are?"

"It ought to be gorgeous at Tahoe."

"The manzanita bushes will be blooming. Lord, you should smell manzanita."

It was forty more miles to Tahoe. The miles passed under the car wheels, smooth as glass. They did not speak often. They felt at ease with each other. Was it that Reno habit of sudden intimacy or was it something else? It was such a relief to find he was not wise cracking and

trying to be clever. A person would not be afraid to tell him stupid things. Now their way wound close under the confronting mountains; the road was lined with tall solemn evergreen; the horizon was a blur of pine needles. Every so often Burns took his gaze from the road and looked at Elisabeth, not just at her face but into her eyes. Elisabeth remembered how seldom in her life she had caught another person's full intimate eyes, staring behind all the little broken lights and reflections. It was disturbing. There was such a strange roving creature in back of eyes, unfamiliar and intense.

"They say, Elisabeth Wane, that a man could propose to the homeliest girl in the world in the moonlight at Tahoe."

"It's too bad Reno isn't on the shores of the lake."

"Tahoe has its Nevada side. You can go up to Tahoe and spend a night in a cabin in Washoe County. A lot of them do that after Cal-Neva opens."

"That's the roadhouse, isn't it, where the dining room is half in California and half in Nevada? I've heard a lot about that gambling room done in red velvet."

"It's run by the same people that run the Willows. It opens on June 15th, but I'm not going. Last year it was a brawl. Even the waiters were drunk. Some of the divorcees got home in evening dress the next afternoon."

Elisabeth found she was becoming more and more conscious of Burns' right hand . . . on the steering wheel

. . . shifting gears . . . It was the most capable right hand she had ever seen. She wondered why she should be so conscious of it. She had sat by a hundred other hands on steering wheels.

"People do narrow life down," she said. "Here they've got one of the most beautiful lakes in the world and all they can do there is drink and eat and gamble."

"They make love, too."

"Yes, but they narrow love down. It's an awfully limited kind of love they have around here."

He lifted his hand from the steering wheel, and then, as if he thought of something else, put it back.

"After all," he said. "Sex isn't so much in itself. It's what you bring to it . . . all the surroundings . . . the extra emotions."

"I guess—sex by itself is piffle."

There could be nothing so blue as Tahoe. It was all the blue that has ever been sung in ballads, blue as it was first poured out in Eden. It was the color that every poet imagines and cannot say, wilder, deeper, more magical than the sky. Close to the shore steeped a still indigo; farther out the sun was a delicate swimming fire on the water. The colors changed and floated, from turquoise to cobalt to sapphire to lilac, all the notes on a deep mad scale. It was a blue delirium.

"No matter how cold it gets in winter, this lake never freezes over. It lies here as blue as today surrounded with

the dazzling snow. There's a mystery about it. The water is ice-cold, too."

"I feel as if the water had color in itself, as if I could go down to the shore and fill a bottle with blue water."

The road spiralled through the trees. Now the lake lay far below, its green shores carven in the water. He told her the names of the trees: sugar pines with their high sticky foliage, the yellow-red trunks of the yellow pine, the shimmer of the quaking aspen forever turning and glittering in the wind. Across Elisabeth's startled eyes flashed blue water and red trunks and green boughs and blue again. There was a heady smell from the manzanita bushes. There were coral-colored azaleas, too, and low dwarf trees with shiny crimson fruit. People were building houses in the clearings . . . sawdust and checkered leaf shadows and stripes of blue water.

They stopped at a little grocery store and bought some cherries. They sat with the bag between them on the seat. There never were such dark rich cherries. It seemed to Elisabeth she had not often enjoyed anything so much as dipping her hand in the puckered bag for the cherries, drawing them out into the molten blue air. She was conscious, too, of Burns' hand going in and out of the bag, going in straight, coming out curled. They ate slowly, as if something would be gone when the cherries were over . . . "I won't have us eat the last one, Elisabeth Wane. I'm superstitious."

They left the car by a lonely beach on the California side, out beyond a row of quaking aspen. They walked down to the clear blue glycerine water . . . "Isn't glycerine a lovely word when you say it slowly?" . . . The beach was covered with large flat pebbles, white and dry. They sat down with their hands on their knees, looking across the lake to the snow on the mountains. Then Burns lay down and stretched out his arms with a large sigh. After a moment, Elisabeth lay down, too. The pebbles felt cold on the backs of her legs, on her arms. They crunched on the crown of her green straw hat. She could hear the water hushing on the sand. There was that aromatic scent of the manzanita bushes, a vague breath of snow. When she looked up, it seemed as if the clear radiant heaven filtered into her body.

"I don't know why I came here," he said, "except that I wanted to be alone with you and lie down somewhere and look up at the sky. I—guess I'm going rather fast with you. But I've got to grab. Please don't mind."

Seeing beauty together brought people close with such fatal ease. One's heart opened out for the beauty, tender and undefended, catching at the light and color, worshipping and susceptible.

"You care for this place as I do, don't you, Elisabeth? Not many women do. Lord, they give a little shriek and their appreciation is over."

"Not many people who live around here all the time

notice the scenery. I suppose they've gotten used to it, like a picture that has been hanging on the wall forever."

"You know—there's nothing in this lake to remind anyone of love. It ought to make me think of boating and fishing. All that timber ought to make me think of how they used to log this lake for the Virginia City mines. But when I'm by Tahoe, I can't help but think of love. Beauty always makes me feel——"

"I know. Melted. Swept away."

"Desirous. Yes, that's the word. No use hiding it."

They lay until late in the afternoon, talking and murmuring, drugged with blue. It was a different experience, talking to Burns. It was all so surprisingly effortless. There was no adjustment, no struggle, no corners to turn, nothing to be avoided, no uneasiness. Their thoughts passed back and forth as lightly and easily as the birds tilted from branch to branch in the grove of quaking aspen. But every so often Elisabeth wondered if she were glad of this man simply because she was so tired.

All the way back to the hotel, threading the evergreen, Elisabeth wondered about the unfamiliar mood in her heart that had come as they lay on the beach and spoke together. She could not name it. She was puzzled. There was no ache in it for Richard. It was light and healing and unregretful. How lovely to know a feeling that was unregretful . . . Not until the car came in sight of Reno

did Elisabeth recognize the mood for what it was. Then from pure relief she laughed.

"Now I know what I've been feeling," she said. "It's happiness. It's so long since I've had happiness that I didn't recognize it when it came back to me. I wonder why people can't be happy oftener. How refreshing it is!"

"You darling—I'll show you——"

They went many places together, those last eight glimmering days. Burns showed her the country, as he had said. Elisabeth fished in tiny lakes, explored at Pyramid, went down into silver mines with a candle. All those days and nights she kept that sense of transparent lightness and flowering green innocence. Feelings budded from places in her heart that she had thought were barren. It was strangely like watching the plum bloom, before the reasoned leaves show in the clusters. Perhaps this man was playing the Reno game. Well, she wouldn't think about it.

He took her to the Willows and all that gaudy place turned real for the evening. The gold was real; the pink lamps in the niches were real; the people were real. Even the women with straggly hair, the sniggering men, the playful Judge doing fancy steps with that woman in a red headband, even those could not harm Elisabeth's mood. Her sorrow over Richard was turned for the moment into something quiet and tenderly sad and sweet

to remember. For the moment it seemed—justified. All the world was justified; she almost understood why everything happened . . . "As long as Reno seems fake, you're all right. But when it turns real, watch out for yourself." . . . Who had said that? Oh, well . . .

That night at the Willows, they knew there were only three days left. They sat in their little circle of brightness, while all around them gathered the mists of parting, blowing in from the future. And yet their eyes were only on the circle of light that grew smaller, moment by moment. It was all the more brilliant for the shadow . . . "In this hour we have everything, Elisabeth." . . . "I feel so grateful. Whom shall I be grateful to? Is it slavish of me?" . . . "Let your heart relax."

Those final days at the hotel were filled with errands and bills. Gretchen, Millicent, and Elisabeth were all getting divorces on the same day. (Millicent's lawyer had hurried hers up by some rather shady process.) They were gabbling and restless, could not sit down for a moment. Their money was running low. Gretchen wired her family for money and received a heated night letter complaining of her extravagance. Her temper was very bad until she took to going around mildly stewed. As for Millicent—anything was apt to make her cry. She threatened to marry Jimmy as soon as she got her decree. Gretchen and Elisabeth kept telling her that he was no person to marry, but she refused to listen. Elisabeth

felt too tired really to worry about Millicent. It was not pleasant in the suite. There was always Nairn's closed door.

On the first of June, Old Man McLean got his divorce and married Ruthie that same evening. She wore blue and carried a bouquet of white roses. On the second of June there was a dance in the hotel dining room and Elisabeth saw Dick and Delia. They circled about the floor as they had at the Golf Club, desirous and expressionless. On the third of June Elisabeth took back her car to the place where it was rented, returned the unread books to the library, said good-bye to the dentist. She had almost forgotten him. She remembered how important he had seemed that first week, bending over her with his moon eyes. He left his patient in the chair and came to the office door.

"I won't forget Reno, Doctor."

"You think you won't, but you will. In six weeks more, Reno will be like a dream."

"I hope not. It's so pitiful to forget. It's a kind of death."

"Think of me sometimes, Mrs. Wane. Out at the Willows, wasting my substance."

"You're too clever a man to go there so often."

"I know my friends are wasting my time. If I could learn to keep away from them, I would amount to something in my profession. I realize that."

"Well, as long as you have no regrets——"

"I don't regret what you would think I'd regret. There's just two or three little things that make my hell on earth."

Between the errands and the packing, the nerves and apprehension, Gretchen's slightly addled movements, Millicent's threats about Jimmy, memories of Nairn, twinges over Richard, there came these times with Burns. There was the afternoon, two days from the end, when they drove through the Carson Valley on one of those winding back roads. Every moment of the ride, Elisabeth knew she would remember it forever. Consciously she stored it away for the lean times back in the real world. It was piercing and strange, riding along, storing away. The ground fluttered with white desert lilies. Poppies ran like flame over yards and gardens, through slender walls of pale sweetpeas. Lattices, gates, and fences were heaped with yellow roses. Elisabeth wanted to live in that gray rock cottage with the yellow roses.

Everywhere they drove, yellow roses under the blue sky. They passed high rich upland valleys with cattle grazing, flocks of sheep, sounds of bleating and bells and the sheep dog barking. The locust trees were in bloom and over the narrow road drooped their long white blossoms. Burns reached out and broke one off and Elisabeth held it in her hand. It felt like paper and it smelled like pressed leaves in a book. Elisabeth wondered if this

road were really beautiful or if it only seemed beautiful in the glow of her mind.

In the last two days, Elisabeth was careful to pay her bills before the tradesmen became alarmed. They always watched a divorcee's time and kept close track toward the end. A noticeable percentage of divorcees tried to skip out without paying. They took automobiles to Sparks or Truckee and boarded the eastbound train from there, so they would not be caught on the Reno station platform. There were all kinds of stories about women who had to stay on because they did not have the fare home.

"Gretchen—I'm panicky. I feel as if I were going back to earth after a trip to Mars. How will it be?"

"We'll have to choke back our life stories."

"I've lost all my reticence——"

"As long as all you lose is your reticence——"

Elisabeth felt that she could not return to the world without new clothes. She wanted to seem very smart, so her New York friends would not think divorce had broken her spirit. She must look especially well the next time she saw Richard. On that last Saturday she bought an entire new outfit for the next time she met Richard.

"Yes ma'am," the shoe clerk said. "They all buy clothes just before they go home. It's a fever that gets hold of them. We store clerks all notice it."

Those last two nights, no one slept. Even Gretchen complained of cold hands and feet. Millicent kept taking

headache tablets. Elisabeth felt such a lump in her throat that she could hardly swallow. While they ate and drank and went on their errands, each was secretly wondering whether divorce were really the right thing for their lives. It was a much more important step than marriage. Marriage was a step into shelter, but divorce was a step into the open. That thought gnawed . . . But of course they said aloud they were terribly happy and glad it was almost over. The newcomers said: "You lucky women!"

Elisabeth went for a rehearsal in her lawyer's office, so she would be sure to answer the Judge's questions correctly. As she sat in the large bright room with the Elk's head and the diploma, she thought of the first time she was there and he had showed her the picture of his child and said he would take her fishing. Nothing in the room had altered. The great branch, shaped like a scythe, still creaked against the window pane. There was the same view of chimney pots and hills. Mr. Winter would go on through the years, changing people's lives, but himself not changing. He would continue to smoke his pipe with that kissing motion of his lips, and the same smart words would fall from his mouth, angular and nasal. Elisabeth was not disturbed, as she had been on that first visit, by Mr. Winter's casual references to mental cruelty. By now she had heard so many of those things.

She spent Sunday—the day before her divorce—in and out of tears. Yes, she wanted the divorce more than she

had ever wanted it. She was a while away from Richard, and out here in the West eastern concerns had a way of growing smaller. Jack and Burns had showed her there were other men in the world . . . But tears seemed to well unasked from the hidden places in her heart. She could not tell when they were coming. Suddenly they flowed bitterly down her cheeks. . . . "Richard!" . . . "My darling, it was all a mistake!" . . . There was no one in the world to turn to. Nairn was dead. Millicent spent this day with Jimmy, no one knew where. Gretchen came back to the hotel toward evening so drunk that she was worried about her eyes. . . . "This Nevada gin."

At six o'clock that Sunday night Elisabeth's telephone rang. She expected it was Burns but the operator said: "New York calling." Elisabeth stood beside the telephone table, the transmitter pressed against her cheek. Old-timers in Reno said that husbands were apt to do queer things the last minute. Some of them in pity and fear went so far as to undo the work of the six weeks, and then were sorry afterward. Nine out of ten last-minute reconciliations were not permanent.

"Hello—Elisabeth—are you all right?"

Somehow Elisabeth felt she had the upper hand, as she had not in their last long-distance conversation. She was conscious that she had seen more, known more, felt more than Richard. She answered in a steady voice.

"I'm all right. It's lovely weather here."

"It's not here. I'm melting in this telephone booth."

"Are you all right?"

"Elisabeth—I just called up to say I hope you aren't bitter towards me. I don't want you to be bitter towards me."

She was losing the upper hand, as she heard him. She struggled to keep it, but the sound of his words brought back the old habit. Thank God, she did not cry. Her voice was faint and acid.

"Who cares? What does it matter?"

"Why—what do you mean——"

"It's just a saying out here."

"I'm having the apartment put in order so you'll find everything all right when you get back. I don't imagine you'll want to live out in Connecticut——"

"Thank you for nothing. And I don't hope you'll be happy when you get married tomorrow."

"Elisabeth—you don't sound like yourself——"

"What does anything matter?"

As soon as she put down the receiver, Elisabeth wanted to pick it up again and shout across the Continent . . . "Richard . . . don't leave me . . . I love you." . . . "Richard . . . I can't bear it alone." . . . "You can't know what it's like." . . . She wanted to talk for the last time about their early days together, the last time speaking together as husband and wife. She wanted to remind him of this and that, of the day they went walking down

by the shore. But it was too late. The connection was broken. Perhaps it was just as well. It would have seemed gushing to Richard. It took two people to make conversation about memories seem fine.

Around seven o'clock they were all dressing for dinner in the suite. Millicent was in a tearing hurry, clattering her comb and brush on the glass bureau top, stumbling over her clothes. Her eyes were very red. Gretchen was sitting in a chair, trying to dress. . . . "I'm so pie-eyed I can't see my stockings." . . . Somehow everything in the suite looked dark and untidy. Elisabeth reported her conversation with Richard.

"Why—the big brute," Gretchen said. "He wants to kick you out and then have the satisfaction of thinking you aren't bitter towards him. If that isn't just like a man!"

"Maybe he just felt tender. I like to think——"

"My husband called me this morning," Millicent said, powdering her throat. "He wanted me to go back to him. Said he'd learned that mental life wasn't everything."

"Well, for the love of frogs, you didn't want to go back, did you? If Mack called me, I'd wring his neck."

"No. . . . When I first came out here, I had to hold on to myself so I wouldn't take the Overland back to him. But now I've caught the Reno school spirit. I feel that I can't leave without graduating."

"That's Jimmy's doing," Gretchen said. "Boy, how he has reconciled you to Reno."

"Admitted," Millicent said, reaching for the rouge.

"But Gretchen—couldn't it be something more than Jimmy?" Elisabeth said. "All our changes aren't due to men——"

Gretchen was just stewed enough to resent an argument. She tried to throw a stocking at Elisabeth . . . was astonished that it would not go very far . . . threw the other stocking.

"Huh—Burns has been your medicine. You can call it any fancy name you like, but it's the old urge——"

"Suppose it's love?"

"Pah" . . . Gretchen was swaying to and fro in her green satin step-in. The gin was hurting her eyes . . . "This love bunk. . . . I haven't been able to love anybody in years. . . . Can't seem to make the grade. . . . Don't tell anybody."

Elisabeth ate only toast and tea for dinner. She had no appetite. She said good-bye to the French night maid, with the curled black bangs and gold earrings, who had found happiness as a blind hen finds a grain of corn. At eight her lawyer telephoned and asked if she were all right. . . . "Everything's going to be O.K., Mrs. Wane. You bet." . . . "Did you get my check for five hundred? Why do you lawyers usually charge five hundred?" . . . "I've salted it away in the old sock. I called

you up to warn you not to get drunk the way so many do the night before. You can't face the Judge with a hang-over. I'll be seeing you."

Burns came. This was their last night together. Tomorrow night would be spent in saying good-bye to Gretchen and Millicent who were taking the evening train. Besides, she remembered the promise to spend the last night with Nairn. Perhaps it was because Reno exaggerated all emotions, but she felt she was going to keep that promise. After the others left on the train, she would go to her room alone.

For the last time Elisabeth pulled on her white wool coat and the white wool beret. For the last time she climbed into the car outside the hotel awning and they passed from under the shadow of the town into the open desert. The moon was complete. It rose over the eastern mountains with the piercing lidless gaze of a lover. It was inexorably clear, like a law of Nature. . . . "You funny humans. Why are you trying to get away from the law?" . . . It drenched the cottonwood boughs, tipped the poplar spears with frost, gave a ghost bloom to the pines, streamed over the desert in a flood. The wan mountains and dark valleys were folded together in soundless space and silver light.

Her head was against his sleeve. For the last time she felt that lightness and content and innocent separation from the world. Every so often he bent his head and her

face touched his firm tanned face. They spoke in small voices about the moon, the intaglio of fir trees in the glow, the thick clustering stars. One star kept following. He turned the car toward Mount Rose. Until the past few days the road over Mount Rose had been shut with snow.

They began to climb. Moment by moment, the valley dropped below. Their ears were filled with the powerful whine of the motor. The world swam in a pale uncanny mist. Southward lay the tiny glittering wreath of light that marked a town. Then the road turned sharply upward and the valley was lost in towering crags and thick black trees that hid the moon. Snow lay by the road. The air was cold. But somehow one did not shiver.

When it seemed they could not climb further, they came out into a clearing. It was the top of the mountain. Overhead were the moon and stars, pouring in a monstrous flood. All the world was moonlight and mist and the infrequent shape of trees. The air was thin and smelled of snow. One's heart beat fast . . . cheeks heated.

Burns stopped the car. The quiet was so intense that it sang. He turned off the car lamps. Then Elisabeth felt she had never before seen moonlight. The ground swept away, pale as anemone. Bleached tree trunks . . . silver stones . . . pallid moss. The sugar pines had changed to white hyacinths. And through it all was the breath of the snow, like a white scented wreath on a dark door.

Burns spread a blanket on the white ground. Then he disappeared for a moment and came back with a little bundle of wood. He brushed away the snow and made a fire. It flickered and sparkled, shedding its ruddy circle. They sat hand in hand, as they had at the Willows, in their own little circle of brightness, with the mists of parting blowing in from the future. Before them was the blaze of the fire, then the wreaths of moonlight, ghost-pale as memory, then the darkness.

"Always remember me, Elisabeth, when you wear this coat. Make me sure of that."

"I'll remember, no matter what happens. And you remember when you ride this road."

"I'll never ride this road unless you come with me."

It sounded so beautiful, there by the fire. Elisabeth had a vision of the snow, waiting for them to come back. Places had such a faculty for waiting, such a patience.

"It's nice to keep things separate, Burns. Everything runs together so. If we could keep even a coat or a road —separate."

"Let me ask you again. Will you be my wife, Elisabeth?"

The breath of the fire was a thin wavering haze above the flame. The moonlight, the snow, the trees, all flickered, changed, and glimmered.

"I can't tell you, Burns. I don't know whether I love you. Nothing's steady in my mind. When Richard tele-

phoned, all those old feelings—I just know that when I'm with you I'm—happy."

"I shouldn't ask you here. It isn't fair. No woman is quite sane when she's in Reno. It's a kind of fever. I ought to have remembered that. But I want you so——"

"I've been in such a muddle of false things and second-rate things that I can't tell what's true when I see it. I feel sort of loose and rotten. And then my life with Richard was untrue for so long—it's damaged me."

"You're stern with yourself, aren't you?"

The wood that Burns had gathered was changing to a feathery ash that the wind blew out of the firelight into the darkness. He put fresh sticks on the flame.

"I've been wondering if my feeling for you, Burns, isn't just—Reno. When I first came out here, I was awfully bitter and solemn about these love affairs that go on. But now I can see how they all happen. One gets so lonely and caught up and confused—I keep thinking of Sam and Marjorie——"

"You must get back East again and be away for a while. Then you can tell."

"It isn't fair to have the scenery so beautiful. You and the mountains and the yellow roses and the moonlight are all tangled together in my mind."

"But I'd love you if everything in this place were ugly."

Elisabeth sighed and stared at the wavering haze above

the fire. She was feeling very tender and humble. The impending dissolution of her past, the high gray wall of the future, Nairn's death, Burns' love. . . . She was humble before all these things. She wished she knew better what sort of a person Burns was. She could name his qualities, but they did not collect into a steady picture in her distracted mind. He was just a nice vague chap who loved her very much. Love obliterates for a while a man's identifying marks.

"I used to think I was a fine person. I remember, coming out on the train, I thought that of course some women were cheap but I wasn't. But now I've come to know how close I am to—to cheap women. There's not so much difference between them and me. Perhaps the cheap things they have done seemed beautiful to them at the time. There's the catch. Things seem so beautiful at the time——"

Burns gave a low laugh and gathered her close in his arms. Again she felt his cheek against hers, smelled the wood smoke in his coat.

"You're so lovely. It's funny to hear you talk about not being fine. Lord, I'll miss you."

"I'll write."

Burns sighed. He held her hands tight between his own.

"A woman goes back East and the first letter comes so quickly. All the letters for the first month are very

frequent. Then they grow less and less frequent, until finally the last letter comes saying: 'I'm going to be married.' So many men have sat back here in the West and waited for that last letter."

"I won't forget."

But even as Elisabeth spoke she wondered if the yearning in her heart were not so much for the loss of Burns as for the mood that can never be recaptured, the word that can never again be said. It was regret for the moon, the snow, the fire . . . but was it for the man?

"At least, Elisabeth, you've kept yourself free of saying 'who cares and what does it matter.' Reno never got you to say that."

Elisabeth looked up at Burns' face, half in pale light, half in shadow. If she only knew . . . but she remembered what Gretchen had said about the old urge and Burns being her medicine.

"I don't believe it is only Reno that says 'who cares and what does it matter.' It's being said everywhere these days, and it's so dangerous. It undermines one so."

"I—doesn't it seem silly to be talking this way in the moonlight?"

"Burns—give me time——"

All the while they were speaking there had been a pounding underneath their talk. They had both been hearing it, and their breath came short. Now they kissed until it seemed they would die kissing in that heart-

breaking moonlight. The stars spattered in their faces. With hunger and thirst, they held each other close. Somehow they wanted so much more than they could ever have in this world. The fire smoldered into darkness. There was no light but that pale sheen on the ground. They trembled and spoke in whispers. The night grew later; there was a colder breath from the snow; an owl cried; the ashes of the fire blew away into the darkness; a rabbit pattered over the clearing and was gone.

It was after midnight when they left the mountain, longing and shaken. The moon had changed color and hung low in the sky like a great yellow melon ready to fall. Down, down they went in a swoon of gold mist and darkness until finally they came out again on the familiar high road. They did not speak often, held in the deep trance of their bliss and sorrow.

The stream of cars had stopped flowing toward Reno. At last the Hot Springs had closed for the night. Even the air field was dark. Half way to Reno the moon set, and the desert went black, and the stars sharpened. When they reached the town, only a few lights showed in the house windows. The streets were empty and silent. Bedroom windows were open with curtains blowing in the wind. It was rather frightening to ride through a town so late. There was something ghostly . . . One imagined all the people lying in their beds, freed from their souls in sleep.

CHAPTER XV

ELISABETH fell asleep late, dreamed badly, and awoke early. As on her first day in Reno, thin sunlight was blowing in the room and pale yellow leaves shimmered over the ceiling. She felt a little as she did when a child, waking up on Christmas morning. Something special and unknown was going to happen. She felt the same way, she remembered, on her wedding morning. Even the memory of last night was wan in anticipation of today's event.

Gretchen rushed in, naked, with a turkish towel, to ask if Elisabeth were going to have a shampoo and manicure. Most of the women did before they went to Court. Elisabeth's divorce was set for ten . . . Gretchen's for ten-thirty . . . Millicent's for two o'clock in the afternoon. Millicent had been crying all night. She had suddenly decided not to marry Jimmy.

Before breakfast and after was a succession of knocks on the door and telephones ringing. Elisabeth got a night letter from her mother. Gretchen was called on long distance by George and her Aunt Cornelia. . . . "The way Aunt Corny acted you'd think I was going to have an

operation." . . . Millicent was called and threatened by a jewelry store to whom she still owed fifty dollars. She had been planning to pay that afternoon.

There was complicated discussion as to what they would all wear, the preference being for something simple and slightly widowed, black with white touches. They all expected to wear flowers. Any divorcee would be embarrassed to go to Court without flowers. It would show that nobody cared. Millicent had gardenias from Jimmy. Gretchen was going to have three bouquets from different admirers. And at nine o'clock a box of orchids came from her husband. "The poor fish," Gretchen said, and pinned them to her dress.

Most of the women took friends along to Court, but Elisabeth preferred to be alone. It seemed a private affair between Richard and herself. She started for the Courthouse at a quarter to ten, wearing her black silk and Burns' sweet peas and black gloves and a wide soft black hat like a pansy. She felt weak and cold. She could not help thinking of that day she drove to the church as Richard's bride, all drooping lace and thick orange blossoms and a ruffled tulle train. She remembered bending down to get out of the motor at church, holding out first her heavy fragrant bouquet of lilies. The smell of lilies, the wet pistils, the yellow pollen staining the white. . . . Oh, well, she climbed the Courthouse steps.

Inside the heavy Courthouse door she met her lawyer

and the hotel clerk who was going to be her residence witness. That meant he would swear he had seen her at least once in twenty-four hours for at least six weeks. Hotel clerks and landladies were always in demand as witnesses.

"Well, you got a fine day for it," the lawyer said.

"Do we go upstairs now?"

"You bet."

The case was to be heard in the Judge's chambers, not in open Court. Elisabeth did not have the Judge she had seen at the Willows. She had chosen the other, so she could have more respect for what happened. When they went in, the Judge was already seated at his desk. He did not wear a gown. He shook hands. . . . "Isn't it a beautiful day, Mrs. Wane?" . . . There were two women present, part of the Court régime. A man came in and Elisabeth could tell by the name it was the attorney who was representing Richard. Even though she knew Richard would not contest, that attorney made her nervous.

At just ten o'clock, one of the women rose. Elisabeth remembered, from her rehearsal with Mr. Winter, that she must rise, too. The woman spoke in a high sweet sing-song voice.

"Do you swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

Elisabeth held up her right hand. She felt the way she

did when she held up her hand at school. She thought how peculiar it was for the divorcees to hear "So help you God" when most of them did not think there was a God. So help you God—why, they did not expect help. She sat down. The residence witness gave his testimony. Then her lawyer began asking the rehearsed questions—her name, date of her birth, if she had any children.

"No issue of the marriage," the Judge said.

No issue. . . . As she answered the questions, trying to keep her voice low and steady, she watched an aspen outside the window, the tiny glinting golden leaves moving in light and shadow. She saw the brown holland window shade, slightly askew, the bookshelves reaching to the ceiling, the map of the United States. She thought of Richard, walking down the street in New York. She wondered if he knew this was the exact hour when the dream was legally over. She was glad that she did not feel like crying. No issue . . . those words covered so much longing.

"Why did you come to Reno, Mrs. Wane?"

"Because I like the West."

"Did you intend to make it your permanent residence?"

"Yes."

"Do you still hold to that intention?"

Elisabeth was carefully prepared for these residence questions. They were most important, more important than the charges against Richard. She had heard horrible

stories about women who did not answer correctly and said they were going to leave Reno tomorrow. She squeezed her handbag where the railroad tickets were.

"I intend to stay in Reno," she said.

Richard's lawyer said there was no contest. The Judge stirred in his chair.

"Judgment for the plaintiff," he said.

In the sudden choke and pounding of her heart, Elisabeth could not hear the words that directly followed, but she caught the end . . . "restore to you the rights of a single person." She straightened and smiled. Those words were a challenge. For a moment she had a quickening sense of the world being crammed with other satisfactions.

The Judge congratulated her and said he hoped she would be happy. The lawyer kissed her, as the custom was. They walked out of the door, down the broad shallow Courthouse steps into the sunshine.

"Aren't you going to kiss the Courthouse pillar?"

"I'm not so glad as that."

"Well, I must be off. It wasn't bad, was it? Come over to my office this afternoon and get a copy of the decree. I'll get you one with a pink ribbon. You did very nicely, just the right shade of depression."

Virginia Street was quite unstirred by the end of Elisabeth's dream. There were the usual pleasure parties,

setting off for Tahoe and Pyramid, as if nothing had happened. It had been more brief than a visit to the dentist's, or getting a stamp at the postoffice. Elisabeth did not feel as stirred, even in her own heart, as she had expected. She felt cool and dead. On the way back to the hotel she turned, as usual, to see what was in the shop windows.

Elisabeth had expected to find the suite empty, but there was Millicent trimming over the hat she intended to wear on the train, holding ribbon in her small bony hands, her dimples deep, her eyes earnest.

"My mouth is full of pins, but come here and let me kiss you. How was it?"

"Not nearly as much trouble as an automobile license."

"You look exhausted."

Elisabeth sat down on a chair and began pulling off her black gloves. She did feel . . . drained.

"The Judge talked about the rights of a single person. But I don't feel the least bit unmarried. I still feel as if Richard were my husband, perhaps more than ever. I suppose it will come home to me after a while."

"You'll probably feel tied to Richard until you get another husband. We women are so funny. How do you think this ribbon looks under the brim? Do you like it crushed or is it better smooth?"

"I can't understand women who get married five

minutes after they've been divorced, using the same Judge and all. I—one doesn't feel in the mood. I haven't any spirit to love anyone today. I'm empty."

"I feel more solemn than I thought I would. I'm glad I decided to think Jimmy over back in St. Louis."

"Do you imagine you'll marry him?"

Millicent reddened as if the question were unpleasant.

"How can I tell? The only thing is—Jimmy's really not the marrying kind. I—what does it matter? I've had a good time."

At eleven o'clock Gretchen came in and threw herself down on Millicent's bed with a howl. She tore off all four of her bouquets and threw them toward the bureau. She kicked the footboard.

"I'm the unluckiest female that was ever begotten. I'm going straight over to Molloy's and guzzle."

"What's up? Was there trouble over your alimony?"

"Nix. That went off all right. But I just discovered this morning that Sidney has twice as much money as George. And here I've been treating him like the dirt under my feet. He always dressed so terribly and with that mouth——"

Millicent giggled and Gretchen threw a pillow. Elisabeth swallowed a laugh.

"How'd you find out?"

"I rounded up the bunch who were sober enough to go to my case. There were about ten in the party. Sidney

got in conversation with the Judge and they found they had mutual friends and it came out who Sidney was. He owns theatres all over the country. What a man——"

"Would you have thrown over George if you had found out before?"

"N-no. I'm fond of George in my own queer way. I wouldn't wear this sappy bangle if I weren't. But I'd have made Sidney take me places and give me things. I'd have had a swell elegant wrist watch. Here I've been careful not to eat too much at the Willows for fear of cleaning him out. Well, all I can say is—George has got to watch his step. I'll hold Sidney over his head. We're going to write once a week."

"Now both of you please tell me if you like these ribbons under the brim. Does it look too coy for anyone going back to St. Louis with a decree?"

"Say, did you know that Edgar Ray and Irene Lang went off for a week-end on a dude ranch? Now it's all over. They hate each other."

That afternoon Elisabeth felt she would never be done packing. She had not realized that anyone could pick up so many possessions in six weeks. Those little trips to the Oriental Shoppe and the Indian Trading Post were filling up her trunk. She had to drop everything and go buy another bag. She threw away as many clothes as she dared. She wished she need never see again the clothes she had worn here. She would like to start the future

with new clothes, even if she could not have a new heart.

Millicent came in at three with her divorce granted. She said she had cried all the way through and Jimmy had gotten huffy. She had also kissed the Courthouse pillar. Now she was off with Jimmy to be gone until the 9.20 train. Later in the afternoon Gretchen left for a gin party and wedding that would last until that same train. She had crammed all her clothes as best she could into four trunks and six suitcases. She had given the white fox and gold to the maid, the day maid that was always saying: "You'll be with us at the best time of the year."

The sun sank over the Truckee River. For the last time from her window Elisabeth watched the light on the crumpled deerskin hills. Once again the sky turned violet. Once again the cars turned on their headlights and flowed down Virginia Street. Likely some divorcee who got here this morning was standing at her window, wondering how the time was going to pass. Well, it was like leaving the old school.

She put on the amethyst ring and went down to dinner. Alone in a corner of the dining room, with the phonograph playing and the river of voices, Elisabeth wondered that she had not wanted to see Burns today. No, she did not want to see a man. This was Richard's day, not a time to have anything to do with love. Her heart felt drained. It was a day of destroying. Let the destroying keep itself separate.

She had felt, ever since the divorce, like a person come back to the house after the funeral. There was that same sense of emptiness, of something gone and buried. There was that same flatness and false brightness in the air. There was the smell of flowers that have gone to the grave. Everything was familiar and yet unfamiliar.

Richard had said he would be married on the day she got her decree. He was probably married now. She wondered if he would behave with the other woman just as he had behaved with her. Or was there always a difference? That was another reason she had not wanted to see Burns. This was not a night for a man. It was better to sit here alone and keep her tryst with Nairn.

The little yellow lamps in the brackets around the dining-room wall burned without winking. The window squares were deep blue. There was a red carnation in her vase on the table, the sleek head waiter's idea of elegance. She did not know why, but the lurid carnation gave her that feeling of new life beginning which quickened in her veins under all the sorrow. Perhaps after she climbed over the high gray wall that stared her in the face, she would see spread out before her a new country, flowers, fruits, and birds. If one were brave, one felt the adventure. If only adventure did not lead out through visions into emptiness.

The platform was crowded for the 9.20 train. Everyone who was going had her little group of friends, was

wearing wilted flowers. There was a lot of shrieking and kissing. Long before train time Millicent was on the platform with Jimmy. . . . "Good-bye, Elisabeth. It's been wonderful knowing you. I'll write you from St. Louis. We'll keep in touch." . . . Elisabeth thought how this girl would be received back into the correct bosom of her St. Louis family and no one would know the wild and joyous Millicent in the yellow dress that had gone with Jimmy to the place by the waterfall. Millicent had an air of St. Louis about her already. Perhaps it was her new clothes and her fawn gloves. There was something in the way she spoke to Jimmy that marked her as an alien, after all. There was an aura of the future.

It looked as if Gretchen would miss the train, but she came at the last minute, more pie-eyed than she had ever been. . . . "G'bye, girls . . . You've been swell . . . Any time you come to Chicago . . . George has got to watch his step . . . Say, you should have been at the wedding. The pianist was so drunk she could hardly play the wedding march and the bride had to lean on the groom to keep from falling over . . . G'bye girls. You've been swell . . . G'bye Sidney, you old sweetness . . . Porter, for the love of frogs, show me my berth. My legs won't stand up any longer . . ."

Gretchen was gone; Millicent was gone. Those pages were turned. Elisabeth had no illusions about seeing them again. Likely they would forget to write. She walked

home slowly from the station, passing under the sign: RENO THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD. New divorcees were coming home from the first show at the Majestic. The stools in the soda fountains were all filled. The gambling machines were whirring. There was that familiar sound of laughter and the croupiers' voices. Well, she must go to bed now if she was going to catch the 6.45 Overland in the morning.

She could not sleep. The first moments of a future were too difficult, trying to find a handhold in the wall. At five she was up, yawning, feeling cold, dressing. At quarter to six, Burns came. When Elisabeth saw him she felt a rush of . . . Oh, God, why wasn't she sure of anything any more? When she lost Richard's love, she had seemed to lose the touchstone.

"Burns—maybe I love you. I'll try not to make it too long before I'm sure——"

"You won't be like the other women who go East and forget?"

"I'm a lot like other women."

The hotel looked very quiet, when they drove away in the cab. All the shades were drawn, the windows dark. Even Virginia Street was deserted and unnatural. The river was very loud. Elisabeth felt a real pang as the cab crossed the bridge. After all, there had been moments . . . Even the Grand Restaurant was quiet and the lights seemed to leer down from the ceiling. It was too early

for Sam to be at his desk. Elisabeth had to eat breakfast here because the hotel dining room was closed at this time in the morning.

They did not say very much at breakfast, nor when they walked up and down the station platform, waiting for the train. There was never much to say, waiting for a train. One's mind always felt so wizened. The air was chill, but it was going to be another beautiful day. The sun had risen over the eastern hills and washed the cottonwood tops with gold.

The train steamed into the station. The future had arrived. Elisabeth squeezed Burns' hand. Why, there was that same conductor. Would he think she had changed? Had she changed? She had a bottle of gin, a gift from Gretchen, in her suitcase. . . . "Good-bye. I'll write. I'll remember." . . . "We won't forget each other." . . . "Burns, I'll remember."

She went to her seat and peered out of the window. Burns was still standing on the platform. She tapped on the glass. Burns stood mute, his hands in his pockets, that craving look in his eyes. And as she looked, it seemed as if his face faded, and all the New York faces came into the foreground, faces from another life. Did Burns look a little queer? She tapped again on the glass. She felt stricken and afraid. How was it going to be with all those other people?

One never screamed or cried out as one wanted. The

train moved away. Burns slid to the side and vanished. Streets . . . lawns . . . trees . . . white houses . . . The train was gaining speed. Elisabeth pressed her face against the window glass and saw for the last time immaculate Mount Rose, holding the secret, unpossessed by the swarming transient humanity around it. The desert was wide and empty. Bushes tossed by the track. Looking back over the hard desert to the mountains, it was pitifully easy to see that infinity was not disturbed. It was easy to believe that nothing mattered and nobody cared.

"But I'll act as though somebody cared," Elisabeth whispered.