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December 20, 2005

J. Mike Lennon
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Mike,

Hope you had a good trip back. We're trying to forge ahead without you. Hired the other two positions, so we should really start moving along soon.

Along with the rest of your copies are the Rinehart *Deer Park* galleys and a few letters we found in *The Deer Park* manuscript files.

We'll be talking to you soon.

Stephen

BOOKS BY NORMAN MAILER • THE DEER PARK •

BARBARY SHORE • THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

THE DEER PARK NORMAN MAILER



RINEHART & CO., INC. *new york* TORONTO

THE DEER PARK



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2

To Adele my wife and to Daniel Wolf my friend

THE DEER PARK

. . . the Deer Park, that gorge of innocence and virtue in which were engulfed so many victims who when they eventually returned to society brought with them depravity, debauchery and all the vices they naturally acquired from the infamous officials of such a place.

Apart from the evil which this dreadful place did to the morals of the people, it is horrible to calculate the immense sums of money it cost the state. Indeed who can reckon the expense of that band of pimps and madames who were constantly searching all the corners of the kingdom to discover the objects of their investigation; the costs of conveying the girls to their destination; of polishing them, dressing them, perfuming them, and furnishing them with all the means of seduction that art could provide. To this must be added the gratuities presented to those who were not successful in arousing the jaded passions of the sultan but had nonetheless to be paid for their submission, for their discretion, and still more for their being eventually despised.

Vie privée de Louis XV, ou principaux événements, particularités et anecdotes de son règne.

—MOUFFLE D'ANGERVILLE

THE DEER PARK

4

PART 1 | CHAPTER ONE

In the cactus wastes of Southern California, a distance of two hundred miles from the capital of cinema, is the town of Desert D'Or. There I went from the Air Force to look for a good time.

Whether or not it is enough of an explanation, I can only say that I arrived at the resort with fourteen thousand dollars, a particular sum I picked up in a poker game while waiting with other fliers in Tokyo for our plane home. The irony is that I was never a gambler, I did not even like the game, and perhaps for such a reason I accepted the luck of my cards. Let me leave it at that. I came out of the Air Force with no place to go, no family to visit, and I wandered down to Desert D'Or.

Built since the Second World War, it is the only place I know which is altogether new. Desert D'Or, one is told, was called originally Desert Door by the prospectors who assembled their shanties at the edge of its oasis, and from there went into the mountains overhanging the desert to look for gold. There is nothing left, however, of such men; when the site of Desert D'Or was chosen, not enough of the abandoned shacks remained to create even one of those many California museums the size of a two-car garage.

No, everything is of the present, and in the months I stayed at the resort, I came to know its developed and cultivated real estate in a way given us to know few places. I can still see the straight paved roads and the curved roads, each laid out by the

cross hair of the surveyor's transit. The hotels with their pastel colors are visible again in the subtle camouflage which dominated all style in Desert D'Or. It was a place built out of no other need than commercial profit and therefore no sign of commerce was allowed to appear. Desert D'Or was without a main street, and its shops, where nothing but a variety of luxuries could be bought, looked like anything but stores. In those buildings which sold clothing, no clothing was displayed, and one waited in a modern living room while salesmen opened panels in the wall to exhibit summer slacks, or displayed between their hands the lush blooms of a tropical scarf. There was a jewelry store built like a cabin cruiser; on the street one peered through no more than a porthole to see a necklace hung upon the silver antlers of a piece of driftwood transported across the desert from Pacific waters. None of the hotels I remember so well—not the Yacht Club, nor the Debonair, not the Yucca Plaza, the Sandpiper, the Creedmor, nor the Desert D'Or Arms—could even be seen from outside. Concealed behind cementbrick fences or wooden palings painted in the prevalent palette of Desert D'Or, one rarely saw a building which was not green, yellow, rose, orange, or pink, and the approach on a twisting sandy road was obscured by a shrubbery of bright flowers. As an instance, one passed through the gate to the Yacht Club, the most important hotel in the resort, and followed its private road, expecting a mansion at the end, but came to no more than a car-port, a swimming pool in the shape of a free-form coffee table with curved-wall cabanas and canasta tables, and a set of lawn-tennis courts, unique through all that region of Southern California. From there, along yellow sidewalks which crossed and crossed again a meandering artificial creek by way of trellised footbridges, illumined at night with paper lanterns suspended from the tropical trees, one passed the guest bungalows dispersed through the grounds, their anonymous pastel-colored doors serving to emphasize the intimacy of the arrangement.

It was at the Yacht Club I stayed until I found the house I was to rent for the rest of my visit to Desert D'Or. I could describe that house in detail, but it would not be worth the effort for it was like nearly all the houses in the resort; it was modern, of one story,

compare 2-3

compare 3

6

with light furniture and rugs whose texture was close to shaggy poodle wool, and it had a garden and a wall which circumscribed the garden, thus repeating the fault of Desert D'Or architecture; on that tableland of brilliant sunlight, the walls were made of glass so that one could possess a view of mesa-colored sand and violet mountains; yet the houses were near enough, one to the other, to make it necessary to enclose them, and the result was not unlike the claustrophobia of living in a room whose walls are mirrors. Indeed, my house had a tremendous mirror which faced the equally large expanse of plate-glass window. No matter how I turned in the living room, there was always before my eyes the sight of my garden with its desert flowers and a lone yucca tree limited by the dusty-rose girdle of the cement-brick fence.

3

There were sides to Desert D'Or which were not satisfactory. For nine months in the year, no matter how irrigation was improved, the resort was in danger of resembling those other desert towns which were parched by the sun. Each twilight the spray from a thousand sprinklers washed dust and sand from gray foliage and returned its green again; each morning and afternoon the sun scorched the sap from the plants and the desert encircled the resort, its cacti standing to the horizon while outcroppings of dusty rock seemed to gather like scavengers in the distance. The blue sky burned upon the pale desert. It would come upon me at times that Desert D'Or was a place where no trees bear leaves. The palms and the yuccas arched a foliage of tufts and fans and fronds and shoots, but never leaves, and on some of the roads where tall palms lined the way, their dead fronds dangled from the trunk like an ostrich's muff. I remember how scabrous was the bark of those trees. Jelly, gum, and the bodies of dead insects seemed to suppurate from the scales, waiting for the moisture of twilight.

comp 3

In winter, rain came, not often, not to the point of discomfort, but enough to wash the desert flowers into bloom, and restore to the town the brilliance of its colors. Then came a great influx from the capital. The movie colony filled the hotels, and the wives of prosperous businessmen opened their homes. What had been a resort of not more than a few thousand people doubled in population, tripled, increased again. Movie stars were seen upon the street, and gamblers, oilmen, criminals with social prestige, mod-

inst. in DP

els, athletes, air-plane manufacturers, race-car drivers, even an artist or two. Visitors arrived in all kinds of cars: in black Cadillac limousines, in blue convertibles and yellow convertibles, in little foreign cars and large foreign cars, some so square as to be diverting in their lack of streamline, and others so smooth, so glistening, that a distortion of the landscape reflected from their bodies as they went by. Then, at the height of the season, one came to appreciate the enclosures about the house which were always dependable in the privacy they offered, no matter how bewildering they must have been to the casual tourist who could drive through street after street and suffer the inferiority that he knew no more of the resort than the corridors of an office building might explain about its rooms.

The only visible activity took place in the bars. The bars were a village within the town, or at least a main street in the absence of any other, yet they were as distinct from the warm facades of Desert D'Or as the interior of one's organs is different from the surface of one's flesh. In common with so many similar places in that part of the country, the bars, cocktail lounges, and night clubs were decorated to resemble a jungle, an underwater grotto, or the lounge of a modern movie theater. The Cerulean Room, to take an example at random, offered an irregular enclosure of rose-orange walls and booths of yellow leatherette, subjected to the overpowering influence of a dark blue ceiling which weighed upon one in ever-increasing pressure. Above the serving bar with its translucent bank of bottles, its pyramids of citrus fruit, a smoky-yellow false ceiling threw a reflection into the mirror behind the counter and gave emphasis to the etching of a half-nude girl which had been cut into the glass. For light there was no more than the small parabolas of illumination which silver cups shaped like scallop shells cast at regular intervals upon the wall. Drinking in that atmosphere, one never knew whether it were night or day, and such uncertainty was echoed in the conversation. Men addled with liquor talked to others who were sober, stories were begun and never finished, other accounts were picked up in the middle. There seemed never a need for any consecutive reply, no more than there was any order to the variety of men and women who came to the Cerulean Room, and on a typical afternoon in the air-cooled midnight of the bar, one could see a portly old man in a Palm Beach suit talking to a young girl with bright lipstick and the deep sun tan of Desert D'Or, the girl more interested in the old man than the gentleman in her. Promoters and tourists, actresses, residents of Desert D'Or, middle-aged women with new-colored hair, and youths not out of their adolescence who had competed with one another racing jalopies across the desert, mingled together. Conversations, interchangeable, consisted almost entirely of information about racing horses, accounts of drinking parties the night before, and systems for roulette. Between the sonorous measured tones of a promoter attempting to raise money, there intruded invariably the hysterical piercing shriek of one blonde chorus girl or another, who seemed to be laughing in that rhythm which claims, "I'm dumb, I'm dumb, but you're a scream."

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in
D'Or
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In such surroundings, afternoon was forever passing into night, and drunken nights into the dawn of a desert morning. Between the bars with their dark interiors, and the houses of one's friends with their furniture of desert colors, one seemed to leave the theatrical darkness of afternoon for the daytime illumination of night, and the sun of Desert D'Or, painful to the eyes, became like the stranger whom the drunk imagines to be following him. So it was that I spent many weeks at Desert D'Or in which I did little more than pick up the bar checks of all those marginal prospectors for pleasure from the capital, and in the telescoped biography by which most of the residents knew one another, I was understood to be an Air Force pilot whose family was wealthy and lived in the East, and I even added the detail that I had a broken marriage and drank to get over it. As a story it was good enough to pass, and when people asked me why I stayed in Desert D'Or, I would tell them invariably that I was there to have a good time. (No matter that my equipment for such a pursuit was poorly sufficient; I even meant what I said and tried to bronze myself in the very real sun of that pastel world with its cactus, its mountain, and the bright green foliage of its money.

not in DP

CHAPTER TWO

I mentioned that I came to the resort with fourteen thousand dollars. Almost everyone I knew in Desert D'Or had had an unusual career, and it was the same for me. I grew up in a home for orphans.

I never knew my mother, and my father who gave me the improbable name of Sergius O'Shaugnessy, stopped taking care of me when I was five years old, and surrendered himself to wandering from job to job. He was not a bad man in his own way, and the few times he visited the orphanage before he died were events I remembered a long time. He would bring me a present, he would listen with sad eyes to my pleas that he take me with him, he would promise to return soon, and then he would disappear for another few years. It was not until I grew older that I realized he could never keep his word.

That I came to understand in a curious way. When I was twelve, I found out my last name was not really O'Shaugnessy but something which sounded remotely like it in Polish or Hungarian. There is nothing in the world like being a false Irishman. Once my father had made that confession to me, he could never bring himself to add another detail. A workingman all his life, he wanted to be an actor, and O'Shaugnessy was his fling. Perhaps that is one of the reasons I have always felt like an imposter. To most of the people in Desert D'Or, I must have seemed odd. I had my First Lieutenant's bars and my wings, I had combat decorations from that Asiatic war which has gone its intermittent way, I even looked the part. I was tall, I had straight blond hair, and I knew I was handsome. Yet I never believed I was convincing. Whenever I would put on my uniform, and there were many days when I felt the need, I would have the sensation that I was masquerading in it like a young unemployed actor who tries to interest a casting director by dressing for the role.

Of one thing I am fairly certain. The people who spent time with me must have thought I was a bit of a mystery, not a particularly interesting mystery to be sure—for my personality must have impressed them as quiet and colorless—but still, very little was known about me. Without the uniform, I doubt whether anyone would have been interested, and I would have been as lonely as any sixty-year-old woman who is not rich, but with the Air Force to lend me its favors, I was more or less acceptable.

Nonetheless, I saw few people regularly. It was too difficult for me. In the off-season, any celebrity who lived in Desert D'Or was surrounded by a court of inferiors. It did not matter where a person went to visit; dependably there would be the same nucleus pouring the host's drinks, laughing at his remarks, serving I suppose as extensions of his pleasure, so that his favorite games were played, his favorite anecdotes were retold, and the court was formed into cliques which deployed for his favor. Nothing was so rare as to find two people of comparable importance who were friendly and wished to see each other frequently.

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6

At Dorothea O'Faye's home which she called The Hangover—it was the place I visited most often—the nucleus was composed of a garage owner and his wife, a real-estate operator and his wife, a publicity agent for Supreme Pictures, an old show girl who had been a friend of Dorothea's years ago, and a drunk named O'Faye who had been married to Dorothea, had been divorced, and was now kept by her to run odd errands. Dorothea was a former personality who had been an actress of sorts, a night-club singer of some reputation, and was retired at the age of forty-three. Some years before, a friend had advised her to invest in Desert D'Or property, and it was said that now Dorothea was rich. How wealthy she was no one knew, however, for she had the secrecy about money which belongs not only to the very rich but to those who live by the appearance of being rich.

Dorothea was not unnotorious, she was handsome with a full body and exciting black hair, and she had been famous as a show girl years ago, and famous again in her night-club days as a singer. Her boast was that she had been everywhere, had done everything, and knew everything there was to know. She had been a call girl, a gossip columnist (at separate times, be it said), a celebrity, a failure; she had been born in Chicago and discovered in New York, her father had been a drunk and died that way, her mother had disappeared with another man. Dorothea had done her father's work when she was twelve; he was a sot of a janitor, and she had collected rent from tenants and put the garbage out. At sixteen she had been kept by the heir to a steel fortune, and not too many years later she had had an affair with a European prince and birthed his illegitimate son; she had made money and lost money, she had been married three times, the last to a man of whom she said, "I can't remember him as well as guys I've had for a one-night stand." She had even had her great romance. He was an Air Force pilot who was killed flying the mail, and she would tell me often that was why she took to me. "I never knew a guy like him," she would sigh. Through the sentimental passages of her drinking she would declare that her whole life would have been different if he had lived; sober, or very drunk, she knew the opposite. "If he hadn't died," she would say, "we'd have killed it. The great thing is when something sweet hasn't time to be spoiled."

Known for her rough wit and the force of her celebrity, Dorothea was considered a catch by that revolving troupe of oil-men, men who had made their money in the garment industries, and men . . . it is needless to pursue the series. What characterized most of them was that their business caused them to travel and they were anxious for the reputation of having women who excited the envy of other men in the cities through which they passed. I wondered at the convenience of their itinerary which was invariably triangulated about California, Florida, and the East. Generally, these men were seen with younger women—models kept by millionaires, or young divorcees so fortunate as to be involved in scandal—but Dorothea possessed, in contrast to those girls, a toughness of mind and a quickness of tongue which was respected inordinately. My idea is that her men accepted her life a business partner, and in all the perspiration and tension of a night club, they found Dorothea familiar, they could talk to her. By the parade of her admirers I was always told, "She's a great kid. She's one of the best." To which Dorothea might answer when asked her opinion of the latest man, "He'll pass. He's a bastard, but no phony." She had categories. There were good guys, bastards, and phonies, and the worst was a phony. A good guy, I learned by context, was a guy who made no pretenses about being interested only in himself. A bastard was a man who had the same attitude but took needless pleasure in hurting people. A phony was somebody who claimed to be concerned with anything but himself. For a while, she had difficulty with me, she hardly knew how to place me in the cosmos of good guys, bastards, and phonies. I was out for a good time as I always announced, and of that she approved, but I had also made the mistake of telling her I wanted to write, and writers were phonies in her book.

All the same, she had her points. She was without affectation, and her loyalty was strong. To be her friend was to be indeed her friend, and if she were hard in business relations, it was her code never to leave a friend in trouble. She was a commanding woman and generous as well. There were always people for dinner, there was always whisky in the den, and though she had two living rooms in her house, each filled with heavy velvet furniture, the court stayed in the pine-paneled den with its small bar, its television set, and its old night-club posters of engagements Dorothea had played. Now, at Dorothea's, all that was played were the games she liked, the gossip was told which interested her, and we spent evening after evening in doing almost exactly what we had done the night before. Her favorite was the game of Ghost, and I often marveled at the ferocity with which she sought to win. Dorothea had had no education, and to be able to spell better than her guests left her in a fine mood.

"What are you thinking, cupcake?" she would say afterward, chucking the old chorus girl under the chin.

"You're tremendous," her friend would say with adoration.

"Oh, Dorothea's great," the garage owner would rumble.

"Angel, make me a small Martin," Dorothea would say, and hand her glass to someone.

Dorothea had lasted. If her night-club days were finished, if her fabulous affairs were part of the past, she was still in fine shape. She had her house, she had her court, she had money in the bank; men still sent airplanes for her. Yet, when Dorothea was very drunk, she was violent too. She always had liquor inside her, she was always restless, she consumed people and time—one could go to her place for breakfast and eat scrambled eggs at four in the afternoon following hours of drinking—but unless she was very drunk, Dorothea was agreeable. Very drunk, she was unmanageable; she abused people, she threw things. Once she was even slapped around by strangers in a roadside brawl. A really drunken evening had to end with Dorothea screaming, "Get out, get out you son of a bitch before I kill you." She could say it to anyone in the court; it did not matter to whom; she was most fond of saying it to one of her rich men friends. She hated so much to be alone, however, that such tantrums were rare. One could spend whole days with her, and all of the night, and at six in the morning when Dorothea was ready for bed, she was still cajoling us in her rough deep voice to stay a little longer. So automatic became the habit, that on those week ends and odd nights when Dorothea was away entertaining one of her dates, the court still gathered at The Hangover, still drank in her pine-paneled den. No one knew how to stay away. Hours before going there, one could sense the anxiety that there was no other way to spend the evening.

About a month after I met her, Dorothea settled upon one rich man. His name was Martin Pelley, and he had an earnest pear-shaped head, a dark jowl, and rather sad eyes. He had made a great deal of money in oil wells, but there was something curiously apologetic about him, as if he were explaining, "I learned how to make money, but I never learned nothing else." Recently, his second marriage had been finished off in Desert D'Or. I remember his wife who had been a platinum blonde with a neck corded by tension. They had had horrible fights. One could not pass Pelley's suite at the Yacht Club without hearing her screams and the terrible abuse she yelled at him. They were now getting a quick Mexican divorce, and Martin Pelley had found his way to The Hangover. He adored Dorothea. His big body would sit heavily in an armchair through the evening, he would chuckle at the wit of others, he would have an anxious scowl upon his forehead as though seeking for some further way to win our approval. When Ghost was played, he was usually the first to go out. "I'm a bonehead for this sort of stuff," he would say easily, "I'm not quick like Dorothea."

12

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He was, however, a marvelous spender. His preference was to invite everyone at The Hangover out for drinks and steak at a desert roadhouse, and when he was drunk he was extraordinarily genial. Any young woman he called, "Daughter," and he would tell us over and over again, "I had a little girl, you see, by my first marriage. The cunningest little bugger. She died, age of six."

"You got to get rid of it," Dorothea would say.

"Ah, I just think about her once in a while."

For two weeks he was at Dorothea's every night. The first time he found her out for the evening, he paced the floor and did not hear a word we said. The court learned from Dorothea about the fight which followed. Pelley had been in a jealous fury.

"You son of a bitch," Dorothea had said, "nobody owns me."

"What are you, a chippie?" he had gone on. "I thought you had character." He had gripped her shoulder. "You always said you wanted to get married again and have kids." This was one of Dorothea's favorite themes.

She had twisted herself loose. "Get your hooks off me. What do you think, you're throwing some pipes around?"

"I want to marry you."

"Go blow."

The quarrel had ended with Pelley taking Dorothea to bed. Unhappily, nothing had happened.

He could not get it out of his mind. He apologized to Dorothea again and again. The apology seemed painted upon his face. I overheard them one night in a corner, and indeed I think he wanted me to overhear for he did not speak softly. "I used to be great, you see," he told her. "When I was a kid, I'd do it so much I got a strain, I had to see a doctor, that's the truth. I know there's no way you can believe me, but I was great."

Dorothea cuddled to him, her bold eyes softened in sympathy. "For Christ's sakes, Marty, I don't hold it against you."

"I got a strain. You don't believe me?"

"Sure, I believe you."

"Dorothea, you're a prince." He held her wrists in his large paws. "I tell you, I was great. I'll be great again."

"There's no rush. Listen, there was a guy I knew. He was the greatest in the hay, and in the beginning he was the same as you."

Dorothea grew tender toward him. Their romance began on the sure ground of his incapacity. Pelley would have been absorbed into the court at The Hangover if the reminder that he were wealthy was not demonstrated by the many times he insisted on standing treat. Dorothea's evenings with other men ceased. Now, her rich friends were obliged to visit her at the house, and hours were spent at Ghost with Pelley competing sullenly against the new visitor. Finally, everyone accepted him as Dorothea's boy friend. There even came the night when the fat ex-chorus girl telephoned me and announced excitedly, "Marty made it. He and Dorothea finally made it. They want to celebrate." When I didn't answer immediately, she added, "Don't you even want to know how it was?"

"How was it?" I asked.

"Dorothea didn't tell me, but she kind of hinted it was just a beginning."

We celebrated that night. Pelley acted like a son had been born to him. He not only bought champagne for everyone, but he nursed Dorothea through the meal as if she had just left the hospital. "You're a bunch of champs," he said to the people at the table, "you're all champs, I never knew such champs," including by this the fat show girl, the garage owner, the realtor, their wives, the press agent, myself, all the friends of Dorothea, even the drunk O'Faye who once had been her husband.

CHAPTER THREE

That was a story. Whenever I thought of it, I would be shocked to see O'Faye now. A natty little sport with a hair-line mustache and a bland meaningless smile, I could never believe that years ago there had been nights when Dorothea wept because she had lost him.

She was seventeen when they met, and he was a vaudeville hooper on the crest of a vogue. Dorothea lived with him, she was crazy about him as she swore, worked out song and dance routines to support the act they did together, and suffered his cheating for he liked a different woman every night. They got nowhere together; she was always hinting that she wanted to settle down, to have children, and he would smile and say she was too young and ask her to admire the silk shirt he had bought that day. She thought to save money and he thought how to spend it. When she found herself pregnant, he gave her two hundred dollars in cash, left the address of an abortionist, and moved his belongings out.

Dorothea sang in night clubs, she had a pattering little song for trade-mark: "I'm Sighin' For My Scion Who's a Yale Man," and her audiences loved it. Her name was well known, she was nineteen and beautiful, and she was secretly pregnant again. That was the passing affair with the passing European prince and it delighted a pure vein of snobbery in her. She was the janitor's daughter and she now carried royal blood. She could not bring herself to extinguish such a creation. Three months went by, four months went by, it was much too late. O'Faye saved her. His vogue running down, his drinking begun, he dropped in to see her one day, and sympathized with her predicament. O'Faye was a rolling stone, he would never have married a girl who carried his own child, but he considered it right to help a friend out of her trouble. They were quickly married, and as quickly divorced, and her child had a name. Marion O'Faye she called him, and starred in a musical comedy that year. Later, years later, after Dorothea had made money and lost it and made it again, after the adventures which established her name, even after the last of her marriages when she was retired in Desert D'Or, her gossip column sold and her court formed, O'Faye had appeared again. He was a wreck, there was no doubt of that. His hands shook, his voice had lost all volume, his working days were over. Dorothea was pleased to take him in; she hated to owe a debt. He had lived at The Hangover ever since, and she gave him a modest allowance. Between Marion Faye the son (as a boy he had dropped the 'O') and the nominal father, there was no relation at all. They looked at each other as curiosities. For that matter, Marion looked at his mother in the same way.

16

When she was drunk, Dorothea could never resist bragging that her son was the illegitimate gift of a prince. Marion had known this since he was a child and perhaps it explained a few things about him. At twenty-three, he was quite extraordinary. Slim, well-knit, with delicate features, light wavy hair, and clear gray eyes, he could have looked even innocent, I suppose, if it had not been for his attitude which was unpleasantly superior. He had an arrogance whose quality consisted of staring at you, considering your value, and deciding you were worthless. At the present time he was living in Desert D'Or, but not at his mother's house. They got along too badly for that, and besides his occupation would have interfered. He was a pimp.

I often heard that when he was a child one would have predicted another career for him. He had been a beautiful high-strung boy, willful and tender by turns. When Dorothea had been able to afford it, there had been nurses and servants, she had always been pleased to spoil her son, to ignore him, to match his tantrums with her own. There was a story she loved to tell about Marion when she was feeling sentimental and mourned the distance between them. Once, so long ago, she had been crying hopelessly in her bedroom—over what, she no longer remembered—and he had come in, he was three and a half at the time, and he had stroked her cheek. "Don't cry, Mommie," he had said, beginning to weep himself, and consoled her the only way he knew, "Don't cry, Mommie, cause you're so pretty."

He was a dreamy boy at school with sudden passions. She would tell me how he had been fascinated by railroad trains, by erector sets, by collecting stamps and butterfly wings. He was shy, he was spoiled, he would be desperate at times with desperate bursts of temper. In the first fight he ever had (it was with the tubby son of a motion-picture producer), he had been pulled screaming off the other boy's neck. Somewhere in those years between ten and thirteen, changes occurred in him. He seemed no longer so girlish, so sensitive; he took boxing lessons, he practiced with weights, he turned surly and communicated with himself. To her amazement he told her once that he wished to become a priest. His intelligence was startling at times, at least to Dorothea, but he had become unmanageable. He was always causing trouble, mocking his teachers, smoking, drinking, doing whatever was forbidden. Before he graduated from high school, Dorothea had been forced to place Marion in one private academy after another, but no matter where she put him, he had a talent for making friends with hoodlums outside the school. At seventeen, he was arrested for driving over eighty miles an hour through traffic on one of the boulevards of the capital. Dorothea fixed that, she had to fix many things he did. On his eighteenth birthday, he asked her for three hundred dollars.

127

"For what?" said Dorothea.

"There's this girl I know, and she needs an operation."

"Didn't you ever hear of precautions?"

He had stood indolently before her, patient, bored, his clear gray eyes looking at her with humor. "Yes, I've heard of them," he said, "but you see, I was with two girls at the time, and I guess the three of us got . . . distracted."

Dorothea managed to write a sentimental column about her son the day he was inducted into service, but that was the last she could write about him. When he came out of the Army, he refused to work, he refused to do anything he did not care to do. She got him a position as an assistant to a well-known executive at Liberty Pictures; three months later, Marion quit. "It's dull," was all he would say, and moved in with her at The Hangover.

In Desert D'Or he knew gangsters, he knew panderers, he knew show girls and call girls and bar girls; he was even a pet of those few residents of the resort who might be considered international society, and with it all, since he was capable of spending days in one bar after another or hours at the Yacht Club patio, since he knew the headwaiters of the most exclusive clubs in the resort and was respected by them because he valued them so low, he had access to that ever-renewed pool of businessmen; entertainers, producers, tennis players, divorcees, sportsmen; gamblers, beauties and near beauties fed to the resort by the overflow from the capital. So when Dorothea kicked him out after a quarrel about money, assuming she could thereby force him to work—for her son she wanted respectability if for no one else—he had found his occupation ready to hand. When Dorothea learned, she pleaded with him to come back, and Marion laughed at her. "I'm just an amateur," he had said, "like you." She hadn't even dared to slap him; somehow it was years since anyone had attempted that.

His operations were modest. He stayed away from the professionals; he did not care to assume the work that would have involved, and many of his arrangements were unique. He knew girls who would accept a date once, and then never again, at least not for several months; he even knew a woman who did not need the money and merely sought the pleasure of selling herself. As he had explained, he was an amateur, he dabbled. To work hard at a business was to be the slave of a business, and he detested slavery; it warped the mind. Therefore, he kept his freedom, and used it sullenly to drink, to force dope upon himself, and to drive his foreign car at dangerous speeds through the desert, a gun in the glove compartment instead of a driving license for the license had been suspended long ago. I drove with him once and tried to avoid it thereafter.

From time to time he still would drop in at The Hangover, but he was contemptuous of the court, and they were uneasy with him. Of all the people there, he could tolerate only two. I was one of them, but he made no pretense about his reasons. I had killed people, I had been almost killed myself, and these were emotions he considered worthy. Out of the catlike grace with which he held himself, he had asked me once, "How many planes did you shoot down?"

"Just three." I said.

"Just three. They lost money on you." His mouth showed distaste. "You'd have shot down more if you could?"

"I guess so."

"You dig killing Asiatics?" Marion asked.

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Of course you didn't. They know how to train you characters." He took a cigarette from a platinum case. "I wasn't an officer," he said. "I went into the Army a private, and I came out that way. I'm the only private they ever had."

"They kept booking you in the stockade. I hear."

"Yes, I learned a thing or two," Marion said reflectively.

"You see, it's a phony. It doesn't take anything to kill a man. It's easier to do that than to chase after a roach and squash it."

"Maybe you don't know all there is about it."

"You want a girl?" Marion asked abruptly. "I'll get you a girl for nothing."

"Not tonight." I said.

"I didn't figure you would," he sneered. Somehow, he had sensed what I was at such pains to keep from everyone. I had followed Pellev's troubles carefully for we shared the same affliction. It had come upon me shortly before I left Japan, and I had been helpless ever since. Once or twice, with girls I had nicked up in the bars of Desert D'Or, I had tried to cut my bonds and only succeeded in lashing them more tightly. "I'm keeping myself for the woman I love," I said in a joke.

Love was the subject which enraged him. "You look," he said to me, "you take two people living together. Cut away all the non-essentials. It's dull. The end. So you go the other direction. You find a hundred chicks, you find two hundred. It gets worse than dull. It makes you sick. I swear you start thinking of using a razor. I mean, that's it," he said, waving a finger like a pendulum, "screwing the one side, pain the other side. Killing. The whole world is bullshit. That's why people want a dull life."

This was all beyond me. I looked into his pale gray eyes, on fire with their internal argument, and said mildly, "Where do you end up with this?"

"I don't know," he said. "I got to work it out." He had straightened up then, had looked at his watch as though to mark how amazed he was to hear himself talk for so long, and had said quietly, "When is Jay-Jay getting here? I have something to tell Dorothea."

That was his other friend at The Hangover. Whenever Dorothea and Marion were not sneaking, he used the publicity man Jennings James for necessary communications. Jay-Jay had managed somehow to remain on good terms with them both. Years ago, he had been a legman for Dorothea, and he had known Marion as a child. There was a curious tie between them: Marion tolerated him in a way he tolerated no one else, he put up with Jay-Jay's long speeches, his drunk, his depressions, he had something which resembled affection for him.

Despite his red hair, Jay-Jay's long skinny figure and his skinny face with its silver-rimmed spectacles made him look like a bank clerk. Yet there was something boyish about him. He lived in the past, and he loved to reminisce about those early days of the depression when he had been penniless in the capital and had lived in a bungalow with two jazz musicians, existing on oranges and the hope he could sell one of his short stories. Those were the good old days and now he did scattered publicity for Supreme Pictures, an advance man for the resort who filed items with gossip columnists on whatever Supreme stars might come to town. I knew for a fact he supplemented his income by passing an occasional girl Marion's way.

With it all, he had a wistful charm. I could not dislike Jay-Jay, but he would tell story after story in a slurred voice, often telling me for I seemed the only one to listen, that for example the quip, "Men with lipstick on their mouths look like they just discovered sex," credited to the movie star, Lulu Meyers, was in point of fact, a sentence he had written for her. "I'm sick of it," Jay-Jay would say to me. "Why I remember when Lulu was married to Charley Eitel and thought brains was everything. I saw her walk into a room one night at a party with her face shining like she'd just discovered love or drunk some jungle juice, and what does she declare but, 'Eitel has just given me my first acting lesson,' she says, 'and it was so stimulating.' This, after three years of making movies and seven starring roles, and I have to run interference for people like her."

I believe he was the first person in Desert D'Or to mention the name of Charles Francis Eitel. After that, it seemed as if everyone were always ready to tell me some new story about him. Eitel was a famous film director who was staying at the resort, and he was one friend of Marion's who never appeared at The Hangover. Until I came to understand it better, I often thought that Marion continued the friendship solely to provoke Dorothea, for Eitel had suffered several misadventures in the last year. I heard that he had walked off a set one day in the middle of shooting a picture, apparently unable to continue, and had followed that debacle by being scolded as an unco-operative witness before an investigating committee of Congress. Dorothea was livid about Eitel. As a gossip columnist she had never risen beyond a certain importance, and finally had become apathetic about the work, but in the last year or two before she retired, the head of her column had always featured the American flag next to her photograph, and her copy was invariably filled with hints and forebodings of frightful subversion in the movie industry. Even now she was extraordinarily patriotic, and like all patriots it was not easy to have a discussion with her. I never tried, and I was equally careful not to mention Eitel. Soon after I met him, I had come to think of Eitel as my best friend at the resort, and I stopped her once in the middle of one of her tirades, said that he was my friend and I did not want to talk about him, and for a moment I thought she would fly into a rage. She came close, she came very close, her face flushed dark red, but Pelley was there passing a drink, and afterward we never discussed Eitel.

CHAPTER FOUR

At the children's home where I grew up, we used to go to a public school, and during class hours, we were treated like everybody else. The lunch recess, however, was a torture. They used to bring us sandwiches from the orphanage, and we would be obliged to eat together in a corner of the lunchroom while the other children stared at us. That made it difficult to become friends, and I remember one semester when I chose to do without lunch for the entire half year. On the first day of the term I had made friends with a boy who lived down the street from the school in a two-family house. Today, I could barely give his name but for all those months I was sick with anxiety that he would discover I was from the home. Later, years later, I realized he must have known all the time, but he was kind enough never to let me guess.

There are enough stories I could tell about the orphanage, but it would be a mistake. Rage would conquer me, and I would go on for pages, chapters, for all of this book about the poverty and the brutality, and the attendants and the matrons with their ugly lives, or else I would become sentimental about one matron who was very kind and paid special attention to me and whom I loved with such devotion that even now I believe I would give almost anything I have to remember her face. To this day I can see the boy who slept in the bunk next to me. He was a hunchback, and the last I knew of him, he was in prison; a feeble-minded boy, trapped while shoplifting. I could relate how I ran away from the home three times in five years, yet I would not even be telling a fact, for the fact would have to include what I learned and that would take too long. It is hopeless to spend one's time writing about a miserable childhood. One cannot rouse pity in the person who listens because self-pity blurs the voice.

I would rather mention the one thing I learned. I came out of the home when I was seventeen with one ambition in my mind. I had read a great many books, whichever ones I could, I read constantly when I was a boy, and I had found very little which seemed the least bit true to me. So I had the ambition, a boyish ambition to be sure, that someday, somehow, I would be a writer and present a mirror to the world as true as I could polish the glass.

I do not know whether this can explain why Charles Francis Eitel was my best friend for almost all the time I stayed in Desert D'Or. Friendship, like love, can only remind you that explanations describe everything but the necessity, yet one thing I believe can be said. I still had the notion that there were every few good men in the world, and the world always took care to destroy them. For most of the time I knew Eitel, I suppose I saw him in this way.

Days before I met him I had already heard his name with its odd pronunciation, 'eye-TELL.' As I have said, it was a subject for gossip in Desert D'Or. I even had a clue to explain Dorothea's animosity. It seemed that years ago she had had an affair with him, and in some way it must have been painful. I gathered that the affair had meant something to her and very little to Eitel, but this is hardly more than surmise, and they had each had so many affairs. In all the time I knew them both I never heard them refer to the few weeks or the few months when they had been together, and I would suspect that its history was important now to no one but Marion.

One night when I had wandered over to have a drink at his house, he mentioned the director. "There's a case," he said. "When I was a kid, I used to think"—and Faye laughed harshly—"that Eitel was God."

"It's hard to imagine you feeling that way about anybody," I commented.

He shrugged. "Eitel took an interest in me when he was dating Dorothea. I was such a freak of a kid, I wanted to be just like him. Even after he broke up with my mother, he used to invite me over once in a while." Faye smiled as though incredulous at the suggestion of feeling in what he had said.

"What do you think about him now?" I asked.

"He'd be all right," Marion shrugged, "if he weren't so middle-class. A middle-class boy, you know." With a curious expression, he left me for a minute to search through the drawer of his aluminum and blond-wood desk. "Here," he said, coming back, "take a look. Read this."

He handed me a printed transcript of the testimony taken at the hearings of a congressional investigating committee. It was a heavy pamphlet with a governmental seal, and as I looked at it doubtfully, Marion said, "Eitel's dialogue starts on page eighty-three."

"You sent away for this?" I asked.

He nodded. "I wanted to have it."

"Why?"

"Oh, that's just a little item," Marion said vaguely.

I read it through. The complete testimony of the director came to twenty pages which were often repetitious and probably boring, but since it was my own proper introduction to Eitel, I think I might give a page or two which is typical of the rest. Indeed, I believe I could repeat it almost from memory for later I read it over many times, and invariably I would experience a peculiar reaction. Here was a man whose hatred of authority was as great as mine. It is crude to say it, but I always felt as if I read my own words, squirming defiantly under the eyes of a matron who knew I had broken a regulation. So the testimony was not boring to me, and I had the conviction even as I read, that I had a great deal to learn from Eitel:

Congressman Bartley S. Crane: . . . are you now or have you ever been, I want you to be specific, a member of the Party?

Eitel: I should think my answer would be obvious.

Chairman Aaron Allan Norton: Do you refuse to answer?

Eitel: May I say that I answer with great reluctance. I have never been a member of any political party. Politics has always impressed me as misplaced ambition. (Laughter.)

Crane: We're aware of your reputation for wit, Mr. Eitel. This however, is an official proceeding. Why did you say, a moment ago, that you answer the question with reluctance?

Eitel: Because I consider it revolting to be obliged to describe what I think under the duress of this Committee.

Chairman Norton: There is no duress here. Let's get on with the thing.

Crane: Did you ever know Mr. . . .

Eitel: The one you called earlier an agent of the Party?

Crane: Did you ever meet him?

Eitel: I probably met him at a party or two.

Crane: Did you know he was an agent of the Party?

Eitel: I didn't know he was an agent, because I don't know what an agent is.

Crane: Mr. Eitel, you seem to delight in presenting yourself as stupid.

Eitel: The Committee seemed to be complaining just a minute ago that I was too clever.

Chairman Norton: We're wasting time. Eitel, I'll ask you a simple question. Do you love your country?

Eitel: Well, sir, I've been married three times, and I've always thought of love in connection with women. (Laughter.)

Chairman Norton: We'll have you up for contempt if you don't stop this.

Eitel: I'm terribly sorry, sir. It's just that the questions of the Committee are so vague for me and difficult to understand.

Crane: Mr. Eitel, you insist you never met the agent in question?

Eitel: I just can't be sure. My memory is annoyingly weak.

Crane: A film director has to have a good memory, I should think. If your memory is as bad as you claim, how did you make your pictures?

Eitel: That's a good question, sir. Now, that you've pointed it out, I wonder how I did make them. (Laughter.)

Chairman Norton: Very clever. Perhaps you'll remember something we have on record here. It says you fought in Spain. Shall I give the dates?

Eitel: I went over to fight. I'm afraid I ended up as a messenger boy.

Chairman Norton: But you didn't belong to the Party.

Eitel: No, sir.

Chairman Norton: You must have had friends among them. Who incited you to go over?

Eitel: I'm afraid my memory is weak again.

Chairman Norton: You don't remember a single name from that time?

Eitel: If I did, I don't know that I would tell it to you, sir.

Chairman Norton: We'll have you up for perjury if you're lying about belonging to the Party.

Crane: To return to a point of questioning. I'm curious, Mr. Eitel. In the event of war, would you fight for this country?

Eitel: If I were drafted, I wouldn't have much choice, would I? May I say that?

Crane: You would fight without enthusiasm?

Eitel: Certainly without enthusiasm.

Chairman Norton: But if you were fighting for a certain enemy, that would be a different story, wouldn't it?

Eitel: I would fight for them with even less enthusiasm.

Chairman Norton: That's what you say now. Eitel, here's something we have in our files on you. "Patriotism is for pigs." Do you remember saying that?

Eitel: I suppose I did.

Ivan Fabner (Counsel for the Witness): May I interrupt on behalf of my client to state that I believe he will rephrase his remarks?

Chairman Norton: That's what I want to know. Eitel, what do you say about it now?

Eitel: It sounds a little vulgar as you repeat it, Congressman. I would have phrased it differently if I had known some agent of your Committee was reporting what I said at a party.

Chairman Norton: "Patriotism is for pigs." And you make your living from this country.

Eitel: It's the alliteration of the 'p's which makes it vulgar. That's always been a vice of mine.

Chairman Norton: Not responsive.

Crane: How would you put it today to this Committee, Mr. Eitel?

Eitel: I would say that on the whole I'm rather proud never to have felt a patriotic emotion. Patriotism has always struck me as being one of the baser sentiments.

Crane: What would you consider one of the nobler sentiments?

Eitel: I'm not accustomed to thinking on these lines. The process of making motion pictures has little to do with noble sentiments.

Chairman Norton: I'm pretty sure the motion-picture industry is going to give you plenty of time to think about your noble thoughts after this morning's testimony. (Laughter.)

Crane: Make an effort.

Fabner: May I ask for a recess?

Eitel: I'm perfectly willing to continue. If you gentlemen want a statement, I'll put it simply. I think such things as concern for the individual and concern for mankind in general are decent emotions. In my opinion, patriotism is the antithesis of both concerns. Therefore, I say it's for pigs, not for people, since I see the pig as the antithesis of man.

Chairman Norton: This is a subversive committee, not a forum for half-baked ideas. Eitel, you're the most ridiculous witness we've ever had.

When I finished reading, I looked up at Faye. "He must have lost his job the next day," I said.

"He certainly did," Faye murmured.

"But why is he staying here now?" I asked.

20

11—Deer Park 10|12|24 T. R. Lining (Rinehart) No. 1144

"Eitel owns a house here even if it's mortgaged." Marion grinned out of his private humor. "You're right, though. This is no place to stay when you've lost your loot."

"I thought Eitel was rich," I said.

"He used to be. You don't know how anything works," Faye said dispassionately. "You see, along about this time they started looking at his income-tax returns. By the time they got done, Eitel had to strip himself to pay the back taxes."

"And he just stays here now?" I asked. "He doesn't do anything?"

"You'll get to meet him. You'll see what I mean," Faye remarked. "Charley Eitel could be worse off. Maybe he needed a kick in the pants."

By the way Faye said this, his voice absolutely flat and expressionless, I thought I sensed some emotion for Eitel as if the director might still be the one person in the world about whom Faye was concerned.

"You like him," I said again.

"I don't dislike him," Faye said grudgingly.

At the Yacht Club, a few days later, Marion introduced me to Eitel, and I enjoyed talking to him. By the end of a week, I suppose I was making a point of going to see him almost every day. Faye was right. I came to see something of what he had meant.

CHAPTER FIVE

The open-air café of the Yacht Club wandered about the cañas and the swimming pool, its peppermint-striped tables and chairs no more than another throw of color against the hotel foliage and the mountains beyond Desert D'Or. Predictably, one could find Charles Francis Eitel seated at a table almost every siesta, a paper-bound manuscript opened before him. Occasionally, he might be seen to study it, a pencil in his hand for whatever notations came to mind. Yet it was difficult to believe the script could be important to him. No sooner would someone come by than he would close the pages, order a drink, and begin to talk in his charming way. Like so many of the people from the capital, he was charming, but unlike most of the others whose manner was a projection of their notion of charm as manufactured as the performance of an accomplished bad actor, Eitel seemed really alive. I had the impression he was intensely interested in everything that was said to him, his expression was sensitive with attention, and as I was to discover, he always gave from that part of himself which corresponded with the person to whom he spoke.

It was with a sense of surprise that one was introduced. Although he was over forty, and had a reputation as a film director of extraordinary talent, Eitel was even better-known in other ways. He had been divorced several times, he was said to have been the cause of more than one marital scandal, and these were the least of the rumors which circulated about him. One could hear that he was an alcoholic, a drug addict; for that matter, I even heard it whispered he was an espionage agent. Considering all this, it was bewildering to meet a man who appeared healthy and vigorous, rather a big man with a broken nose and a wide smile. He had a large face to match his broad body, and his head was half bald, crowned with a circle of vigorous curly hair. He had wonderful eyes. They were very blue, and when he smiled, they crinkled, and his broken nose gave him a warm amiability. Only his voice gave a clue to something else. It was a humorous well-modulated voice, and he spoke with a certain affectation. When one learned that he did not come from a rich family, Eitel's speech gave its immediate hint of how much shame and aspiration had created it.

I had rarely liked anyone so much; I felt that here was a man like myself, only superior to me, wiser, with experience beyond compare. Later I learned that many people saw Eitel this way. Of all the rumors about him, and Eitel's acquaintances seemed to delight in declaring that his career was finished, I believed nothing. He drank a great deal, but I never saw him drunk; his speech merely became slow and his manner relaxed; that he took drugs was fantastic to me, and indeed it was untrue. His notoriety with women I would have been pleased to share. More than once I had envied the friendly intimate attention he was capable of giving them.

26

Nonetheless, he was forced to be a lonely man. I believe that the quick progress of our friendship was due above all to the fact that I looked for his company. It was his habit to drive over to the open-air café in the early afternoon, and there as I have mentioned, he would drink, he would talk, he would look at his script. Once, he had been a great friend of the manager of the hotel, but at present he was waiting for the day when he would be asked not to enter the Yacht Club. "You see, years ago, I loaned the manager some money, and he's the sort of man who boasts that he never forgets a favor." Eitel grinned. "Right now, I find that a fortunate trait of character. For some silly reason, I like this place."

It was not that he was completely alone; there were always new guests who might begin a conversation with him. The trouble was that in a short while they would learn about Eitel, and afterward would try to ignore his table. Many days, nobody besides myself would sit down at all, and I would watch him drink through the afternoon and into the night. It seemed he was never invited anywhere, or at least anywhere he wished to go. Invariably, Eitel would get restless after a time and insist I accompany him on a round of all the second-rate night clubs and bars of the resort. All those hours were very much the same. As though he could not contain himself, his energy would spill into one small episode after another. Drinking companions would be found and lost, a girl might be picked up and as quickly dropped again, once he almost got into a fight because a drunk insulted a bar girl who was sitting with us, and yet casual as it all passed, it had become a kind of occupation. On he would wander through those hours, seeming terrified of trying to sleep until the pale washed dawn lifted over the desert, and along the purposeless rounds of his drinking he drove himself like a man suffering from a broken marriage, his routine scattered, and the thousand details of his life become mountains. I could see him waste a day and then a night and accomplish no more than answer a letter.

Accompanying him, for I dreaded my own insomnia, I would get to bed with the morning sun. Next afternoon, dependably, Eitel would be seated beneath his beach umbrella beside the pool of the Yacht Club, the script of his scenario open on the peppermint-striped table, his pencil poised for the note he seemed never to make, and his greeting to me alive with the pleasure of ceasing work.

I was told his story more than once, hearing it from former friends, acquaintances, and people who did not know him at all, as well as from Eitel himself. The accounts varied, they often contradicted each other, possessing finally not much more than the outline of a newspaper account. He was the only son of an auto dealer in a big Eastern city, and his father was born of immigrant parents. Eitel was the first of his family to go to college. It had been expected that he would be a lawyer, but while he was at school he became interested in the theater and quarreled with his parents about his career. By the time he graduated, the question was academic; his father had lost his money in the depression. Eitel wandered about New York, taking jobs, quitting them, losing them, anxious for experience, romantic for experience. He was not a good-looking young man, and he was shy, and so he fell in love with the first girl who found him attractive. She was studying to be a welfare worker, and she lived at home, and wanted to marry him to get out of her parent's house. It was natural they should believe they were very much in love. Their marriage lasted nine years, and two or three of those years were passed happily. She was political, his wife, and through her, through her friends, he studied radical literature, he talked politics with great excitement, he joined a group of young actors who were equally political. His wife worked in a bookstore to support him, and he wrote plays, he acted in small theaters, he gained experience to direct other plays, and in the trough of the depression his own career grew. He was hired to put on a play in a government-sponsored project, and it was a tremendous success. Suddenly, it seemed everyone knew his name. He was a playwright, a director, an actor; it was inevitable he should be offered a career in the movies. So he had gone to the capital, and on a modest contract to make cheap pictures, he had had the good fortune to be allowed projects which were unusual. They were a cheap experiment, no more, and yet he had directed one, then two, and finally three pictures which were considered remarkable today. Eitel always remembered it as the best year of his life. He was young, he had the confidence that his talent was inexhaustible, and there were people who considered him a genius. Unhappily, it was not quite so simple. Those three pictures for all their critical approval and their subsequent history of being seen by college film societies and museums and cinema clubs, for all their awards, for their venerable reputation to this day, even for their influence—so many directors were subsequently to imitate his style—had been pictures which did not make money. Although he was given a better contract by another studio with larger salary, greater budgets, bigger stars, the stories were no longer his own. He chafed at these restraints, and continued to make pictures which were better than most; they even showed a profit. Yet he was becoming a touch dissatisfied. It was the period of the Spanish Civil War, and what he could not say in his work, he tried to find in political activity, in the work there was always to be done on committees. He was still full of enthusiasm; he would argue that the time was coming when the director and not the financier would con-

ceive films and make them. In the interim, he argued about Spain, he spoke at public meetings, he helped to gather contributions, and all the while he was losing his first wife. She was unhappy, she had lost him somewhere, and she hated the capital. She felt he did not want her any longer, and it was true; he did not; he wanted a woman who was more attractive, more intelligent, more his equal; indeed, he wanted more than one woman. After the years of his youth when he had been hungry for women and unable to find them, he saw before him in the capital a world of stimulation, and it made him anxious to be free.

However, he felt guilty about his wife. He had needed her so much at one time and they had shared his exciting success, they had been good friends, she had taught him so much, and it was not her fault that now he knew more. He would think at times that his work was blemished not only by the studio, but by himself. That was the trouble with their marriage, he would tell himself; he was too comfortable and too bored, he was not growing in experience. So, in the midst of such trouble, they decided to go together to Spain.

He got to the front lines as a visitor. The year he spent there was wasted, and it was impossible to bring back the movie he had hoped to make for the co-operation he needed was spoiled by bitter political feuds. When it was over, he came back disheartened. With their other differences, there was now an ideological flaw between his wife and himself; she would remark bitterly that he was cynical. "The war which put a finish to five hundred years," he was fond of remarking, and they returned to that marriage which only deteriorate, politics gone, activity gone, only the capital to share between them. He had his affairs, she had her affairs; they told each other about them for they were determined to remain friends; they swore they must be honest to one another. Yet they quarreled. He had been offered an enormous salary at Supreme Pictures, and he argued that he should take it, she argued that he should not; he was full of the decision that to make the movies he wanted, he must be powerful in a studio, he must triumph first in a world of practical affairs. He made two bad pictures and one of them made a great deal of money, and then his wife wanted a divorce, she had found someone else. He had dreamed for years of exactly such a solution, yet at that moment to his surprise, he could not let her go; they had one of those final reconciliations which are always so sad; and a half year later they divorced. Eventually she married a labor-union organizer, and after a year or two Eitel ceased to visit her. By now he could barely remember her.

During those years he had continued to think of himself as a man who did not have the manners to satisfy his reputation. It was therefore understandable that he married an actress from the social register. While it lasted, he made movies, many movies, he bought a fourteen-room house with a studio, a library, a wine closet, a gymnasium, a swimming pool. There was a four-car garage, a volleyball court, a badminton court, and a tennis court; vines grew on the terraces and framed a formal garden, a row of cypresses leaned toward the ocean, and there was a kennel for a dozen dogs. That was his second marriage and he kept the house long after the wife.

His second divorce coincided with his entrance into the Army. In Europe, he made training films and combat films and traveled the cocktail circuit of generals and international beauties and black marketeers, of politicians and movie producers and statesmen. He even made the last of his good films, a documentary on parachute troops so different from all the battles one saw on the screen that the Army refused to release it.

When Eitel came back from the war, he acquired the last of his reputations. There was a year or two when it was rumored that he had slept with half the good-looking women of the capital, and it was a rare week which did not have his name in one gossip column or another. At Supreme, he continued to make pictures which were by starts brilliant and exciting, and more often pretentious, their merit usually limited to a powerful beginning or individual scenes of a quality which recalled his early work. As his talent deteriorated—with no discernible damage to his career for many of his films made money and he was the highest-paid director at the studio—he seemed to show a preference for movies of violent action and bizarre character until it became at last a virtual trade-mark, and "the Eitel touch" was sufficient to guarantee a pastiche of exotic murders. "Audiences are made up of sentimental necrophiles," he said to me once.

Yet of all that time which passed in making money and spending most of it, in directing films which were wholly satisfactory neither to himself nor to the studio, and were a compromise—actors, story, and plot furnished by Supreme Pictures; atmosphere and master's touch by Charles Francis Eitel—it was his last year at the studio which concerned Eitel the most. Over and over he would return to it in conversation, examining the particulars as if fascinated by the story of someone other than himself, wondering as did many of the people in Desert D'Or whether that year, despite its melodramatic excesses and flamboyant misfortunes, could be a preface to serious work he would do again, or if it were no more than another series of incidents in what he had come to consider his degeneration.

The last year at the studio had begun with his third divorce. He always married out of pity, Eitel said to me, and he had come to distrust pity. It was the sure sign of vanity. "I'm the archetype of the fellow who marries five or six times because he just can't believe the poor girl will live without him." The third wife had been beautiful, she had been the Lulu Meyers of whom Jay-Jay had spoken. "You'll meet her sooner or later," Eitel told me. "She comes down here between pictures." Lulu was very young, Eitel went on, he had really believed she needed him. "It's demoralizing when a marriage ends. You always go hog-wild. And to make matters worse, I wasn't working on a picture at the time. I don't know

why, I got into the most dreary sort of affair with a Rumanian actress. She had had one of those lives which are so horrible you can't even bear to think about them. Her first husband whom she claims she loved was killed in a street accident, her second husband stole her money. Oh, it was grim. She was apparently very well known in Rumania, and when the war came she was put into a concentration camp, although for all I know she could just as well have been a *collaborateur*. In any case, she came here with nothing but the most atrocious Rumanian accent. It doesn't matter what kind of star she may have been in Rumania, there are not many roles you can play when you're close to fifty, your looks are obviously fading, and you have that atrocious accent. She made some sort of living being technical adviser on films with a Balkan locale."

We were sitting on the patio which opened from the living room of Eitel's house, and rather abruptly he stopped and made a face at the yucca tree turning blue in the twilight shadows. "Sergius O'Shaugnessy," he said with the comic pompousness he loved to give my name, "what are you doing here? Here in Desert D'Or?"

"Nothing," I said, "I'm trying to forget how to fly a plane."

"Do you have money to do this forever?" he asked me.

"For a year or so."

"Then what?"

"I'll worry about that when my money is gone."

"You're really here to have a good time?" Eitel asked incredulously. I nodded. "Women?" he went on.

"Yes."

"Sergius, you're a nineteenth-century gentleman," he said, and we both laughed.

"The worst thing about my Rumanian," Eitel continued, "is that she had been very attractive once, and too many men had been in love with her. Now, I'm afraid, it was the reverse. She was unadmired, she was vulnerable, and so she adored me." He couldn't bear her, Eitel explained, and therefore he felt obliged to be as nice as possible. "An affair on that basis can go on forever. It continued for the whole year. I've never been the kind of man who can be faithful to a woman with any regularity. I've always been the sort of decent chappie who hops from one woman's bed to another in the course of an evening because that's the only prescription which allows me to be honestly fond of both the ladies, but I was faithful in my way to the Rumanian. She would have liked to see me every night for she dreaded to be alone, and I would have liked never to see her again, and so we settled for two nights a week. It didn't matter if I were in the middle of a romance or between girls, whether I had a date that night or not—on Tuesday night and Thursday night I went to her apartment to sleep. I can say, parenthetically, that she was passionate in a depressing way."

"How can passion be depressing?" I asked, and my voice sounded so naive to me that I must have flushed.

Eitel was kind about it. "You're right, Sergius. It wasn't really passion, and that's why it left me low. She was hungry, that's all, and I've always had a horror of greedy people even if they're starving." He started to pour himself a drink, and instead merely rattled the ice cubes in his glass. "As I say, I believed that I couldn't stand her, and the scrupulousness with which I went to see her was due to no more than my wish not to cause her any hurt. But, looking back, I can say that I was wrong. I needed to see her."

"You felt more for her than you thought?"

He shook his head. "Oh, I can see her virtues now, but actually she had very little to do with it. I just needed the discipline of having one thing I knew I would do at a certain time." He shrugged. "As I say, I was in bad shape after Lulu moved out."

"Some of the people here say you're still in love with her," I said directly. I think I believed this myself. I had seen Lulu Meyers not more than a year ago, but I had seen her from a distance of twenty yards when she had passed for a minute through our officer's mess encircled by admiring generals and colonels, and I had seen her again from a hundred yards away and with ten thousand soldiers between us while she had prattled a little song on an improvised overseas stage, and had told her jokes and had been utterly unattainable like some fairy princess of sex who had flown across the Pacific to anoint us with tiny favors, a whiff of her perfume, a nail she had lost from her pumps, an eyelet from her evening gown. I even remembered having heard the name of her husband, and having forgotten it, and so the situation seemed impressive and a little fantastic to be able to speak casually of her now to the man who had been her husband and had become my friend.

"In love with Lulu?" Eitel asked. He began to laugh. "Why, Sergius, our marriage was the mating of zero and zero." He poured his drink and took a sip before putting it down. "When Lulu and I got married, I knew it could never last. That was what bothered me afterward. You begin to think you're a sleepwalker when you can't even believe in your marriage on your wedding day. I just had the feeling that everything in my life was pointless. That's why I needed the Rumanian. My work was going to hell."

32

His last picture, *Love Is But A Moment*, had been an expensive failure. It had come upon him that after fifteen years and twenty-eight pictures, he was further away than when he had started, from his private goal of working at the studio, of playing their game, until someday he would be powerful enough to make only those pictures he cared to film. Instead, he had made their pictures, had occupied in the process no more essential part than the corrupt and successful painter who leaves to his apprentices the heart of his canvas, and contents himself with no more than a signature and a few characteristic brush strokes. He was not even startled to discover that he had no real desire to make the films he had once conceived, and he would wonder at times how he had stayed so long, resentful of the men for whom he must work, scornful of what his pictures communicated, abusing the capital with those derisive jokes so common there, until the day he realized with what depression, that for better or worse, it was his true marriage and he knew nowhere else to go. Worse. After fifteen years, the commercial reputation at which he had sneered was in the process of being lost. His last picture, *Love . . .*, had been a fiasco, but the two which preceded it had not been successful either. "And then," Eitel said, "there was that damned Subversive Committee." It had hung over him for months. There were so many petitions to which he had signed his name, so many causes to which he had given money, first from conviction, then from guilt, finally from habit. It was part of the past; he always thought of himself now as indifferent to politics, yet he learned that in the next public hearings on subversion in the film industry, he would be summoned, and if he were not willing to give the name of everyone he knew who had ever belonged to any of the parties and committees on the government's proscribed list, he could never work again in the capital. That was the sort of test he would have welcomed in those happy years of the depression when he had thought of himself as a rebel.

Now, it was much more difficult. It seemed so pointless a gesture. He felt nothing for all those people he once had known; some he liked in memory, some he disliked, but it seemed ridiculous to end his career by defending them with his silence and so indirectly defending a political system he had come to hate. Yet there remained his pride. One did not go crawling before politically ambitious men.

"It was horrible," Eitel said. "I couldn't make up my mind." He smiled at the memory as if relieved it were gone. "You can have no idea of the work I put in. I had no time to ponder the moral questions, I was too busy having conferences with my lawyer, my agent was taking soundings at the studio, my business manager was lost in sessions with accountants to review my income-tax returns. They analyzed the situation, they refined it, they analyzed it again, and there was no alternative. My expenses were high, they told me, my salary was a necessity, my capital had been drained in divorce settlements, and Supreme Pictures was not going to protect me from the Committee. What with economic and television and a dozen other things, the studio wanted the opportunity to suspend me from our contract. My agent was even convinced that they had encouraged the Committee to start on me. It seemed that when one got down to it, I had very little real money. Therefore, they all advised the same thing. I would have to co-operate with the Committee." Eitel shrugged. "I said I would. I was sick about it, but there it was. My lawyer

53

and I started to spend hours going over names. I began to realize that I must have known five thousand people in the capital. In the middle of it all I started changing my mind again. I got the lawyer to draw up a different plan of procedure in case I should decide not to co-operate. And all the while friends kept seeing me and giving advice. Some insisted I should talk, others begged me to be an unfriendly witness, others came just to confess that they didn't know what they would do. And I was finding it hard to sleep. It's not a very pleasant sensation for a man over forty to lie in bed night after night and say to himself, 'Who are you? What do you want?' The Committee was scheduled to begin its hearings in a month, and I felt as if it were my execution date. What nobody took into account was the picture I was making. The studio had assigned me to film a musical comedy called *Clouds Ahoy*. I couldn't have asked for anything worse. I hate musical comedies."

Nonetheless, it was painful to discover that he could do such pictures less well than other directors for whom he had no respect. To his horror, he found that he seemed unable to do his work, and that to the people around him, in those seismographic indications of prestige which quivered through the studio, he was now a man on trial. His producer fretted and interfered on the set, there were visits by high studio executives who did not say a word. Everything about the picture was going wrong. There were delays which could have been avoided and others which could not; the star became ill, the Technicolor suffered by unbelievable errors in lighting, a grip was hurt, Eitel had a fight with the cameraman; it was decided that changes must be made in the script, the production schedule fell days behind, and an expensive scene with extras, calculated to take a morning, extended into the morning of the next day; efficiency was unprecedentedly lax, and Eitel knew he was to blame. Each night for salt to his sores, he was obliged to sit in a projection room and watch the rushes from the previous week. The picture was very bad. The weaknesses of the script had become infirmities, the pace was always too slow or too rapid, the acting was unspeakable, the comedy was not funny, the sentiment was pious, and the production numbers with their troops of chorus girls and their kaleidoscope of scenery seemed divided brutally in conception by the ideas of the dance director and the arbitrary prejudices of Eitel who insisted the other was without musical imagination, Eitel who could not recognize a musical theme. Most revolting of all was "the Eitel touch"; here and there would be a scene with abstract composition, intricate shadows, and a meaningless patch of atmosphere. It continued like this for three weeks of shooting, until one morning, with the picture not yet half done, everything went wrong, and everyone, producer, director, actors, cameramen, and grips, dance director and chorus, spilled irritably about the sound stage. Eitel, his nerves exasperated beyond control, simply walked off the set and left the studio, not knowing whether he were stricken or exalted. Immediately, his contract was revoked by Supreme Pictures, and the next morning another director was given the thankless office of finishing *Clouds Ahoy*. Eitel was not even present to learn the news. When he quit the studio that morning, he was at the beginning of acting out a scenario of his own, which, whether ahead or behind of schedule, took several days to unwind.

36

CHAPTER SIX

Eitel returned directly to his fourteen-room house, and told the butler not to answer the door. His secretary was away on vacation, and so he called his telephone service and instructed them to take his messages for the next two days. Then he sat down in his study and began to drink. His telephone rang all that afternoon and the only indication of how much liquor he had swallowed was that the sound of the phone became increasingly ludicrous. By evening he began to feel dizzy. There was something absurd to him in the thought that he was acting like any male star who would have such a scene as this: in cinematic shorthand the hero drank alone and that was equal to suffering.

The fact was that he could not get drunk. Too sobering was the thought that in forty-eight hours he was due to appear before the Committee. "I'm free now," he would tell himself, "I can do what I want," and yet he seemed able to think of nothing but how to calculate the damage of having quit the set of *Clouds Ahoy*. His contract with Supreme was ruined, there was no doubt of that. Still, he was not in a hopeless situation. If he co-operated with the Committee, he would be able to find work at another studio or even negotiate a more modest contract with Supreme. What it amounted to, was that a quick fit of temper was going to cost him a few hundred thousand dollars over the next five years. "It all goes in taxes anyway," he caught himself thinking, and felt loathsome to himself. Was it for this that he had wished to be free so many times? It seemed more impossible than ever to make up his mind.

The night before the day he was required to appear, he still had not seen his lawyer, and indeed had spoken to him on the phone only long enough to say that he would meet him at his office a half hour before the hearings started. Then Eitel rang his answer service and prepared to take the list of messages which had accumulated in the thirty-six hours since he had left the studio. There had been more than a hundred calls, and after a while he became weary of noting all the items. "Just give me the names, not the messages," he said to the operator, and dismissed them from his mind even as she mentioned them. When the girl came to Marion Faye, he stopped her. "What did Faye want?" Eitel asked.

"He didn't leave any message. Just a phone number."

"All right. Thank you. I'll take that, and you can give me the rest later."

Faye arrived an hour after Eitel phoned. "Trying to get used to living alone?" he greeted Eitel.

"Maybe that's what it is."

Marion sat down and tapped a cigarette carefully on his platinum case. "I saw Dorothea yesterday," he said. "She's betting that you'll talk."

"I didn't know people were betting on me," Eitel said.

Faye shrugged. "People bet on everything."

"I wonder why?"

"Because it lets them feel good."

"Well," Eitel said, "how are you betting, Marion?"

Faye looked at him. "I put down three hundred dollars that Dorothea is wrong."

"Maybe you'd better hedge that bet."

"I'd rather lose it." Marion's face was completely without expression.

Eitel tried to sit back in his chair. "I've been hearing unpleasant stories about what you're doing in Desert D'Or."

"They're true."

"I don't understand it."

"We'll talk another time about why I'm a pimp. I just wanted to tell you . . ."

"Yes, what did you want to tell me?"

Marion's voice was not completely in control. "I wanted to say that if I lose my bet, I end all relations with you." The formality of his sentence made him look very young.

"Marion!" Eitel said for want of anything better.

"I mean what I say," Faye repeated.

"Perhaps I've seen you three times in the last three years. Not much of a friendship to be lost there."

"Go screw," said Faye. His voice was throbbing.

The obscenity irritated Eitel. Years ago, Marion had been exceptionally articulate. "I've been wanting to talk about you," Eitel said.

"Look," Faye muttered, "I grasp you, Charley. You're not going to sing."

"Maybe I will."

"For what? So they'll let you make some more crud?"

"What else is there?" Eitel said.

"Why don't you find out? That's what you've been telling yourself you wanted for the last fifteen years."

Eitel never was certain what he would have done if Faye hadn't visited him, but the next morning, after a particularly bad night, he walked into his lawyer's office, gave his broad amused smile, and said easily, "I'm not going to give any names," as if this had been determined from the very beginning. "Just keep me out of jail, that's all."

"Sure you won't change your mind on the way over," the lawyer asked.

"Not this trip."

In the weeks which followed, Eitel would try to think about his appearance before the Committee for it stood out in his memory as something which made him feel proud. He had acted exactly as he might have hoped to act; he was cool, his voice never lost its control, and for two hours, carried by his excitement, he dodged questions, returned maddening answers, tiptoed the line between mockery of the Committee and a trial for contempt, and with glee that the pressure of all these weeks was finally released, he felt obliged to ruin every retreat. When it was over, he passed through a crowd of photographers, slipped into his car, and raced away. It was one o'clock in the afternoon, but he was hardly hungry. Feeding on his exhilaration, he went for a drive through the mountains, his nerves enjoying every scream of the tires along the winding road.

That was finally spent. More numb than not, he crawled along a boulevard which led to the ocean, and cruised there for miles, his eyes without attention for the blue water, the cabanas of the cinema colony, or the olive hills which rose above the highway. On a wide beach some distance from the city where the swell rolled in on long even waves, he stopped his car, sat on the edge of shore, and watched the surfboard riders. They were all young, somewhere between eighteen and twenty-two, and to Eitel they were all beautiful, both boys and girls, their bodies supple, their skin burned to a golden bronze, their hair bleached by the sun. They sprawled in circles on the sand, wrestling with one another, sleeping, watching the water a half mile from shore where the riders would stand up and poise themselves on the first rise of the swell. Their feet on the board, they would race ahead of the surf, their arms outstretched in confident balance, young birds, glider-children. When they had run into shallow water and could stand no longer, they would dismount, and propping the enormous board into the sand at water's edge, would lie beside one another, the boys resting their heads on the hips of the girls. Eitel watched them, became absorbed in studying a tall strong girl with round limbs and magnificent breasts. Not ten feet from him, she stood alone, brushing sand from her light hair, her back curled. She seemed utterly confident of the beauty of her body and the sport of being alive. "I must make love to that girl," Eitel thought with a spontaneity rare for him.

"Is it hard to learn how to ride these boards?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, depends." She seemed more concerned with the sand in her hair.

"Whom could I get to teach me?" he tried again.

"I don't know. Why don't you try it yourself?" He could sense how indifferent she was to him, and it brought an uncomfortable tingling to the skin of his face.

"If you didn't help me, I'd probably drown," he said with twinkling eyes and a voice to charm the dead. But he saw himself as she must have seen him, and he felt sallow and overweight.

The girl yawned. "Get a board and somebody'll show you." A tow-headed youth of nineteen with broad shoulders and

powerful legs went racing past them and slapped her on the thigh. "Come on in," he called in a booming voice, his short chopped features a cut of healthy meat to match the muscles of his limbs. "Oh, Chuck, wait till I get *you*!" the girl shouted, and ran down the beach after him. Chuck stopped, she caught him, and they struggled with animal pleasure, Chuck throwing sand on her hair while she hooted with laughter. A minute later, running side by side, they dove into the shallow water, and came up splashing at each other.

"I was ready to do anything," Eitel said to me, "to tell her my name, to hint about all sorts of chances for her." He stopped. "I understood suddenly that I was without a name, and it was the most awful sensation. I had felt important all those years because so many people wished to meet Charles Francis Eitel, and to meet him, they had had to meet me first. Now, there was only me." He gave a self-amused smile. "That was the thing with this girl. You see, it had been ages since I talked to a woman who did not know all about me before I met her, and here was a young girl who could look at me and not be interested at all. How healthy those kids were. They looked like you," he said without pretense, and I glimpsed another reason why Eitel was pleased with my company.

"Back I got into my guilt-laden Cadillac and returned to town, feeling like a little man who tries to grow a mustache. When I got home, there was a call from my Rumanian. She was still loyal." Eitel shook his head at himself. "It convinced me I had to get out of the city immediately. Somehow after seeing that girl at the beach, I knew I couldn't go on with the Rumanian. Yet I had never liked her so much as I did at that moment. So I had enough sense to know I was about to get into something absolutely impossible. I spoke to my business manager and told him to put the house up for sale and pay the servants off, and I got on a plane for Mexico." That evening on the flight south, he had glanced at the newspapers long enough to see that he was on the front page. "How they must be abusing me," he had thought, and drifted into an exhausted sleep.

In Mexico, at a seashore resort which resembled nothing so much as Desert D'Or glued to the side of a cliff, the reaction followed him. There were hundreds of letters. Long arguments from pacifists discussed the merits and the weaknesses of the position he had taken and invited him to answer, a pamphlet from a vegetarian society found its way, a Lulu Meyers Fan Club president wrote she was happy Lulu had divorced him, anonymous letters full of abuse told him he had soiled the heroic example of those witnesses who had refused to say even a word to the

Committee, obscene notes came from illiterates, congratulations from a few, and there was even a personal letter from an anti-tobacco society which enclosed a photograph circled in red pencil of Eitel smoking a cigarette after testimony, and the writer requested him to be more solicitous in the future not to give indirect advertisements to the tobacco industry. "Eitel among the cranks," he had thought, and turned to open the letter from his business manager which announced the catastrophe of the back income taxes.

"It wasn't too bad in Mexico," Eitel said, "but on the other hand it was terrible. You may not believe it knowing me now, but I used to be capable of enormous amounts of work, and all of a sudden I didn't seem able to accomplish anything."

I nodded; besides everything else I had heard stories of Eitel's ability to work eighteen hours a day while making a picture.

"There was a week or two down there," he went on, "when I began to think I was in very poor shape. With all I've done in my life it may sound odd to you, but I started to think of how in college I used to dream of being by myself, and how once I graduated I would spend years wandering around, picking up experiences here and there. It's naive of course but every artist has that sort of ambition when he's young. For that matter, most people do I suspect. Anyway, I married much too soon, and when I thought about it in Mexico, it seemed to me that ever since I had never been free at all. I had always been involved in something I didn't really want. I began to think that the main reason I acted the way I did with the Committee was to give myself another chance to be alone. And yet I didn't know what to do with the chance I had made. Yes," he said reflectively, "that put me in bad shape." Eitel smiled. "Anyway, win or lose, I managed to stop brooding about that. I tried to stay away from the places where I might meet people I knew, and I tried to think, and after a while I began to get interested in a little story I had been saving for years." He tapped the manuscript on the table beside him. "If I can bring this off, it'll make a movie that can justify so much bad work I did." He riffled the pages. "Pity I had to come back."

"You don't really seem to be doing much more here than you did in Mexico," I said gently.

Eitel nodded. "It's ridiculous, I know, but I couldn't take the loneliness there. When you're my age it's not that simple to go looking for a new place. I wanted to be among people who knew me." He smiled. "Sergius, I swear I'll get down to work. This movie ought to be made."

"Would anybody give you money?" I asked.

"That's not really the problem," Eitel said. "There's a producer I know in London. I don't like him much, but if I have to, I can work with him. We've corresponded. He's wild about my idea, and in Europe I can direct the picture under a pseudonym. All that's necessary is to write a good script." He sighed. "Only, it's not that simple. I feel as if I've been . . . amputated."

39

I understood Eitel even less when he told me these stories. I had always assumed that to know oneself was all that was necessary to master one's life. I did not comprehend how Eitel could see himself so clearly, and be able to do nothing about it. Nor could I learn to copy his facility in talking about himself. I even wondered that he did not resent my silence about my past. I was tempted to talk to him, to try to explain things I could not explain to myself, but it was not possible. Often, after I had left him, and had gone back to that empty house I rented on the edge of the desert, I would leave off thinking about Eitel with his world so strange to me, and I would be marooned in my own past with all its pain and all its confusion, so intense that I cannot remember ever mentioning the orphanage once I had become a pilot. I had had such a passion to be treated like everybody else, at least everybody who had succeeded, and to succeed I studied hours at night while I was a private to pass the pre-flight examinations. Until I graduated from flying school, nothing seemed so important as to get my wings.

It is hard to describe what being a flier meant to me. I had friendships which I thought would last forever, and in combat, practically as a matter of course, I saved the life of other pilots several times just as they in turn did the same to me. There was a feeling for each other which was rare and exciting. We knew, or so we felt, that there was no one like us. We were better, we were stronger, we were very proud.

Unfortunately, that life soured. I can even pick the episode I remember best, and ironically it did not occur in combat. Fighting an enemy plane was impersonal and had the exhilaration of all impersonal contests; I never felt I had done anything but win a game. As time went on, I became more tense, we all did, but it was the only period in my life when I was happy and did not want to be somewhere else. Even the thought of death was not disturbing for I had no desire for any life outside the Air Corps. I could not conceive of what I might do afterward.

Sometimes on tactical missions we would lay fire bombs into little Oriental villages. I did not like that particularly, but I would be busy with the technique required to dive my plane and drop the jellied gasoline into the proper part of the pattern. Rarely did I think of it any other way. From the air, a city in flames is not an ugly sight.

One morning, however, I came back from such a mission and went into Officer's Mess for lunch. We were stationed at an airfield near Tokyo, and one of our Japanese K.P.'s, a fifteen-year-old boy, had just burned his arm in a kettle of overturned soup. Like most Oriental peasants he was tough, and so he brought the dishes with one hand, his burned arm held stiffly behind him while the sweat stood on his brow, and he bobbed his head in little apologetic grimaces because he was disturbing our service. I could not take my eyes from that burn; it ran from the elbow to the shoulder, and the skin had turned a violent pink. I found it impossible to eat.

After lunch I took the K.P. aside, and asked the cooks for tannic-acid ointment. There was none none in the kitchen, and so I insisted that they boil tea and apply compresses to his arm. Suddenly, I realized how ridiculous this was. Two hours ago, I had been busy scorching a dozen people, or two dozen, or had it been a hundred.

No matter how I tried to banish the image, I could never quite be rid of the Japanese boy with his stiff burned arm and his apologetic smile. No sudden changes occurred in me, but over a period of time, the comradeship I had felt for most of the fliers turned false for me. I began to look at them in a new way, and their laughter, their pleasures, even their friendship itself, seemed unfeeling to me. They were one species and I was another; they were happy and I was an imposter. So, again, I was forced to writhe with emotions I had long forgotten, and I was sick, for I had a choice to make. My missions were completed, my term of service was over, and I had to decide whether or not I wished to find a career in the Air Corps. Trying to make up my mind I grew worse, I had a small breakdown, and spent a season in the hospital. I was not very sick, but it was still a breakdown, and for seven weeks I lay in bed and felt very little. When I got up, the decision had been made for me. I was to be given a medical discharge. It did not matter terribly. Flying had become too difficult. Resting in that bed other memories had returned, and I thought of the secret diaries I had kept as a boy, and the books I had read with such passion whenever I could spend an hour in a public library. In the void future which extended beyond the Air Corps, I could feel some hope when I thought of writing again.

For such a purpose, Desert D'Or may have seemed an odd place to stay, and indeed I hardly wrote a word while I was at the resort. But I was not ready to work; I needed time for proper convalescence and I drifted through the months I remained there. I do not know if I can explain that I did not want to feel too much, and I certainly did not want to think. I had the curious idea that there were two worlds. There was a real world as I called it, a world of wars and disasters and children's homes on dreary back streets, and this real world, this world of facts, was fantastic. It was a world where orphans burned orphans, and extraordinary events occurred which one could never understand; it was better not even to think of them. I preferred the imaginary world in which almost everyone lived, where life passed, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not, and facts were buried.

But I write too much, and it is all a preface. Within a few days the winter season was to start, and all of that predictable routine I divided so equally between Dorothea at The Hangover and Eitel at the Yacht Club became altered. Before the movie colony had been in Desert D'Or a week, whatever little story I have to tell was fairly begun.

PART 2

CHAPTER SEVEN

With the appearance of the movie colony, Desert D'Or grew crowded with automobiles, the hotels filled, and the night clubs were open until morning. Among the guests who clustered around the pool of the Yacht Club there were some who actually went swimming, and the sight of a bather no longer attracted one's attention like a dancer alone on the floor.

It was then I realized how much Eitel had dreaded this invasion. In contrast to his previous habits, he kept to his own house, and was rarely to be seen at the hotel. When he did sit in the open-air café, the script was no longer with him, and he read a newspaper or a book, devoting himself to the pages with a concentration which was obviously false. Occasionally people still stopped to talk to him, and he would listen and give his answers, as solicitous as ever, but I noticed that few of the new guests, most of whom he had known for years, would stay for more than a minute before moving on, and there were afternoons when he was entirely alone. He had come to prefer privacy, and I often sensed the effort it needed for him to appear in public.

One day when I had stopped by his house, the phone rang in Eitel's bedroom. From the foyer I could hear him talking. It was plain he was being invited to visit somebody who had just arrived at the Yacht Club, and when he joined me again his pleasure was obvious. "How would you like to meet a pirate?" he said with a laugh he could not contain.

"Who is it?"

"The producer, Collie Munshin."

"Why do you call him a pirate?" I asked.

"Just wait until you meet him."

But Eitel could not keep himself from saying more. I think he was annoyed at how much pleasure the invitation had given him.

Munshin was the son-in-law of Herman Teppis, Eitel explained, and Teppis was the head of Supreme Pictures. Munshin had married Teppis' daughter, and it had helped to make him one of the most important producers in the capital. "Not that he wouldn't have made it anyway," Eitel said. "Nothing could have stopped Collie." He had been, it seemed, a little bit of many things, a salesman, a newspaperman, a radio announcer on an unimportant station, a press-relations consultant, an actor's agent, an assistant producer, and finally a producer. "Once upon a time," Eitel went on, "he was practically an office boy for me. I know the key to Collie. He's shameless. You can't stop a man who's never been embarrassed by himself."

42

Eitel began to change his shirt. By the care with which he selected his wardrobe, I knew he did not feel as casual as he was attempting to appear. "Wonder why he wants to see me?" he said aloud in the middle of dressing. "I suppose he wants to steal an idea."

"Steal an idea?" I parroted.

"It's his technique. Collie gets a feeling about a story. Not anything you can really name. Some vague idea. Then he invites a writer who's out of work to come to lunch. He hints to the writer that he's interested in hiring him. He somehow conveys the nuance of ideas which do not even exist. He listens to the writer's suggestions, and they talk the thing up. The next day he invites another man to lunch. By the time he's seen half a dozen writers he has a story and then he uses one of the peons he keeps locked in a hole to write the thing. When Collie is done, he can sell the story to the studio as his own creation. Oh, he's clever, he's tenacious, he's scheming . . ." Eitel ran out of words.

"What's to keep a man like him from becoming president?" I asked.

"Nothing," said Eitel, putting on a jacket, "he'll run the world someday."

As he closed the door behind us, Eitel added, "there's one thing which might hold him up. He has trouble with women."

"Does he have so many?"

"No. Collie wouldn't dare to keep a harem when his wife is Herman Teppis' daughter. There's only one girl, and she's caused him trouble enough with H.T. It's some dancer he keeps tucked away. She's been his mistress for several years. I've never met the girl, but Collie will be the first to tell you the troubles she gives him. It's a conventional relationship. She wants him to divorce his wife and marry her, and Collie allows her to believe that he will. **Poor** boy, he can't stand to let go of anything." Eitel chuckled. "However, the girl friend makes him pay. When Collie's not around, his little kitten will go for a romp. A couple of actors who've worked for me have been with her. They tell me she's extraordinary in bed."

"It must be humiliating for him."

"I don't know," Eitel said; "there are parts and parts to Collie. He enjoys being a martyr."

"You certainly know some fine people," I told him.

"It's all in the viewpoint. Collie's not so bad. Nobody's really a monster once you get to understand them."

We had come to Munshin's bungalow, and Eitel clapped the knocker on the pastel-colored door. After a pause I could hear someone running toward us, and then it flew open, and I had no more than a glimpse of the back of a fat man in a dressing gown who went bounding away to the phone, the gown flapping against his calves, while he called over his shoulder, "Come in. Be with you in a minute, fellows." He was talking in a high-pitched gentle voice to someone in New York, holding the receiver in his left hand, while with his right he was dexterously mixing drinks for us, carrying on not only his business conversation, but acknowledging the introduction to me, opening a wide smile across his face. A little under medium height, with short turned-up features, he gave a clown's appearance for the balloon of his head sat upon the larger sphere of his torso, and he seemed at first meeting a jolly buffoon. The drinks made, he passed them over with a wink, and his right hand free again, he began to caress his light hair, discovering a bald spot on his head and then patting it into concealment again, only to desert his head for his belly which he prodded gingerly as if to discover whether it concealed an ache. His energy was certainly considerable; I had the idea it would be rare to see him doing but one thing at a time.

Eitel sat down with a bored look and smiled familiarly at the producer's calisthenics. When the call was done, Munshin bounced to his feet, and advanced on Eitel with an outstretched hand and a grin of delight on his face. "*Charley!*" he said, as if Eitel had just entered the room and he were surprised to see him. "You look great. How have you been?" Munshin asked, his unoccupied fingers covering their handclasp. "I've been hearing great things about you."

"Stop it, Collie," Eitel laughed, "there's nothing you can steal from me."

"Steal? Lover, I just want to steal your company." He clamped a bear-hug on Eitel's neck. "You look great," he repeated. "I've been hearing wonderful things about your script. I want to read it when it's done."

"What for?" Eitel asked.

"I want to buy it." He said this as if no obstacle existed to buying anything from Eitel.

"The only way I'll let you buy it is blind."

"I'll buy it blind. If it's from you, Charley, I'll buy it blind."

"You wouldn't buy Shakespeare blind."

As I had noticed so many times, Eitel was assuming the color of the person to whom he spoke, and now he used Munshin's idiom, employing a rough teasing voice which was no more than a copy of the original. I had the feeling that if I had not been there, if indeed he had not gone to some length to disparage Munshin to me, he would have been far more cordial, as though not to be friendly with a person was an effort too difficult to sustain.

"You think I'm kidding," Munshin said in a reproachful voice.

"Stop it, Collie," Eitel said again.

As he spoke, Munshin continued to touch Eitel, pinching his elbow, patting his shoulder, jabbing his ribs. "Charley, don't show your script to anybody. Not till it's done. Just work on it. Don't worry about your situation. It'll straighten out."

"Quit bullying me. You know I'm going to make the picture by myself."

"That's your style, Charley," Munshin said with a profound nod. "That's the way you always should have worked."

He told us a joke, chattered some gossip, and kept his hands upon Eitel's body in an unrelenting set of movements which called up the picture of a genial house detective searching for a weapon.

"I've thought of a great movie to make," he announced.

"What is it?" I asked from politeness, for Eitel merely made a face. The producer mentioned a famous French novel. "That author knows everything about sex," Munshin declared. "I'll never be able to think I'm in love again."

"Why don't you do the life of the Marquis de Sade?" Eitel drawled.

"You think I wouldn't if I could find a gimmick? I like the classics. They're tested."

"Collie," Eitel said, "sit down and tell me the story you really have."

"I don't have a thing. I'm open to suggestion. I'm tired of making the same old stuff. I got into the industry for the reason we all got into it. Every man has a dream in this business."

"He's absolutely unscrupulous," Eitel said with pride. Collie merely grinned. He cocked his head to the side with the cunning, delighted look of a dog who is being mock-reprimanded.

"You're a born exaggerator," Munshin said.

"You can't stop Collie."

"I love you."

Munshin poured another drink for us. Like a baby, his upper lip was covered with perspiration. "Well, how are things?" he said, changing his tone.

"Just fine, Collie. How are things with you?" Eitel asked in an indifferent voice. I had noticed that he was very much on guard. In contrast to his usual animation, he seemed reluctant to say more than a few noncommittal words.

"Charley, my personal life is in very bad shape."

"Your wife?"

Munshin stared into space, his hard small eyes the one suggestion of bone beneath his fat. "Well, things are always the same between her and me."

"What is it, then, Collie?"

"I've decided to give the brush to my girl friend."

Eitel began to laugh. "It's about time."

"Now, don't laugh, Charley. This is important to me."

I was surprised at the way Munshin spoke so frankly. He had not known me fifteen minutes, and yet he seemed as ready to talk as if he were alone with Eitel. I was still to learn that Munshin, like many people from the capital, could speak openly and warmly about his personal life while remaining a model of reserve in his business operations.

"You're not really giving her up?" Eitel exclaimed. "What's the matter, has Teppis laid down the law?"

"Charley!" Munshin said in a tone of reproach, "this is a personal tragedy for me."

"I suppose you're in love with the girl." Obviously forcing himself to be unpleasant, Eitel's voice had become husky with tension.

"No, now I wouldn't say that. It's hard to explain."

"Oh, I'm sure of that, Collie."

"I'm very worried about her future," Munshin said glumly, his fingers prodding his belly again for the concealed stomach pain.

"From what I've heard about her, she'll get along."

"What did you hear?" Munshin asked.

"Just that while she's known you, she's had her extracurricular activities."

Munshin's round face became tolerant and sad like a priest who listens to an attack upon the church. "We live in a community of scandal," he said severely.

"Spare me, Collie," Eitel murmured.

Munshin was on his feet. "You don't understand this girl," he said in a booming theatrical voice, full of passion. I was bewildered by so sudden a transition. "She's a child. She's a beautiful, warm, simple child."

"And you're a beautiful, warm, simple father."

"I've defended you, Charley," Munshin declared. "I've defended you against stories which even you would have disliked to hear about yourself. But I'm beginning to think I was wrong. I'm beginning to think you're nothing but rottenness."

"Honest rottenness. I don't play the saint."

"I'm not claiming I'm a saint," Munshin bellowed again. "But I have feelings." He turned in my direction. "What do you see when you look at a fellow like myself?" he asked rhetorically. "You see a fat man who likes to play the fool. Does that mean I have no human sentiments?"

He was far from a clown at the moment. His mild high-pitched voice had swollen in volume and become deeper in tone. Standing over us, I could realize suddenly that he was a man of some physical power. "All right, Charley," he said, "I know what you think of me, but I'll tell you something. I may be a businessman, and you may be an artist, and I've great respect for your talent, great respect, but you're a frozen man, and I have feelings, and that's why you can't understand me."

Through this tirade, Eitel had been drawing on his cigarette. Nonchalantly, he put it out. "Why did you invite me over, Collie?"

"For friendship. Can't you understand that? I wanted to hear your troubles, and I wanted to tell you mine."

Eitel leaned forward, his broad body hunched upon itself. "I have no troubles," he said with a smile. "Let me hear yours."

46

Munshin had subsided. "There are pluses as well as minuses to this affair. It's easy to sneer at the girl," he said. "I've sneered at her myself. When I first set her up, I thought, 'Just another night-club dancer. A hot Italian babe with that hot Latin blood.' Well, I was wrong, Charley. She may not be so brilliant, and she's obviously from a poor background." He looked at me. "I've always been full of prejudices about women," Munshin said humbly. "You know, I've wanted girls with some class and distinction to them, and I'll admit it, it's what I still hold against Elena. She doesn't match up to the people I know. But that doesn't keep her from being a very human woman."

"Still, you're giving her the brush," Eitel said.

"There's no future for us. I admit it, you see, I admit my faults. I'm a social coward like everybody else in the industry."

"So like all cowards you got tired of turning down her marriage proposals."

"Elena's not a schemer," Munshin said with ardor. "You want to know something? Just a couple of days ago I tried to give her a thousand dollars. She wouldn't take it. Not once did she ever ask me to marry her. She's not the kind who threatens. It's just that I can't stand the thought she has no future with me."

"Herman Teppis can't stand the thought either."

Munshin disregarded this. "Let me tell you about her. She's a simple Italian-American girl from a poverty-ridden background. It's given her inferiority feelings. I had my analyst send her to a friend of his, but it didn't come off. She didn't have enough ego to work on. That's how serious the problem is." Munshin held out a heavy palm as if to focus our attention. "Take the way I met her. She was doing a fill-in number at a benefit I ran. I saw her in the wings, dressed up, ready to go on. A real Carmen-type. Only a Carmen shuddering with fright," said Munshin looking at us. "She was practically clawing the hand off her partner. 'There's a human being in torment,' I thought, 'a girl who's as wild and sensitive as an animal.' Yet when she got up there on the stage, she was all right. A good solid flamenco dancer. Afterward, we started talking, and she told me she couldn't even eat a piece of bread on a day she was working. I told her I thought I could help her with some of her problems and she was grateful as a puppy. That's how we started." Munshin's voice had become heavy with emotion. "You, Eitel, you'd call that scheming, I suppose. I call it sensitivity and heartbreak and all kinds of emotions. She's a girl who's all emotion."

As Munshin continued to talk, I had the feeling he described her the way he might outline a heroine in a plot, lavishing personal detail upon the story conference more interesting than the film which would issue from it.

"You take the business of being Italian," Munshin lectured us. "I can't tell you the things I've learned, the human subtleties. These distinctions in minority problems, the sort of emotions I've never considered, and I'm a good liberal. For instance, if she's served by a Negro waiter, she always has the idea that he's being a little intimate with her. I've talked to her about such problems. I tried to explain how wrong it is to have prejudice against a Negro, and she understood."

"Like that," Eitel said, snapping his fingers.

"You stop it, Charley," Munshin said, bobbing in his seat. "You understand what I mean. She was ashamed of her prejudice. She's not like all of us who are ashamed and do nothing. Elena is a person who hates everything that is small in herself. She's consumed by the passion to become a bigger person than she is, consumed, do you understand?" and he shook his fist.

"Collie, I really think you're upset."

"Take her promiscuity," Munshin went on, as if he had not heard. "She's the sort of girl who would love a husband and kids, a decent healthy mature relationship. You think it didn't bother me, her seeing other men? But I knew it was my fault. I was to blame and I'll admit it freely. What could I offer her?"

"What could the others offer her?" Eitel interposed.

"Fine. Fine. Just fine coming from you. I'll tell you, Charley, I don't believe in double standards. A woman's got just as much right as a man to sexual freedom."

"Why don't we form a club?" Eitel jeered. If he had been at all affected by Munshin a moment ago, he now seemed indifferent. "Collie, what do you want of me?" he asked coldly. Yet he was perspiring, and his fingers shredded the butt of the cigarette he had smoked.

"I've gone to bat for you, Eitel. I pleaded with H.T. not to suspend you after *Clouds Ahoy*. Are you so ungrateful that I have to remind you how many times I helped you make pictures you wanted to make?"

"And then you cut them to ribbons."

"We've had our disagreements, Charley, but I've always considered you a friend. I don't care what transpires between us today, it won't affect my attitude toward you."

Eitel merely smiled.

"I'm curious," Munshin put his hands on his knees. "What do you think of Elena the way I've described her?"

"I think she's better than you deserve."

"I'm glad you say that, Charley. It means I've been able to convey her quality." Munshin paused, and loosened the cord of his dressing gown. "You see, about an hour ago, I told Elena we couldn't go on."

"An hour ago!"

Munshin nodded.

"You mean she's here?" Eitel asked incredulously. "Here in town?"

"Yes."

"You brought her out here to give her the brush?"

Munshin started to pace the floor. "I didn't plan it. A lot of times I bring her along on my trips."

"And let her stay in a separate hotel?"

"Well, I've explained the situation."

"When is your wife due?"

"She'll be here tomorrow." Munshin blew his nose. "I had no idea it would happen like this. For months I knew I couldn't go on with Elena, but I didn't plan it for today."

Eitel shook his head. "What do you want me to do? Hold her hand?"

No, I mean . . ." Munshin looked distraught. "Charley, she doesn't know a soul in this place."

"Then let her go back to the city."

"I can't stand the thought of her being alone. She's so high-strung. There's no telling what she'll do. Charley. I'm going out of my mind." Munshin stared at his handkerchief which he still kept wadded in his hand. "Elena was the one who said we should break up. I know what it means to her. She'll put the blame on herself. She'll feel she wasn't good enough for me."

"It's the truth, isn't it?" Eitel said wearily. "That's how you feel."

"All right, I'm the rotten one. I'm no good." Munshin came to a stop in front of Eitel. "Charley, I remember you saying, it's your exact words. You said that when you were a kid you always wondered how to get a woman, and now you wonder how to get rid of one."

"So?"

"Can't you sympathize?"

"Yes."

"Could you pay her a visit?"

"I don't know her," Eitel said.

"You could be introduced as a friend of mine."

Eitel sat up. "Tell me, Collie," he said coldly, "is that why you loaned me the money two weeks ago?"

"What money?" said Munshin innocently.

"You don't have to worry about Sergius," Eitel said, and he began to laugh. "I'm ashamed of you. Two thousand dollars is a lot of money for Carlisle Munshin to pay to have a broken-down director take a girl off his hands."

"Charley, you're a corrupt man," Munshin said with vehemence. "I loaned you that money because I consider you my friend, and I oughtn't to have to tell you that you could be more discreet. If word ever got around, I'd be in trouble up to here." The producer held his finger to his throat. "It's Elena I'm thinking about now. Let this boy be the witness. If anything happens to her, part of it will be your fault."

"There's no limit to you, Collie," Eitel started to say, but Munshin interrupted. "Charley, I'm not kidding, that girl should not be left alone. Do I say I'm in the right? What do you want, my blood? Offer a solution at least."

"Turn her over to Marion Faye."

"You're heartless," Munshin said. "A human being is in pain, and you say things like that."

"I'll see her," I blurted suddenly.

"Keep out of this," Eitel snapped at me.

"Even the kid here will go," Munshin said.

Eitel lay back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling, his legs extended before him. "Okay, Collie," he said, "okay. One loan deserves another. I'll get drunk with your girl."

"You're a prince, Charley," Munshin said huskily.

"What if you-know-what happens?" Eitel drawled.

"Are you obsessed?" Munshin said. "I don't even think of things like that."

"Then what do you think of?"

"You'll like Elena and she'll like you. I'll make her feel good to know that a fellow with your reputation and your presence admires her."

"Oh, God," Eitel said.

The phone was ringing.

Munshin tried to say something more as if he were afraid Eitel might change his mind, but the noise of the telephone was too distracting. Obeying the irregular rhythm of the switchboard operator, it would stop, it would be silent for an interval, and then it would ring again.

"Answer it," Eitel said irritably.

Munshin pinched the receiver against his jaw. He was preparing to make another drink, but the sounds he heard through the earpiece froze his motion. We listened to a woman who was crying and laughing, and her hysteria quivered through the room. Weeping rose into a babel of fright. There was so much terror in the voice and so much pain that I stared at the floor in shock. One piercing cry sounded, unrestrained in its loneliness and anguish until it was almost impossible to bear.

"Where are you, Elena?" Munshin said sharply into the mouthpiece.

Some climax had passed. I could hear the sobbing diminish, a word or two be blurted forth. "I'll be right over," Munshin said. "Now, you stay there. You stay there, do you understand, Elena?" He had no sooner hung up the phone, than with rapidity for a man of his bulk, he was drawing on a suit, fastening the buttons to a shirt.

Eitel was pale. "Collie," he said with an effort, "do you want me to come along?"

"She's in her hotel room," Munshin said from the door. "I'll call you later."

Eitel nodded and sat back. We were silent once Munshin was gone. After a few minutes, Eitel got up and mixed a drink. "What a horrible thing," he muttered. "Three years out of her life."

"How does a man," I asked, "stay with a woman who's so . . . It's unpleasant."

Eitel looked up. "A little compassion, Sergius," he said. "Do you think we choose our mates?" And, moodily, he sipped on his drink.

Time passed, and we continued to drink Carlyle Munshin's liquor. Slowly, the afternoon went by. It seemed pointless to remain there, equally pointless to move on. Outside, there would be only the desert sun. "I'm depressed," Eitel announced with a broad grin after half a dozen drinks. I had the impression his face was growing numb; slowly, with tactile pleasure, he was patting the bald spot on his head. "Wonder how Collie is making out?" Eitel said after another pause.

As if in response, there was a knock on the door. I went to answer, and an elderly man shouldered me aside and walked into the living room. "Where's Carlyle?" he demanded of no one in particular. I could only follow behind him.

Eitel had stood up. "Well, Mr. Teppis," he said.

Teppis looked sourly at him and seemed to be debating whether to say anything. He was a tall powerful man with silver hair and a florid complexion, but despite his white summer suit and hand-painted tie, he was far from attractive. Beneath his surtán, his features were poor; his eyes were small and heavily pouched, his nose was flat, and his receding chin ran without interruption into the bulge of his neck. He bore an unfortunate resemblance to a bullfrog. When he spoke, it was in a thin hoarse voice. "All right," he said curtly, "what are you doing here?"

"Do you know," Eitel said stiffly, "that's a good question to ask."

"Collie's up to something," Teppis announced. "I don't know why he saw you. I wouldn't even want to breathe the air a subversive breathes. Do you know what you cost me on *Clouds Ahoy*?"

"You forget the money I made for you . . . Herman."

"Hah," said Teppis, "now he calls me by my first name. They leave me and they go up in the world. Eitel, I warned Lulu against you. Marry a fine young American actress, a girl who's too good for you, and you just drag her name through the muck and the dirt and the filth. If anyone saw me talking to you, I'd be ashamed."

"You should be," Eitel said. "Lulu was a fine American girl, and I turned her into a common whore." His voice was cool, but I could sense he was sapped by agitation.

"You have a vile mouth," Herman Teppis said.

"Don't talk to me this way. I no longer work for you."

Teppis swayed forward and back on the balls of his feet as though to induce momentum for what he would next say. "I express my opinion as a private individual. Five years ago I called you into my office and I warned you. 'Eitel,' I said, 'anybody that tries to throw a foul against this country ends up in the pigpen.' That's what I said, but did you listen?" He waved a finger. "You know what they're talking about at the studio? They say you're going to make a comeback. Some comeback. You couldn't do a day's work without the protection of the studio. I'm ashamed to have made money from your movies."

"Come on, Sergius, let's go," Eitel said.

"Wait, you!" Teppis said to me, "what's your name?"

I told him.

"What kind of name is that for a clean-cut youngster like you? You should change it. John Matthews. That's the kind of name you should have." He looked me over as if he were buying a bolt of cloth. "Who are you?" said Teppis, "what do you do? I hope you're not a bum."

If he had wished to irritate me, he was successful. "I used to be in the Air Corps," I said to him.

There was a gleam in his eye. "A flier?"

Standing in the doorway, Eitel decided to have his own amusement. "Do you mean you never heard of this boy, H.T.?"

Teppis was cautious. "I can't keep up with everything," he said.

"Sergius is a hero," Eitel improvised. "He shot down four planes in one day."

I was about to protest, but I had no chance. Teppis smiled as if he had been told something very precious. "Your mother and father must be extremely proud of you," he said.

"I wouldn't know. I was brought up in an orphanage." My voice was probably unsteady because I could see by Eitel's change of expression that he knew I was telling the truth. I was furious at giving myself away so easily. But it is always like that. One holds a secret for years, and then spills it like a cup of coffee.

"An orphan," Teppis said. "I'm staggered. Do you know you're a remarkable young man?" He smiled genially and looked at Eitel. "Charley, you come back here," he said in his hoarse voice. "What are you flying off the handle for? You've heard me talk like this before."

"You're a rude man, Herman," Eitel said from the doorway.

"Rude?" Teppis put a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "Why, I wouldn't even be rude to my doorman." He laughed and then began to cough. "Eitel," he said, "what's happened to Carlyle? Where'd he go?"

"He didn't tell me."

"I don't understand anybody any more. You're a young man, Johnny," he said, pointing to me as if I were inanimate. "you tell me, what is everything all about?" But long before I could answer, he started talking again. "In my day a man got married, and he could be fortunate in his selection, or he could have bad luck, but he was married. I was a husband for forty-two years, may my wife rest in peace, I have her picture on my desk. Can you say that, Eitel? What do you have on your desk? Pin-up pictures. I don't know people who feel respect for society any more. I tell Carlyle. What happens? He just gets fatter. He wallows. That's the kind of man I encouraged my daughter to marry. A fool who sneaks around with a chippie dancer."

52

"We all have our peculiarities, Herman," Eitel said.

For some reason this seemed to make Teppis angry. "Eitel," he shouted, "I don't like you, and you don't like me, but I get along with everybody," and then he made a point of looking me over very carefully. "What do you do?" he asked again as if he had not heard my answer the first time. "Are you an actor?"

"No."

"I knew it. None of the good-looking clean-cut ones are actors any more. Just the ugly ones. Faces like bugs." He cleared his throat with a barking sound. "Look, Johnny," he went on, "I like you, I'll do you a good turn. There's a party tomorrow night. I'm giving it for our people out here. You're invited."

The moment he offered this invitation, I knew by the pleasure it gave me that I wanted very much to go to his party. Everyone in Desert D'Or had been talking about it for several days. But I was angry at myself for feeling grateful to a man I did not like, and was even more disturbed that my first impulse had been to accept, and in that moment I had forgotten Eitel. As if it were a point of honor, I told myself that if Teppis wished to invite me—and I had no idea of the reason—he would have to invite Eitel too.

"I don't know if I want to go alone," I said to him, and was pleased that my voice sounded indifferent.

"Bring a girl," Teppis offered. "You got a sweetheart?"

"It's not easy finding girl friends," I stated. "I spent too much time flying airplanes."

My instinct about Herman Teppis seemed well placed. He nodded his head wisely. "I see the connection," he said.

"I was thinking Charley Eitel could help me find a girl," I added.

For a moment I thought Teppis was going to fly into a rage. He glowered at both of us. "Who invited Eitel?" he said furiously.

"Didn't you invite him?" I asked.

With a great effort, Teppis smiled benevolently. "Johnny, you're a very loyal friend." In virtually the same breath he said huskily to Eitel, "Tell me, cross your heart, Charley. Are you a Red?"

Eitel didn't respond immediately. "You ought to know the answer to that, Herman," he murmured at last.

"I know!" Teppis shouted, "I know all about you. I'll never understand why you made such a spectacle of yourself." He threw up his arms. "All right, all right, I know you're clean deep-down. Come to my party." Teppis shook his head. "Only, do me a favor, Charley. Don't say I invited you. Say it was Mac Barrantine."

"This is one hell of an invitation," Eitel answered.

"You think so, well don't look a gift-horse, you know what I mean? One of these days go clear yourself with the American government, and then maybe I'll work with you. I got no objection to making money with people I don't like. That's my motto." He took my hand and shook it firmly. "Agree with me, Johnny? That's the ticket. I'll see both you boys tomorrow night."

On the drive back to Eitel's house, neither of us knew where to start talking. I finally asked him a tangential question. "Isn't it dangerous for Teppis to invite you?"

Eitel shook his head. "People will probably think I've been having private talks with the Committee. Don't worry about Teppis. He never does anything without having a reason." We had turned into his garage, and Eitel stopped the car with a bit of a jerk. "Sergius, I'm not going to that party," he said abruptly.

"Do what you want." I was disappointed. I wanted to be there, but I would hardly know a person other than Eitel.

"You go, you'll enjoy it," he said. "I won't. I've been a bus boy to Teppis for too many years." We had come inside and he flung himself in a chair and pressed his hands to his forehead. The familiar script was on an end table beside him. He picked it up, rustled the pages, and threw it to the floor. "Don't tell anyone, Sergius," he said, as though to give some indirect explanation, "but my script stinks."

"Is it that bad?"

"I don't know. Right now, I don't believe I'm able to do the movie." He smiled easily. "I haven't accomplished a thing in the last two months. I've just been cutting scenes out." He sighed. "If I should ever bring it off, remind me, will you, of this conversation? You see, I've been trying to remember if I were ever as depressed in the old days when the work would come out well."

"I'll remind you," I said.

A short while later, Munshin phoned Eitel. Elena was all right, he informed him. She was sleeping. Tonight, he would take care of her. But for tomorrow he begged Eitel to show her a good time.

Eitel said he would. When the call was finished, his eyes were dancing. "Do you know," he said, "I can hardly accuse myself of running after Teppis if I take Collie's girl along."

"But what about the girl?"

"It could be the very best way to get over Mr. Munshin. She'll see that a stranger will do more for her in a night than he did in three years."

"What are you up to?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm going to take her to the party," Eitel declared.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Laguna Room at the Yacht Club which Herman Teppis had rented for his party, was not a room at all. Enclosed by an irregular stucco wall painted in the predominant lemon-yellow of the Yacht Club, it was open to the sky, and like the café, an amoebic pool strayed between the tables, encircled a portion of the dance floor, and terminated behind the bar, a play of colored lights transforming the water into a lake of tomato aspic, lime jello, pale consommé, and midnight ink. On an elliptic island, not twenty feet long, in the middle of the lagoon, the bandstand was erected, and the musicians played their dance numbers unhindered by any passing drunk who might wish to take a turn on the drums.

Since the party was given by Herman Teppis, the management of the Yacht Club had added a cinematic motif. One of those searchlights, common to the capital, but rarely used at Desert D'Or, threw its column almost vertically into the air, cast at such an angle as not to burn into the eyes of the guests, and an apparatus of spotlights and flood-lamps was arranged to give the illusion that this was a party on a movie set, even to the extravagance of an enormous papier-maché camera upon a wooden boom, directed by a bellhop wearing the costume of a silent-film cameraman with the brim of his cap turned backward and a boy's pair of knickers which reached his knees. All through the evening the camera was rotated upon its boom, being lowered almost into the water, or raised so high it spread a gargantuan shadow across the colors of the Laguna Room.

There were over a hundred guests, how many I could not count, and I was told more than once this was an extraordinary party and that there had not been one so elaborate in many months, the explanation delivered in a half-whisper that Teppis could deduct the expense from his income tax. The people at the party were dressed in a variety of ways. There were men in white dinner jackets with cummerbunds about their waists, others in dark business suits, a few in tropical shirts and slacks, and even one young man whom I learned was Teddy Pope, the movie star, in a sweater and faded dungarees. It was not precisely the same with the women. They were all in evening gowns which ran the spectrum from cream-white to purple-black, and jewelry was worn from the top of their hairdress down, so I saw on different women a collection of tiaras, earrings, necklaces, brooches, bracelets, belts, and even an anklet or two with golden charms.

I had trouble getting in. Faithful to his promise that he would visit Elena, Eitel had disappeared earlier in the evening and had still not returned by eleven, so I decided to go alone. At the entrance to the Laguna Room which was garnished by a gangplank, a man dressed like a maritime officer, a purser perhaps, was checking the invitations. There was no record of my name on the guest list.

By an inspiration I said, "Could it be listed as John Matthews?"

There was no John Matthews on the purser's scratchboard.

"How about Charles Eitel?" I suggested.

"Mr. Eitel is listed, but you would have to come in with him."

Yet it was the purser who discovered my name. In a last-minute addition, Teppis had recorded me as "Shamus Something-or-other." Thus as Shamus Something-or-other, I entered his party.

Near the purser's stand, seated on two couches which faced each other, were half a dozen women. All were dressed lavishly, and their make-up in correction of such faults as thin mouths, small eyes, and mouse-colored hair, had curved their lips, shadowed their cheeks, and given golden or chestnut hues to their coiffures. Like warriors who rest behind their painted shields, they sat stiffly, three and three, staring at one another, talking with apathy. I bobbed my head shyly at them, not knowing whether to introduce myself or to move on, and one of them looked up, and in a voice which was slightly harsh, demanded, "You under contract at Magnum?"

"No," I said.

"Oh, I thought you were somebody else," she said and looked away again.

They were talking about their children, and I realized with an intuition Eitel later confirmed that they were wives of important men and men who hoped to be important, the husbands off in search of one another through the Laguna Room while the women were left to the ennui of chatting with each other.

"What do you mean, California is no good?" one of them said fiercely. "It's wonderful for children."

Whenever a man entered, they appeared to pay no notice, but their eagerness was hardly concealed. I realized that in walking past with a tentative smile, showing my embarrassment whether to speak to them or not, I had done the disservice of reflecting their situation. A few other men came in after me, and I saw that they either walked by without a look, or stopped for a brief but arduous gallantry which went something like this:

"Carolyn!" the man would say, as if he could not believe he saw the woman here and was altogether delighted.

"Mickey!" one of the six women would say.

"My favorite woman," the man would say, holding her hand.
"The most attractive man I know," the deserted wife would say.

Mickey would smile. He would shake his head, he would hold her hand. "If I didn't know you were kidding, I could give you a tumble," he would say.

"Don't be too sure I'm kidding," the wife would say.

Mickey would stand up, he would release her hand. There would be a silence until Mickey murmured, "What a woman." Then, with the businesslike tone which terminates a conversation, he would say, "How are the kids, Carolyn?"

"They're fine."

"That's great. That's great." He would start to move away, and give a smile to all the women. "We have to have a long talk, you and me," Mickey would say.

"You know where to find me."

"Great kidder, Carolyn," Mickey would announce to no one in particular, and disappear into the party.

All through the Laguna Room wherever one could find a couch, three wives were sitting in much that way. Since many of the men had come without women, the result was that men clustered about men, standing near the pool, off the dance floor, at the café tables or in a crowd near the bar. Invariably there was a director, a producer, or a movie star at the center of each collection, and in those rare instances when two important men were talking together, the press was even greater. I picked up a drink at the bar and wandered through the party looking for a girl to talk to. But all the attractive girls were surrounded, even if by less men than squeezed up to listen to a film director or a studio executive, and besides I did not know how to enter the conversations. They were all so private. I had had the vanity that my looks might attract some attention, but most of the girls seemed absorbed in the conversation of fat middle-aged men and bony middle-aged men, the prize going to a German movie director with a prominent paunch for he had his arms about the waists of two starlets. In truth I was not really eager to find a girl yet. At the beginning of a party it is necessary only to believe that one is eager. Being not yet drunk, the fact was that it was easier to drift from one circle of men to another.

In a cove of the bar formed by two tables and the tip of one of the pool's tentacles, I found Jennings James telling a joke to several male actors of no particular celebrity. James rambled on, his eyes blurred behind his silver-rimmed glasses. When he was done, several other anecdotes were told, each more stray than the one which had preceded it. I quit them after a while, and Jay-Jay caught up to me.

"What a stinking party this is," he said. "I'm supposed to work tonight, show the photographers a good time." He coughed with stomach misery. "I left all those photographers over at the canopy table. You know it's the truth about photographers, they'd rather eat than drink." Jay-Jay had an arm on my shoulder, and I realized he was using me as an escort to reach the Men's Room. "Sergius," he said, "you know the best fellow here? It's the bartender. I had a long talk with him. I asked for dago red wine and he brought out the only bottle in the hotel. We got to talking and I told him he got to meet Charley Eitel. Charley and me, we're the only anarchists among all this upstart rich." James gave a lurch away, and then stumbled back. "You know the line of poetry, 'Methought I saw the grave where Laura lay?'" But whatever it was he wished to add, was lost, and he stood looking at me sheepishly. "Well, that's a beautiful line of poetry," he finished, and like a man who has clung to the open rear of a streetcar while it climbs the hill, and drops off once his destination is reached, Jay-Jay released my arm and listing from the change in balance, went careening to the urinal.

I was left to stand around the edge of one group or another. A director had finished a story of which I heard no more than the last few lines. "I sat down and I told her that to be a good actress, she must always work for the truth in what she's playing," the man said in a voice not devoid of self-love, "and she said, 'What's the truth?' and I said it could be defined as the real relation between human beings. You saw the performance I got out of her." He paused, the story was over, and the young men and women around him nodded wisely. "That's wonderful advice you gave her, Mr. Sneale," a girl blurted out, and the others murmured their agreement. "God, what insight!" a young man said.

"Howard, tell the story about you and Mr. Teppis," one of them begged.

The director chuckled. "Well, this story is on Herman, but I know he wouldn't mind. There are enough stories on me in my dealings with him. H.T.'s got an instinct which is almost infallible. There's a reason why he's such a great movie-maker, such a creative movie-maker."

"That's very true, Howard," the same girl declared.

I moved on without listening further and almost bumped into the subject of the story. In a corner, busily embarked on a discussion, were Herman Teppis and two other men who in age, bearing, and clothing were not too unlike Teppis himself. They had been pointed out to me already as the heads of rival studios, Eric Haislip from Magnum, and Mac Barrantine from Liberty Pictures, but I believe I would have guessed in any case for the three men were left alone and spoke in privacy. If I had drunk less liquor, I might have realized the social paradox which permitted only the titans at this party to talk without the attention of sycophants, but instead I placed myself at the elbow of the producer named Mac Barrantine. All three men continued to talk without paying the slightest attention to me.

"What do you think you'll gross on *The Tigress*?" Eric Haislip was saying.

"Three-and-a-half to four," Herman Teppis said.

"Three-and-a-half to four?" Eric Haislip repeated. "H.T., you're not talking to the New York office. You'll be lucky to get your money out."

Teppis snorted. "I could buy your studio with what we'll make."

Mac Barrantine spoke heavily and slowly out of the side of a cigar. "I claim that you just can't tell any more. There was a time when I could say, 'Bring it in at one-and-a-half, and we'll gross a million over.' Today, picture-making is crazy. A bomb I'm ashamed of makes money, a classical musical comedy vehicle like *Sing, Girls, Sing*, lays an egg. You figure it out."

"You're wrong," Herman Teppis said, prodding him with a finger. "You know the trouble? People are confused today. So what do they want? They want a picture that confuses them. Wait till they get really confused. Then they'll want a picture that sets them straight."

"Now, you got to show them real things on the screen," Eric Haislip sighed.

"Real things?" Teppis exploded. "We bring real things to them. Realism. But because a fellow in a French movie vomits all over the place and they like it in some art theater doesn't even have air-cooling, we should bring them vomit?"

"There's no discipline," Mac Barrantine said. "Even a director, a man with a high-powered tool in his hands. What does he do? He runs amuck like a gangster."

"Charley Eitel cut your throat," Eric Haislip said.

"They all cut my throat," Teppis said passionately. "You know something? My throat don't cut." He glared at them as if remembering instances when each of them had treated him outrageously. "Bygones. Let it be bygones," Teppis said. "I get along with everybody."

"There's no discipline," Barrantine repeated. "I got a star, I won't mention her name. She came to me, she knew that in two months we were starting production on a really big vehicle for her, and you know what she had the gall to say? 'Mr. Barrantine, my husband and I, we're going to have a baby. I'm six weeks along.' 'You're going to have a baby?' I said, 'where in hell's your loyalty? I know you, you're selfish. You can't tell me you want the heartache of bringing up an infant.' 'Mr. Barrantine, what should I do?' she bawled to me. I gave her a look and then I told her. 'I can't take the responsibility for advising you what to do,' I said, 'but you damn well better do something.'"

"She's going to be in the picture I hear," Eric Haislip said.

"Of course, she's going to be in the picture. She's an ambitious girl. But discipline. Do any of them have that?"

Eric Haislip was looking at me. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" he demanded abruptly, although he had been aware of me for several minutes.

"I've been invited," I said.

"Did I invite you to sit on my lap?" Mac Barrantine said.

"I'll stay where I please," I muttered.

To my surprise, Teppis said, "Leave the boy alone. I know this boy. He's a nice young fellow."

JEH

Nothing could have been more bewildering. Barrantine and Haislip glowered at me, and I scowled back. The four of us stood in the most uncomfortable juxtaposition to one another. "The youth, the young people," Teppis announced. "You think you know something? Listen to a young fellow's ideas. He can tell you something. This boy has a contribution."

Whatever my contribution, Barrantine and Haislip did not seem particularly eager to absorb it. Conversation lagged for several minutes, and then they left on the excuse of refilling their drinks. "I'll call the maitre dee," Teppis offered. They shook their heads. They needed a walk, they announced. Whey they were gone, Teppis seemed in a fine mood. I had the suspicion he had come to my defense in order to insult them. "First-rate fellows," he said to me. "I've known them for years."

"Mr. Teppis," I said irritably, "why did you invite me to your party?"

He laughed and clamped a hand on my shoulder. "You're a clever boy," he said, "you're quick-tongued. I like that." His thin hoarse voice drew a conspiratorial link between us whether I willed it or not. "You take the desert," he confided to me, "it's a wonderful place to make a human being feel alive. I hear music in it all the time. A musical. It's full of cowboys and these fellows that live alone, what do you call them, hermits. Cowboys and hermits and pioneers, that's the sort of place it is. Fellows looking for gold. As a young fellow, what do you think, wouldn't you like to see such a movie? I like history," he went on before I could answer. "It would take a talented director to make such a story, a fellow who knows the desert." He poked me in the ribs as though to render me breathless and therefore honest. "You take Eitel. Is he still hitting the booze?" Teppis said suddenly, his small flat eyes studying my reaction.

"Not much," I said quickly, but my look must have flickered because Teppis squeezed my shoulder again.

"We got to have a long talk, you and me," Teppis said. "I like Charley Eitel. I wish he didn't have such a stain on his character. Politics. Idiotic. What do you think?"

"I think he's about to make the best movie of his life," I said with a desire to pique Teppis.

"For the art theaters," Teppis stated, and he pointed a finger to his brain. "It won't be from the heart. You're too fresh for your own good," he continued with one of his bewildering shifts, "who's interested in your ideas? I'll tell you what the story is. Eitel is through."

"I disagree," I said cheerfully, pleased to realize I was the only one at this party who did not have to be polite to Herman Teppis.

"You disagree? What do you know? You're a baby." But I thought I understood what rankled in him, the fear that he might be wrong chewing at the opposed fear he might make a fool of himself by considering Eitel again. "Now, listen you," he started to say, but we were interrupted.

"Good evening, daddy," a woman said.

"Lottie," Teppis said moistly, and embraced her. "Why didn't you call me?" he asked. "Ten o'clock this morning and no call from you."

"I had to miss it today," said Lottie Munshin. "I was packing for the trip."

Teppis began to ask her about his grandchildren, turning his back almost completely on me. While they spoke I watched Carlyle Munshin's wife with interest. She was one of those women who are prematurely middle-aged, her skin burned into the dark colors of false health. Thin, nervous, her face was screwed tight by tension, and in those moments when she relaxed, the lines about her forehead and mouth became etched into prominence for the sun had not touched them. Pale haggard eyes looked out from sun-reddened lids. She was wearing an expensive dress but had merely succeeded in making it look dowdy, her décolletage revealing the prominent bones of her chest while a sort of ruffle fluttered upon her freckled skin with a parched rustling movement like a spinster's parlor curtains. "I was delayed getting here," she said to her father in so pinched a voice one had the impression her throat was dry. "You see, Doxy was littering today. You know Doxy?"

"It's one of the mutts?" Teppis asked uncomfortably.

"She took the state-wide blue ribbon for her class," Lottie Munshin said reproachfully. "Don't you remember?"

"Well, that's good," Teppis coughed. "Now, why don't you leave those dogs out of your mind for a couple of weeks, and you take a good vacation. You relax. You have a good time with Collie."

"I can't leave them for two weeks," she said with something like panic. "Salty litters in the next ten days, and we have to start training Blitzen and Nod for the trials."

Teppis answered her as if she were a child. "Well, that's fine," he said vaguely. "Now, there's a fellow I got to see, so I'll leave you in the company of this young man. You'll enjoy talking to him. And Lottie, you remember," he said, "there's more important things than those dogs."

I watched him stride away, nodding his head ever so slightly to the people who swarmed to greet him, carrying them one at a time like parasite fish, an arm about their shoulders. One couple even moved off the dance floor, and came hurrying toward him.

"Do you like dogs?" Lottie Munshin asked me with a certain intensity. I could sense her shyness. She gave a short harsh laugh for punctuation, and looked at me awkwardly.

I made the mistake of saying, "You breed them, don't you?"

She replied; she replied at length; she insisted upon going into details which could not have interested me less, and before her passion, cold as the passion of any fanatic, I stood uncomfortably, trying to conceive the plain, inhibited girl who had grown into this woman. "Collie and I have the finest ranch within the county limits of the capital," she said in that pinched voice, "although of course keeping it up devolves upon me. It's quite a concern I can tell you. I'm up at six every morning."

"You keep a different schedule than most of your friends," I offered.

"Early to bed. I like to be up with the sun. With such hours everybody could keep themselves in fine condition. You're young now, but you should take care of yourself. People should follow the same hours animals do, and they would have the natural health of an animal."

Over her shoulder I could see the dance floor and the swimming pool, and I was uneasy between my desire to quit her for people who were more interesting, and my reluctance to leave her alone. While she spoke, her bony fingers plucked at her chin. "I've got a green thumb," she said. "Things grow under my thumb. I sometimes think my father must have been meant to be a farmer because where else could it have developed in me?"

"Oh, look. There's your husband," I remarked with relief.

She called to him. He was some distance away, and had obviously no previous intention of approaching, but at the sound of her voice he looked up with an exaggeration of surprise which betrayed that he was not surprised at all, and came moving toward us. As he recognized me, his expression altered for a moment, but nonetheless he shook my hand warmly. "Well, we meet again," he said broadly.

"Carlyle, I meant to ask you," Lottie Munshin went on in a worried abstracted voice, "are you going to try that twelve-hundred-calorie diet?"

"I'll give it a look," he said in a bored tone, and caught me by the arm. "Lottie, I have something I must talk over with Sergius. You'll excuse us," and with no more than that, he steered me under a yucca tree, and we stood in the harsh shadow created by a flood-lamp above the foliage.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Once more I was obliged to explain that I had been invited by Herman Teppis.

"Eitel, too?"

When I nodded, Munshin burst out, "I wouldn't put it past Eitel to bring Elena here." As he shook his head with indignation, I began to laugh. "It's a rotten party," I said, "it needs some kicks."

Munshin amazed me. "It would be worth a lot of money to know what's in H.T.'s head," he muttered almost to himself, and walked away leaving me beside the yucca tree.

The party was becoming more vigorous. People were drawing off by couples, or gathering in swarms at one center of interest or another. In a corner a game of charades was going on, the dance floor was more nearly filled, a well-known comedian had started an entertainment which consisted of abusing the people who listened to him, and an argument about the merits of a successful play almost competed with the music of the rumba band.

A drunk had succeeded in climbing the boom which supported the papier-maché camera, and he was quarreling with the cameraman who was trying to persuade him to dismount. Nearby a woman was laughing hysterically. "Ronnie's a flagpole sitter," she kept announcing. The swimming instructor of the hotel was giving a diving exhibition in a roped-off portion of the pool to desultory applause, but few were watching her. On the couches in one scalloped wing of the Laguna Room, a few men and women were necking. I had a couple of drinks at the bar, and tried to penetrate one circle or another without success. Dispirited, I listened to a folk singer dressed like a leatherstocking who sang old ballads in a high quavery twang which could be heard above the volume of the dance orchestra. "Isn't he talented?" a woman demanded nearby.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. A handsome young man whom I recognized as the tennis professional of the Yacht Club smiled at me. "Come on over," he said, "somebody would like to meet you." It turned out to be Teddy Pope, neat in his bleached dungarees and crew sweater. He was a tall man with a pleasant open expression and white-blond hair which fell in a cowlick over his forehead. When I came up with the tennis player, he smiled at me.

"Isn't this party a dog?" Teddy Pope said.

We all looked at one another. I could think of nothing to say. Beside Pope sat Marion Faye, small, intense, and insufferably bored. He merely nodded at me.

"Do you know roulette?" the tennis player asked. "Teddy's an aficionado."

"I've been trying to get a system," Teddy said. "I had a theory about the numbers. But mathematically it was too much for my intelligence. I hired a statistician to try to figure it out." He smiled at me again.

"I hate roulette," the tennis player said.

"You a weight-lifter?" Teddy asked me.

"No. Should I be?"

For some reason this was vastly amusing. Pope and the tennis player and Marion Faye shared a burst of laughter. "I can bend an iron bar," Teddy said to me. "That is if it's a slim enough iron bar. I just stay in weight-lifting to keep me from getting fat. I'm getting so fat now." He pinched his belly in demonstration and succeeded in isolating an excess of flesh no thicker than a pencil. "It's disgusting."

"You look in good shape," I said uncomfortably.

"Oh, I'm pudgy," Pope said. He pointed to his bicep which was finely muscled. "You should go to Timothy's gym back in the city," he said. "Timothy can take a concavity and make it a convexity on any part of your body."

"He ruined your forehead," the tennis player said.

Teddy Pope made no answer. He leaned back and smiled at the sky. "I understand you're a flier," he said. "Is it true that most of you live for drinking and sex?" He leaned back and smiled at the sky. "Oh, there's a beauty," he said as a pretty girl passed. "Would you like to meet her? Marion says you're a little shy."

"I'll make out," I said.

"Why don't you help him, Teddy?" Marion jeered.

"I would just be a drag," Pope said.

"Sit down, Sergei," said the tennis player.

"No, well you see," I stammered, "I promised to bring a drink to somebody."

"Come back if you get bored," Teddy said.

I was approached beneath another yucca tree by a small bald-headed man in a sky-blue tropical beach suit who had a tall redheaded girl by the hand. "Ah, there you are, I missed you before," he said briskly. "I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Bunny Zarrow, you may have heard of me. Actor's representative." I must have looked at him with surprise, for he added, "I see you were talking to Mr. Teppis. May I ask what you were talking about?"

"He wanted my advice on a movie."

"That's interesting. That's unusual. And what is your name?"

"John Matthews," I said.

"You're under contract, I take it?"

"Of course."

"Well, a contract can sometimes be bettered. I wish I could place your name. I will say this is neither the time nor the opportunity, but you and I must have lunch to discuss it. I'll call you at the studio." He pointed to the girl beside him. "I'd like you to meet Candy Ballou." The girl yawned and then tried to smile. She was very drunk.

Bunny drew me aside. "Let me give you her phone number. She's a charming out-going girl." He blinked his eyes. "I'm glad to do you a favor. If I weren't so overworked, I would keep her number, but it's a shame to keep such a girl to myself." He returned me to Candy Ballou and placed our hands together. "Now, kiddies, I'm sure you two have a great deal in common," he said, and left us looking at one another.

"Would you like to dance?" I asked the redheaded girl.

"Don't panic, love-bucket." She said this as if it were a password, and then opened her eyes to focus on me. "What studio you at?" she blurted.

"That's just a joke, Candy," I said. "I'm not in the movies."

"A joke on Zarrow, huh?"

"That's right."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing," I said.

"No dough. I might have known." She swayed her body suddenly to the rhythms of the rumba music and yawned fiercely. "Oh, honey," she said in a little broken voice, "if you had class, you'd help me to the ladies' room."

On my return from that errand with no more for company than a new highball, I saw Eitel come in at last. He was with a girl. Elena, I knew.

CHAPTER NINE

She was almost beautiful. Elena's hair was auburn and her skin was warm in hue. As I watched Eitel lead her into the mouth of the party, she reminded me of some gentle animal, a deer perhaps, graceful in its very awkwardness, ready for flight. She was not tall but she walked erectly with the carriage of a dancer, and her strapless evening gown revealed handsome shoulders. Her face was soft, it was heart-shaped, and above a delicate childlike mouth and chin, the snares of her long narrow nose suggested sensuality. She was at once both tender and attractive, and I thought Munshin's description inadequate.

Except for particulars. She was obviously 'without defenses' as Collie had put it. Like an adolescent she hardly knew how to manage her hands and arms, and I thought it a pity. Without Eitel to shepherd her, she would have been helpless, but it was evident he had succeeded in giving her a sense of protection. As he advanced with Elena from person to person, I wondered what he must be feeling. Their appearance at the party had caused a restraint which could have been comic if it were not so tense, for very few of the people who saw him knew what to do. There were several who came forward and smiled and even said hello, there were many who nodded, and even more who turned away, but I had the feeling they were all frightened. There must be a reason why Eitel had been invited, and until they knew the reason they could only feel the panic that whatever they did might well be an error. I was furious at the way he and Elena were finally left to themselves, for they were obliged to cross the floor of the party without catching anyone to accompany them, and I saw Eitel stop finally at an empty table near the pool, set out a chair for Elena, and then sit down himself. From a distance, I had to admire his poise; he had succeeded in looking as unconcerned as he must have wished.

I went up to their table and greeted them. "Can I join you?" I said clumsily.

Eitel gave me a quick grateful smile. "Elena, you must meet Sergius, he's the best person here."

"Oh, shut up," I told him, and turned to her. "I'm awfully sorry, I didn't catch your last name," I said.

"It's Furelli," Elena muttered with some embarrassment, "an Italian name." Her voice was a bit coarse and uncultured.

"Doesn't she look just like a Modigliani?" Eitel said enthusiastically, and then added, "Elena, I know you've been told that more than once."

"Yes," Elena said, "that is, someone once told me. As a matter of fact it was your friend."

Eitel passed over the reference to Munshin. "But where did you get those green eyes?" he teased her. From the angle where I sat, I could see his fingers tapping restlessly upon his knee.

"Oh, that's from my mother," Elena said. "She's half Polish. I guess I'm one-quarter Polish and three-quarters Italian. Oil and water." We all smiled, and Elena shifted uncomfortably. "What a funny subject," she said.

Eitel made a play of studying the Laguna Room and said amusedly, "What do you think this party needs?"

"What?" I asked.

"A roller coaster."

Elena burst into laughter. She had a pleasant laugh which showed her white teeth, but she laughed too loudly. "Oh, that's so funny," she felt obliged to say.

"I love roller coasters," Eitel went on. "That first drop. It's like the black hole of death. There's nothing to compare with it." And for the next two minutes he described the attractions of a roller coaster, giving to the conversation all the force of his desire to attract people to himself until I could see by the admiration in Elena's eyes how he had made the subject more vital than it seemed. He was in fine form, and to complete him, Elena was a good listener. I found myself thinking that she was not stupid, and yet she did no more than respond with a laugh or some insignificant remark. It was the quality of her attention. Her face registered the nuance of everything he said, until Eitel was carried away. "It proves an old idea of mine," he said. "One gets on a roller coaster in order to feel certain emotions. It's the same with an affair. When I was younger, I used to think it was ugly, even unclean I suppose, that a man who thought he was in love would find himself using the same words with one girl after another. Yet there's nothing wrong about it really. The only true faithfulness people have is toward emotions they're trying to recapture."

"But a man like that isn't feeling anything for the woman," Elena said.

"On the contrary. At that moment, he adores her."

Argument flustered her. "I mean," she interrupted, "you know, it's . . . oh, I'm not sure." But she could not quite let it pass. "A man like that isn't relating to the woman. He's detached."

Eitel seemed delighted. "You're right," he reversed himself. "I suppose it's the proof of how detached I am."

"Oh, you can't be," she said.

"I certainly am," he smiled, as though to convey an advance warning.

It must have been difficult to believe. His eyes were alive, his body leaned toward her, and his dark hair seemed charged with energy. "Don't judge by appearances," Eitel began, "why I can tell you . . ."

He broke off. Munshin was approaching us. Elena's face became expressionless, and Eitel began to smile in an unnatural way.

"I don't know what it is you got," Collie boomed, "but H.T. told me to come over and say hello. He wants to talk to you later."

When none of us made an immediate answer, Munshin contented himself with staring at Elena.

"Collie, how are you?" Eitel said finally.

"I've been better." His buoyance seemed to have disappeared suddenly. "I've been a lot better," he said, continuing to look at Elena.

"Aren't you having a good time?" she asked in a voice which throbbed with the effort to be casual.

"No, I'm having a rotten time," Munshin answered humbly.

"I was looking for your wife," Elena said, "but I don't know who she is."

"She's around," Munshin said vaguely.

"And your father-in-law? He's here, I heard you say."

"What difference does it make?" Munshin asked with a moist ingratiating look as if he were really saying, "Someday you won't hate me any more."

"Oh, yes, no difference at all. I wouldn't want to embarrass you," Elena said harshly, her voice all but out of control. It gave a hint of how badly she would act in a quarrel.

"I met Teddy Pope tonight," I interrupted as best I could. "What is he like?"

"I can tell you," Eitel said gratefully, "he's been in several of my pictures."

At that moment, a remarkably beautiful blonde girl in a pale-blue evening gown came up behind Munshin, and covered his eyes with her hands. "Guess who?" she said in a husky voice of a peculiar timbre, suggestive and provocative. I had a glimpse of a little turned-up nose, a dimpled chin, and a pouting mouth whose contour was famous. At the sight of Eitel she made a droll movement with her eyebrows.

"Lulu," Munshin said, half rising from his chair, and not knowing whether her interruption had relieved the situation or made it worse, he hugged Lulu with large fatherly arms, smiling at Elena and Eitel, while with his free hand visible only to me, he patted the small of her back as though to imply she might do worse than to embrace him again.

"Miss Meyers, Miss Furelli," Eitel said smoothly, and Lulu gave a passing disinterested nod to Elena. "Collie, we have to talk," Lulu announced, "I have something I definitely want to tell you about." Then she gave a sweet smile to Eitel. "Charley, you're getting fat," she said.

"Sit down," Eitel offered.

She took a chair next to him, and insisted Munshin sit on the other side. "Isn't anybody going to introduce you?" she asked directly of me, and when my name was given, she made a pretense of studying my face. What a pretty boy you are," said Lulu Meyers. She could not have been much more than twenty herself.

"She's great," Munshin said. "What a tongue."

"Would you like a drink?" I asked Elena. She had been silent since Lulu had come, her face blank, and by comparison she did not seem as attractive as I had thought her before. Perhaps aware of this herself, she picked nervously at the cuticle on her nail. "Oh yes, I'd like a drink," Elena blurted, and as I started away, Lulu handed me her glass. "Get me a small Martin, will you?" she asked, turning her violet-blue eyes upon me. I realized she was as nervous as Elena, but in a different way; Lulu sat very alertly in her chair.

When I came back, she was talking to Eitel. "We miss you, old ham," she was saying. "I don't know anybody better to get drunk with than Eitel."

"I'm on the wagon," Eitel said with a grin.

"You're on the wagon as far as I'm concerned," Lulu said with a glance at Elena.

"I hear you're going to marry Teddy Pope," Eitel answered.

Lulu turned upon Munshin. "You tell H.T. to lay off the drums," she said angrily and flipped her cigarette on the floor, grinding it out with a quick impatient motion. I had a glimpse of her legs and of pert little feet covered by silver slippers. Those legs were as familiar as the contour of her mouth, each drawn upon one's memory by a hundred photographs, or was it a thousand, which emphasized those details. "Collie, this propaganda has got to stop, I tell you."

Munshin gave his sheepish smile. "Now, you relax, doll. Who's forcing you into anything?"

"I approve of Lulu marrying Teddy," Eitel drawled.

"Charley, you're a troublemaker," Munshin said quickly.

Elena and I looked at each other. She was trying very hard to seem a part of this group, her eyes following everyone who spoke, her smile forced by the anxiety not to miss anything, not to seem ignorant. Probably I was acting in a similar way. We sat uncomfortably at opposite flanks of the conversation, no more than social book-ends.

"I'm serious," Lulu said. "You can tell Mr. T. I'll marry this pretty boy first," and she inclined a finger indolently toward me.

"You haven't proposed yet," I said.

Elena laughed with enough pleasure to have said it herself. Again her laugh was too loud, and the others stared at her.

"Don't panic, love-bucket," Lulu said with an authority the redheaded girl, Candy Ballou, had not been able to muster. She held her empty glass up for us all to see, and poured its last drop on the floor. "I'm sad, Collie," she announced and lay her head upon Munshin's shoulder.

"I saw your last picture," Eitel said to her.

"Wasn't I just awful in it?" Lulu made a face. "They're ruining me. What did you think, Eitel?"

He smiled noncommittally. "I'll talk to you about it."

"I know what you'll say. I was performing too much, wasn't I?" She raised her head and pinched Collie on the cheek. "I hate acting." And with hardly a pause she leaned forward to address a question. "What do you do, Miss Funotti?"

"Furelli," Eitel said quickly.

Elena was uncomfortable. "I've been . . . not exactly, a dancer, I guess."

"Modeling now?" Lulu said with a wry emphasis on the question.

"No . . . I mean, of course not . . ." Elena was helpless before her. "Different things," she finished at last.

"Oh, I'll bet," Lulu said, and spoke to me again. "You the latest tail on Eitel's kite?"

I could feel myself turning red. Her attacks came so quickly and so widely that it was a little like waiting for the sound to stop in musical chairs. "They say you're through, Charley," Lulu went on.

"They certainly do talk about me," Eitel said easily.

"Not as much as you think. Time passes."

"I'll always be remembered as your second ex-husband," Eitel drawled.

"It's a fact," she said. "When I think of Charley Eitel, I think of number two." With a bewildering change of manner, she put her hand on Eitel's arm. "I'm sorry, Charley, I apologize." She turned to all of us, and in that unique husky voice which contrasted so piquantly with her delicate blonde beauty, she said, "I'm a bitch. I saw such a ghastly picture of me today in the papers."

"Lulu," Munshin said quickly, "we can rectify that. The photographers will be working soon."

"I won't be mugged with Teddy Pope," Lulu declared.

"Who's forcing you?" Munshin said.

"No tricks, Collie."

"No tricks," Munshin promised, wiping his face.

"Why are you perspiring so?" Lulu insisted, and then broke off to stand up. "Jay-Jay!" she cried aloud, and opened her arms. Jennings James who had just walked toward us, wrapped her to his skinny frame in what appeared a parody of Munshin's embrace. "My favorite girl," he said in his high Southern voice.

"That was a bitchy release you had on me day before yesterday," Lulu said.

69

"Honey, you're paranoid," Jennings James protested. "I wrote it as a work of love to you." He nodded to all of us. "How are you, Mr. Munshin?" he said. The trip to the Men's Room seemed to have revived him.

"Take a chair, Jay-Jay," Munshin said, "this is Miss Furelli."

Jennings James bowed formally to her. "I love the dignity of Italian women, Miss Furelli." His freckled hand smoothed his red hair. "Are you going to stay with us long in Desert D'Or?"

"I'm going back tomorrow," Elena said.

"Oh, you're not," Eitel protested.

"Well, I'm not sure," Elena corrected herself.

A waiter brought ice cream. It was melted upon the plates, and only Elena accepted a dish. "This is soft ice cream, isn't it?" she said. "That's the expensive kind I've heard." When everyone looked rather puzzled by the remark, Elena became a little desperate in the attempt to prove it was so. "I don't remember where I heard it, but I did see it advertised, soft ice cream, I mean, or maybe I was eating it, I don't know."

Eitel came to her aid. "It's true. Duvon's in the city features a sort of melted ice cream. I've had it myself. But I don't think this is Duvon's, Elena."

"Oh, no, I know it isn't," she said quickly.

Jay-Jay turned back to Lulu. "Honey, we're ready for the pictures. Those photographers have finished grossifying themselves, and it all waits on you."

"Well, let it wait," said Lulu. "I want another drink."

"Mr. T. asked me specially to get you."

"Come on, let's go," said Munshin, "everybody." I suspect he included Elena, Eitel, and myself, for no other reason than to prevent Lulu from deciding she wished to remain with us. Once on his feet, Munshin took her arm, waited for Elena and Eitel to join him, and started along the edge of the pool past the dance floor toward a cluster of photographers I could now see gathered about the papier-maché movie camera.

Jay-Jay brought up the rear with me. "That Furelli dame," he said, "she's Munshin's little gal, I hear."

"I don't know," I said.

"Oh, man, she's a dish. I never got my hooks into her, but I know some who have. When old Charley Eitel gets done with Furelli, you ought to spend a couple of delicious hours with her." He then started to give me details of how she was reputed to act in bed. "And she looks like a sweet kid, too," he added gallantly. "It's hard for a girl living in the capital. I don't hold it against her. Why, Teppis, himself, that son of a bitch . . ." but James had no time to finish the sentence for we had come up to the photographers.

I could see Teddy Pope approaching from another direction. The tennis player still accompanied him, and they were laughing at some private joke. "Lulu, honey," Pope said, and held out his hand to shake hers. They touched fingertips and stood side by side.

"Now, fellows," said Jay-Jay springing forward and talking to the three photographers who stood phlegmatically in front of the camera boom, "we want some human-interest stills. Nothing elaborate. Just how cinema folks live and entertain each other. You got the idea." People had gathered from various corners of the Laguna Room, not a great many, but enough to make ours the largest group at the moment. "Honeybun, you look lovely," Dorothea O'Faye called out from the crowd, and Lulu smiled. "Thank you, sweetie," she called back. "Hey, Teddy," a man said, "have your autograph?" and Teddy laughed. Standing before an audience, his manner had changed. He seemed at once more boyish and more virile. "Why, here comes Mr. T. now," he said aloud, and revealing a subtle disdain to those who could detect it, he began to clap his hands, and at least a dozen of the onlookers, trapped into compliance, applauded as well. Teppis held his hands aloft. "We're taking some pictures tonight of Teddy and Lulu not only for interest on their picture, or should I say, our picture, *An Inch From Heaven*, but as a symbol, as I would call it, of tonight and the kind of good time we've had." Teppis cleared his throat and smiled benignly. His presence had succeeded in drawing a dozen more onlookers, and for a while the scene was busy with the flash-bulbs of the cameras, the shifting of positions, and the directions given by the photographers. I saw Teppis in place between Teddy and Lulu, Lulu between the two men, Teddy and Lulu together, Teddy and Lulu apart, Teppis holding Lulu's hand in a fatherly way, Teppis photographed with his hand on Teddy's elbow. I was struck by how well they did it, Teddy smiling, happy, abundantly healthy to the eye, Lulu sweet, Lulu demure, Lulu sexy, all with an ease which balanced the dignity and fatherly pride of Herman Teppis. It was virtually too perfect. Teddy Pope turned a frank pleasant face to every instruction of the photographers, his voice indulged a modest sincerity, his smile seemed to enjoy his surroundings. He waved his hand in a boxer's gesture and gave a parody of having wrenched his shoulder from the unaccustomed exercise; he put his arm about Lulu's waist, he kissed her cheek. And Lulu with a cuddling curving motion of her body slipped against his side, her hair clustered in gold ringlets about her head. To her beauty was now added a considerable vitality. She seemed to bounce when she walked, her shoulders swayed in opposition to her legs, her neck preened, her mouth was in motion, her soft husky voice laughed at the jokes of others. It was a pity, I felt, that these two who acted lovers so well had not the slightest interest in each other.

When the photographers were done, Teppis made another little speech. "You never know. We're a big family at Supreme. I'll tell you something. I don't think these two kids were acting." And with a hand against each of their backs, he pushed them toward one another until they were obliged to embrace in order not to stumble. "What's this I hear, Lulu?" he said aloud to the laughter of the guests, "a little ladybug has told me you and Teddy are dear friends."

"Oh, Teppis," Lulu said in her sweetest voice, "you should have been a marriage broker."

"It's a compliment. I take it as a compliment," Teppis said. "A producer is always making marriages. Art and finance. Talent and an audience. Are you all having a good time tonight?" he asked of the guests watching, and I listened to more than one answer that a good time was being had. "Treat the camera boys," Teppis said to Jay-Jay, and he started to walk away with Lulu on his arm. The crowd dissipated, the photographers were left to pack their equipment. Beside the pool, I saw Teppis stop to talk to Eitel, and while he spoke, he looked at Elena.

I could see that Teppis recognized her name the moment Eitel introduced her, for Teppis' reaction followed instantly. His back stiffened, his ruddy face seemed to swell, and he said something, something undoubtedly abrupt, since Eitel turned away quickly with Elena.

Alone with Lulu, Teppis was mopping his face in agitation. "Go dance with Teddy," I heard him say hoarsely as I approached. "Do it as a favor for me."

Because of the crowd I could no longer see what had happened to Eitel.

Lulu caught my eye. "Mr. T., I want to dance with Sergius first," she said with a pout, and slipping away from Teppis she put her hand in my palm and drew me to the dance floor. I held her tightly. The liquor I had been drinking all evening had finally succeeded in making me bold.

"How long will it take," I said in her ear, "before you start to look for Teddy?"

To my surprise she accepted this meekly. "You can't understand," Lulu said.

"Why, do you understand?"

"Oh, don't be like that, Sergius. I like you." At the moment she seemed no more than eighteen, delicate and demure in my arms. "It's harder than you think," she whispered, and by the tenderness with which she held herself against me, I found it difficult to believe in that first impression she had created so unpleasantly. She seemed very young; spoiled perhaps, but very sweet.

We danced in silence. "What did Teppis say to Eitel?" I asked abruptly.

Lulu shook her head and then giggled. "He told Charley to get the hell out."

"Well, then I guess I have to go too," I told her.

"You weren't included."

"Eitel is my friend," I said.

She pinched my ear. "Wonderful. Charley will love that. I have to tell him when I see him."

"Leave with me," I said.

"Not yet."

I stopped dancing. "If you want," I said drily, "I'll ask Mr. T. for permission."

"You think I'm afraid of him."

"You're not afraid of him. You'll just end up dancing with Teddy."

Lulu began to laugh. "You're different from what I thought at first."

"That's just liquor."

"Oh, I hope not."

Reluctantly, almost bemused, she allowed me to draw her from the dance floor. "This is an awful mistake," she whispered to me.

Yet Lulu was hardly timorous when we passed Teppis. Like a promoter who counts the seats in the house, he stood near the entrance, his eyes scanning the scene. "Girlie," he said, grasping her by the arm, "where are you going?"

"Oh, Mr. T.," Lulu said like a naughty child, "Sergius and I have so much to talk about."

"We want to get some air," I said gleefully.

"Air?" He was indignant as we left. "Air?" I could see him looking for the ceiling of the Laguna Room. Behind us, monotonously, the papier-maché camera rotated on its wooden boom, the searchlights making Grecian columns with the sky for pediment. A pall lay over the party. The zenith had passed, and couples were drawn into tete-à-tetes upon the couches for the drunken hour had arrived where all is possible and the fundamental license of the big party may have its reign; everybody wants everybody, and if desires were deeds, the history of the night would end in orgy.

"You say to Charley Eitel," Teppis shouted after me, "that he's through. I tell you he's through. He's lost his chance."

Giggling at the impuissant sound of his rage, Lulu and I ran along the walks and over the little trellised bridges of the Yacht Club until we came to the parking circle. Once, beneath a Japanese lantern, I stopped to kiss her, but she was laughing too hard and our mouths met clumsily. "I'll have to teach you," she said.

"Teach me nothing. I hate teachers," I said, and holding her hand, pulled her behind me, her heels clacking, her skirt rustling, in the promising tap-and-whisper of a girl trying to run in an evening gown.

We had an argument over whose car to take. Lulu insisted upon using her convertible. "I'm cooped up, Sergius," she said, "I want to drive." "Then drive my car," I compromised, but she would have no other way than her own. "I won't leave," she said, driven to a pitch of stubbornness, "I'll go back to the party."

"You're frightened," I taunted her.

"I'm not."

She drove badly. She was reckless which I might have expected, but what was worse, she could not hold her foot steady upon the pedal. The automobile was always slowing or accelerating as if in response to her mood and drunk as I was she made me aware of possible danger.

"I'm a nut," she'd say from time to time.

"Let's park, nut," I would answer.

"Did you ever go to the crazy doctor?" Lulu asked.

"You don't need him," I said confidently.

"Oh, I need something," she said, and with a wrench, gravel stinging our fenders, she brought the car off the shoulder and on the road again.

"Let's park," I said.

She parked when she would have it. I had given up hope, I was half resigned to driving through the night, or even, blessed by that feeling of impregnability which whisky can offer, was prepared to sit politely while she skidded us off the highway and we rolled and tumbled at seventy miles an hour through the cactus and desert clay, when Lulu, picking a side road at random, screamed around the turn, slowed down once it was past, drifted along, and finally pulled off in some deserted flat, the night horizon visible all about us in a giant circle.

"Lock the windows," she said, engrossed in pressing the button which raised the canvas top.

"It'll be too hot," I protested.

"No, the windows have to be closed," she insisted.

All preparations completed, she turned in her seat and allowed me to kiss her. I attacked her hungrily with fright and animosity as strong as desire. She must have felt she had set off an avalanche, and in fact she had; for the first time in almost a year I knew that I would be all right.

Yet, it was not so easy as that. She would give herself to my mouth and my arms, she would accept my caresses, and then she would start away, looking fearfully through the car window. "There's a man coming," she would whisper, her nails digging my wrist, and I would be forced to lift my head and scan the horizon, forced to stop and say, "There's no one around, can't you see?"

"I'm terrified," she would say, and give her mouth to me again. How long it went on I do not know, but it was classic. She teased me forward, she pushed me back, she allowed me to strip a piece of her clothing only to huddle away like a tormented virgin. We could have been adolescents upon a couch. My lips were bruised from kissing, my body suffered, my tongue felt swollen, and if I had succeeded in capturing at last whatever clothing she wore beneath her evening dress, pushing it behind me in the seat like a mad jay stuffing its nest, I still could not inspire Lulu to give up her gown. Though she allowed the most advanced forays and even indulged me to succeed for precisely three seconds in making my entrance, the relief of triumph not yet secured, she withdrew all with a little motion that pushed me away, and then sat up to look up through the windows. "There's someone coming. There's somebody on the road," she said, and pinched me when I tried to come near her.

"This is impossible," I told her, but for all I told her, high-water mark had apparently been reached. For another hour, no matter what I did, how I forced, how I dallied, and how I importuned, I could not arrive so close again. The dawn must have been not too far away, when exhausted, discouraged, and indeed virtually indifferent, I lay back in my seat and murmured, "You win." With a weary hand I passed over my cache of her under-clothing and shut my eyes.

Tenderly, she kissed my lashes, her fingers teased my cheek. "You're sweet," she whispered. To revive me, she pulled my hair. "Kiss me, Sergius," she said as if I had not yet embraced her at all, and in the next minute while I lay back upon the seat, not believing and almost passive to her giving, in a last resurgence of that conquering energy I had possessed when we began, I was allowed to penetrate into the mysterious and magical belly of a cinema queen. She gave herself gently to me, she was delicate, she was loving, loving even to the modesty with which she whispered that she had taken no precaution and I must be considerate. So I was obliged to travel alone and was repaid by having her cuddle afterward in my arms.

"You're wonderful," she said.

"I'm just an amateur."

"No, you're wonderful. Ooooh, I like you. You!"

On the way back I drove the car while she curled beside me, her head on my shoulder. The radio was on and we hummed to the music. "I was crazy tonight," she said.

I adored her. The arrogance with which she had treated everyone when I met her made this only more delightful. If our bout in the car had been ludicrous by turns, it carried almost nothing against the warmth of this after-pleasure. The thought in having her I still did not know her nude, created desire to possess her again. I had the rare knowledge that not only would I remember this moment as happiness, but that I was happy now. More. Something so important had been achieved. For on that dangerous drive she brought me before we parked, I had told myself that absolutely I had to succeed with her, and the memory of this feeling now that indeed I had succeeded was prodigious balm. I had the confidence and the comfort at this moment that since such things as my particular little sickness could never be cured by an act of will, there must have been something in myself finally which was not defeated, something which would nourish me in the future. Perhaps it was no more than that enough time had gone by, but I felt succored, I felt ready—for what, I hardly knew.

Lulu was tense when we kissed good night outside her door. "Let me stay," I said.

"No, not tonight." She looked behind her to see if the walks were deserted.

"Then come to my house."

She kissed me on the nose. "I'm just beaten, Sergius." Her voice was the voice of a child.

"Will you come see me tomorrow?"

"Call me." She kissed me again, she blew a kiss as she disappeared through the door, and I was left alone in the labyrinth of the Yacht Club, the first sun of a desert morning not far away, the foliage a lovely pale-blue like the pale-blue of her gown.

It may sound ridiculous, but I was so rich with enthusiasm that I had to share it, and I could think of no one but Eitel. That he might be occupied with Elena, or that as the ex-husband of the girl I had just found, he would not necessarily be overjoyed to share my story, did not occur to me. I doubt whether I even remembered that Lulu had been married to him. As it is so often with some exciting first night, she had no history and no existence for me prior to tonight, and if she seemed larger than life on this fabulous dawn, she was also without life. How I loved myself then. With the dawn spreading out from me until it seemed to embrace the Yacht Club with its widening light, I could think of those dawn mornings when I was out on a flight which had begun in the darkness of the hangars, the sweet syrup of coffee on my tongue, the exhausts of my plane flaring two beautiful torches into the night. We would take off an hour before dawn, and when morning came to meet us five miles high in the air with the night suspended beneath like masks of the earth and of the sea, I used to believe I could control the movement of universes by the power of my body as it was swollen by the power of the plane, and I had juggled magic. For it was magical to fly an airplane; it was magical for all of us. One could know that no matter what happened on ground, no matter how small or bewildered or frightened we ourselves could be, there was always waiting those hours when we would be alone in formation and delivered from life, and so the magic was in the flight and the flight made us giants, and there was nothing which could happen once we were down which could not be redeemed or forgotten or transmuted when the night went into the west and we pursued it on our wings.

I had taken care to forget all of this, I had loved it too much, and it had been too painful to think that probably I would never have magic again; but on this dawn with the taste of Lulu's mouth on my lips teasing me with the knowledge of her flesh, I knew that I could have something else, and I could mourn those airplanes I had deserted because there was something to replace them, even as a man who has despaired of falling in love and finds a new woman after years of nothing can allow himself then to think of a first love he had cudged from his mind and give himself finally to mourn that first love because he need not mourn her too much; new magic has come.

Thinking this, or thinking of such things, I started up the path to where I had parked my car. Midway, I sat on a bench beneath a bower of shrubbzery, breathing the new air. Abruptly, I was startled. In a cottage nearby, I heard brawling sounds, a startling curse or two, and then a door in the wall opened, and Teddy Pope lurched out, still in his sweater and dungarees, but his feet were bare. "You bitch," he screeched at the door.

76

"Stay out," came the voice of the tennis player. "I never want to talk to you again." Teddy cursed. He cursed at such length and in so loud a voice that I was certain everyone sleeping nearby must be awakened. The door to the bungalow opened again, and Marion Faye came outside. "Go beat your meat, Teddy," he said in his cruel quiet voice, and then he stepped back inside and shut the door. Teddy turned around once and looked past me with blank eyes which saw nothing at all.

I watched him lurch along the wall, and despite myself I followed at a distance. In one of the miniature patios of the Yacht Club where a fountain, a few yucca trees, and a hedge of bougainvillea arranged an artificial nook, Teddy Pope stopped and made a phone call from an outdoor booth installed beneath a trellis of rambler roses. "I can't go to sleep like this," he blurted into the receiver. "I've got to talk to Marion." The voice at the other end made some short answer.

"Don't hang up," Teddy Pope shouted.

Like a night watchman making his rounds, Herman Teppis came into sight along one of the walks. He approached Teddy Pope, came up beside him, and with a totally unambiguous motion, slammed the receiver upon its cradle.

"You're a disgraceful human being," Herman Teppis said, and continued on down the walk without saying another word.

Teddy Pope staggered away and came to rest against a yucca tree. He leaned upon it as if it were his mother. Then he began to cry. I had never seen a man quite so drunk. Sobbing, hiccuping, he tried to chew upon the bark of the tree. I backed away, I wished nothing so much as to disappear. When I was out of sight, I heard Pope scream. "You bastard, Teppis," he cried out, shrieking safely into the empty dawn; "you know what you can do, you fat bastard, Teppis," and I could picture his head on the yucca tree. I drove slowly home, making no attempt to find Eitel after all.

PART 3 | CHAPTER TEN

For much of what follows, I must use my imagination.

When I think of myself in Desert D'Or, I realize that of all the people I knew and the part of my thoughts which I can make theirs, or to be true to the logic of memory, *their* thoughts which I have made my own, it is only in trying to describe myself that imagination will falter. I cannot believe that I was quite so indefinite to other people as I now remember, but it is hardly possible to see oneself otherwise. For in the act of remembering others, the more one creates the more one finds, but for ourselves the trace of what is real intervenes, and we are always insubstantial.

So, in the false certainty of memory, I understand Eitel better than myself. Today, I cannot remember clearly how he looked, no more than one can picture oneself in childhood, but I *know* what he thought, and what he felt, and I can enter his affair with Elena Furelli and follow its course.

It began well. To regain his self-respect it was necessary for Eitel to do something of no advantage to himself, and therefore when Teppis told him to leave the party, Eitel was in a fine mood. On the walk to his car from the Laguna Room, he was full of intimate nonsense, giving imitations of people they had met that night until Elena breathless from laughter had to hold his arm. "I love the dignity of Italian women," Eitel went on in mimicry of Jennings James, and she could only whisper to him, "Oh, stop!" I know he gave her the impression she had never met anyone quite so marvelous; she must have felt as if she had known him for a long time. It was the quality of intimacy he could convey, suggesting the admiration that he had never talked before to anyone quite so capable of understanding him. And on the exhilaration of the drive to his bungalow, he truly admired her, finding her more than attractive with her warm brown hair, her golden skin, the tender heart-shaped contours of her face.

Once they arrived at his house, she went in with him quite naturally. He made her a drink and sat beside her on the couch, thinking that nothing could be more of a tonic to her self-esteem than to make love to her gently, kindly, showing the affection he felt for her. Yet his pulse was quickening from the anxiety he always experienced before making love to a woman the first time. "I think I've seen you before," he said after a silence.

Elena nodded. "You did. But you weren't even looking at me."

"I don't believe that's possible," he said with his best smile.

"Well, it's true." She also smiled. "I used to work in the costume department at Supreme. Once I brought up a couple of dresses for you to examine, and you didn't even see me. You just looked at the costumes. Maybe it was cause I looked so terrible that day."

"I thought you were a flamenco dancer."

Elena shrugged. "I wanted to be. Once in a while my agent would get me a job for a night or so. But no career to speak of."

Her remark gave him a picture of how she must have lived. From experience, he knew whatever banal history there was of shabby bungalows and cheap restaurants and all those men through whom she must have passed, periphery of a social summit: would-be agents, unemployed actors, real-estate operators with a one-room office, musicians, a man or two with a name for a one-night stand, a man perhaps with a name like his own, so that in reverse of those medieval troubadours who could boast of having slept with the queen, she could tell her intimates that such and such a star was an old friend.

He disliked mentioning Munshin but he was curious. "Collie said he met you at a benefit."

She laughed. "That's Collie's story. He likes to build things up. Why he never even saw me dance. He used to make me feel too inhibited."

"Then how did you meet?"

"Collie wasn't like you. He noticed me." Her green eyes teased him. "I was the tenth assistant or something like that to Rexi Blair, Collie's wardrobe man, and what with one thing and another, and playing tag in Collie's office, Collie finally took me to dinner." She sighed. "You know what I hold against Collie? He made me quit the job, and then he put me up in an apartment. He said he couldn't keep on seeing me if I worked steadily at Supreme." She gave a wry twist to her childlike mouth. "So that's how I became a kept woman. I guess I'm lazy."

Eitel was studying her face, considering Elena as a possibility for his film. She would not do. He could tell that at a glance. Despite the vitality of her eyes and the beauty of her mouth and her white teeth, there was the sad fact that her nose was too long and the sensuality of her nostrils would be magnified by the camera.

He changed the subject. "Have you ever done any skiing?" Eitel asked.

"No."

"We must do it sometime. There's nothing like skiing," Eitel said with enthusiasm as though tomorrow they would be on a plane to the north.

"I haven't done anything much."

"It's indescribable," Eitel said, his voice husky from the proximity of their bodies. "Everything you learn is done by fighting your fear."

"Oh."

They each sat sipping their drinks. "I think I can get some Spanish music on the radio," Eitel said. "Would you dance for me?"

"Not tonight."

"But you'll dance for me sometime?"

"I don't know," she said.

"I'd love to see you. I know you're good."

"You're just being nice." Her hand was playing nervously with his. After a minute or so, she reached forward with a little smile and kissed him.

In virtually no time at all, they were beside one another in his bed. Eitel had been without a woman for several months, and in surprise at his own gusto, and with an enjoyment which for once was not mental, he made love to Elena and was amazed at her response. How she opened to him, he thought numbly. With the exception of a moment when she attempted to hold him off, and cried out, "No, no," to which he answered not brutally, "Oh, shut up," merely increasing her excitement by the words, he had never had a woman who gave herself so completely on a first embrace. To Eitel, who had decided more than once that when all was said very few women really knew how to make love, it was one of the most extraordinary experiences of his life. Long after his genuine enthusiasm had passed, and he catered to her with the art and technique he had been at such competitive pains to acquire, he could picture Munshin's round face and its sad look. "Et tu, old friend," Munshin would be saying, and it furnished Eitel new appetite. He found with a kind of wonder that he had discovered a treasure. She responded to every improvisation, she stimulated others; he was a ferment of invention. Eitel had always felt that the way a woman made love was at least as reliable a guide to understanding her character as any other criterion, and Elena from the distance of an inch became a woman of exceptional beauty. Never had he seen such an alteration. Where she was timid with people, she was flamboyant with love; where the child, now the woman; where crude in her manners, subtle with sexual intuition. So it went, her energy almost avaricious in its requests on him. When at last they were done and Eitel could glow from that prowess more valuable to him than pleasure itself, they lay side by side smiling at each other.

"You're . . . you're," she started to say at last, and ended by using an odd word. "You're a champion," Elena said. And with a little groan of disbelief she turned away from him. "I just never . . . you see . . . it never happened like this."

Since that day on the beach when the girl with the surfboard had been indifferent to him, he had begun to doubt himself. As he had grown older, he had become more sensitive to the subtle ways in which women refused his body even as they accepted it, and this had made him sexually fragile. He had thought that in a few more years this part of his life would be gone.

It was pleasant then to believe Elena, not only because it was more agreeable than to think she invariably made such a speech, but from an instinct now finely developed after—one could never count the number—of such remarks made to him with sincerity or in flattery or by women who wished to use him. He had heard it so many times, and not without justice, for satirically he had considered this his true art. "To be a good lover," I had heard him say, "one should be incapable of falling in love." But he believed her out of something more. To give herself as she had given, was beyond all bounds of flattery. It was not the sort of thing one could deliver at will. In the course of the years he had accumulated affairs which had been hardly despicable, stunning affairs as he would think of them drily, but never, no, not ever, had the first night produced such an extravaganza. Enchanted with himself, loving beyond compare her body as it curled against him in slumber, he allowed himself to close his eyes, thinking with drowsy contentment that if he usually wanted nothing more than to quit a woman's bed after making love, now he not only wished to sleep the night with Elena but to hold her in his arms. He fell asleep a happy man.

In the morning, both were depressed. Eitel left her in bed and put on his clothes in the living room. The ice-cube bucket contained an inch of water, and he washed it out, poured some liquor neat, and cleared his throat. When Elena appeared in her evening gown, her face without make-up, her hair which she had worn in a Grecian knot above her head now hanging forlornly about her cheeks, he was almost forced to laugh. If she had been beautiful in bed, she looked sad at this moment and not at all attractive.

"Let's have breakfast," he said with an effort, smiling at her, and when she nodded, he began to scramble some eggs and put the coffee on.

"After we get some food in us," he called from the kitchen, "and feel human, I'll take a drive out to your hotel and bring you some clothing. It'll pick you up."

"I'll get out. You don't have to worry about me," she said in a surly voice.

"I'm not talking about that." She had sensed he would just as soon be free of her, and he was moved to be kind. "I want you to spend the day with me," he said quickly.

She softened. "I'm always in a bad mood in the morning."

"Oh, so am I. We're just alike I tell you." And on an impulse he kissed her lightly.

Over breakfast, given the stimulation of coffee, his humor improved. "How would you like to take a swim at the Yacht Club?" he asked with enthusiasm.

"There?"

He nodded, he could see she was considering how it would be to appear at the pool before so many strangers who would all appreciate her new relation to Eitel.

"I don't think so," she said.

"We'll shock them." He was in boyish good spirits. "If Tepis comes along, we'll push him into the pool."

"He was an awful man," Elena said. "The way he talked to you."

"It's the only language he knows. He doesn't use words. He just throws out language to convey emotion." Eitel laughed. "Now, there's a man who's all emotion. Not like me."

"You're full of emotion," she said, and then looked at her plate in embarrassment.

Dejection slipped over Eitel. He had not answered Teppis properly the night before. There were any number of things he might have said, but he merely smiled scornfully and walked away with her.

"I just thought of something," he exclaimed, starting himself up again. "I know a water hole in the desert. It's kind of pleasant. Cactus. Even a tree, I think. Why don't we go swim there?"

Despite indications to the contrary, she was still his morose little Italian. "I guess I'll take the bus home today," she said quietly.

"Oh, you're out of your mind."

"No, I want to go home." He noticed she did not dwell in self-pity on how little could await her there. "You've been very nice," she added clumsily, and began to shiver. He realized how much emotion she contained.

"Look, Furelli," Eitel began in a light tone, but tears came into her eyes, and she left the room. He could hear her close the bedroom door.

"Damn," Eitel said aloud.

He was thinking that she had given herself to him in order to humiliate Munshin. Now, the next day had come and she had merely humiliated herself. He strode to the door, opened it, and sat down beside Elena on the bed. "Don't cry," he said tenderly to her. She was dear to him suddenly. He liked her ever so much. "Don't cry, little monkey," Eitel said and stroked her hair. It released a watershed of tears from Elena. He held her in his arms, a little amused by such emotion, a little bored, and yet not without sympathy. "You're very sweet," he said into her ear.

"No . . . you're so nice to me," she sobbed.

After a time, her eyes swollen, she got up to examine herself in the mirror, made a sound of dismay at how frightful she looked, and head averted, whispered to him, "Once I get my other clothes, let's go to the pool."

"Oh, you're a terror," he said, and she hugged him hungrily.

"Please don't look at me," Elena said. "Not until I fix myself."

He obeyed her. Given the key to Elena's room, he went for a quick drive through Desert D'Or, located her hotel, mounted to her room, and gathered a change of clothing. It was not a large room, and its window looked upon an airshaft. She had brought only one suitcase, a shabby piece of luggage, yet she had managed to strew its few contents over every piece of furniture. She was sloppy, and as a testimonial to the standards of the hotel, the chambermaid had been content to do no more than make the bed. Sadly, Eitel studied the disarray. She was so helpless he thought, tossing a slip on top of a rumpled blouse in order to clear a space for himself. He sat down on the chair thus cleared, and lighting a cigarette, admonished himself. "I'll have to warn her about me," he almost said aloud.

Warn her, he did not. The afternoon developed into unexpected fun. If no one came to their table to talk, it suited his mood exactly. Ever since he had awakened, his temper was shifting continually between pleasant melancholy and excitement. It pleased him somehow that the news of his quarrel with Teppis had spread so quickly. Let him be all alone, he thought; let *them* be all alone, Elena and himself. "Fresh beginnings," Eitel repeated to himself all that day like the phrase of a song which one cannot put out of mind.

He was very pleased with Elena. Her body which he had hardly time to study in their embrace, was delightful in a bathing suit. He found himself wanting her all over again, and felt a sensual warmth sitting in the sun, able to know that in a few hours he would have her. It was pleasant beyond pleasure to put off that moment. She had a charming laugh. It it were based upon nervousness, it was nonetheless appealing. Her soft curved mouth widened with merriment, her beautiful white teeth gleamed to his sight, and he discovered that he was trying to make her laugh, and that his wit flourished before her admiration. She was aware of how people looked at them, she was not altogether at ease, far from it, and yet unlike the night before at the party, she succeeded in presenting some composure. He had to applaud the dignity with which she listened to him, her eyes attentive to the meaning of what he said. "I could make something of this girl," he thought. It would not be so difficult. He could teach her to speak without moving her hands, he could direct her soft voice away from occasional vulgarities. Eitel was infatuated with the afternoon. Everything was so perfect. "Eitel against the world," he thought with guarding irony, but it could hardly damp his exuberance. He found himself thinking of those years when he had been in college at a fashionable Eastern university which had represented the crown to his parent's ambition; and with a shock—it was truly so long ago—he remembered how clumsy he had been in his late adolescence, and how difficult and painful he had found it to live among students who seemed born with their comfortable knowledge that the world was for them. With what hunger he had watched, and with what hatred, while they had paraded their eminently desirable dates through the doors of all those fraternity houses to which he had never been invited, and like a moment from the past which is caught and then relinquished again in the interval between sleep and awakening, he recovered the contempt he had felt for his own few pitiful conquests in college—town girls, working girls, and occasional invitation to some unattractive student from the neighboring college for women. He had left school with the intolerable fire of knowing that the world saw him as unimportant and homely and insignificant, and perhaps that had been the spur to make those early movies. If that were true, then the success of his art had come from hunger and from anger; and in those years at the capital, while his hunger had been

satisfied and his anger mellowed into wit, he had spent his urge and been admired and lost the energy of his talent. Sitting beside Elena now, thinking of how he was back where he had begun, he had a conviction that his art would return. She would help him, he could live with such a woman now, and on the flood of enthusiasm these thoughts encouraged, he felt very close to Elena. She was warm, and she had given him so much last night. How necessary that had been for his confidence. "You're wonderful," he said to her like a youth, and was even more taken by the constraint with which she accepted his praise. She was perceptive. That he had decided beyond a doubt. Of her own accord she had begun to speak of Munshin, and he was impressed by what she understood. "He's not a bad man," Elena said. "He would like a woman to be really in love with him. I was mean. I made him think I loved him." Her simplicity drew Eitel. "Collie thought you loved him?" he asked.

She surprised Eitel by what she said next. "I don't know. He's sharp. You know he has a lot of understanding of relationships."

"Yes, indeed."

"My analyst thought I should try to make a go with him."

"You're finished now?"

"I stopped going to the analysis. I don't think I made the right kind of transference." It seemed bizarre, somehow, to hear such words from her mouth. "You know," she said, "my doctor was like Collie to me." A devil shone in her eyes for an instant. "I think I used to go out and get in some of the weird things I did with men, just so I could be more interesting to him." She giggled.

"How did Collie take all this?"

"I hate him," she said suddenly. "I don't know about these things, but I've heard he's pretty awful business-wise." Eitel tried not to wince at her language. "But, you see, Collie's a funny man. He wants to be noble—that word isn't too strong, it is?" she asked. "He just loved the idea he could forgive me. That made him feel marvelous because then he could think there was one side to him anyway where he was being a very fine man. It didn't matter what I did. He would have forgiven me if I'd had, you know, sexual relations in front of him. He's such a hypocrite," she said furiously, and squeezing Eitel's hand, added, "I don't know how I could have stayed with him so long."

Eitel nodded. "Collie wasn't so 'noble' when it came to divorcing his wife."

"That's cause he also likes to think he's a rat. Oh, it was impossible. I'm disgusted with myself." She fingered her mouth vacantly. "He's a funny man, Collie. He's so full of guilt and anxiety."

"That blasted jargon again," Eitel said to himself. It carried unpleasant connotations from previous affairs. There were so many women he had had while they were in analysis, and they had carried gossip back and forth: what Eitel had said about the analyst; what the analyst had said about him. A modern *menage-à-trois*.

But Elena was absorbed in her own thoughts. "Collie is very complicated," she told Eitel. "He wants to think he's very unselfish, and he also wants to think he's no good. The only time he's happy is when he feels both things at the same time. Does that make sense? I mean, I don't know, I don't know how to say things."

She was priceless, thought Eitel. "Couldn't put it better myself," he said lightly.

"I don't really hate Collie," she added, "I'm just ashamed."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." Her nervous fingers tore cuticle from her nail. He would have to correct that habit, Eitel was thinking. "Because I needed him for so long, and because I did, oh, you know, exploit him."

"Well, he used you," Eitel said.

"That's true . . ." Elena tried to express herself. "Only Collie is that way. He has to use people. It's not his fault. That's the way he is."

"Whereas you have a better idea of yourself," Eitel said with a smile.

"Well, I didn't mean that. I don't know." An impish look peeped out of her green eyes. "I guess that's what I do mean," she said, and laughed again.

"You're wonderful," Eitel said.

"I'm having such a marvelous time today," Elena declared.

That night was as exciting as the night before, even better perhaps, for he had been desiring her all day. Once again he could marvel that Elena was the most perfect wanton he had ever found. And with the part of his mind he never relinquished from himself, no matter what the pitch of his embrace, he was deciding over and over again that the question which had bothered him through the day, the doubt whether they could repeat themselves or had merely enjoyed an accident, was now answered for him. "It's never been like this," she said to him, and when he could only smile, she shook herself with wonder. "Something has happened to me." Nestling closer she whispered, scratching a first pin-prick of jealousy from him, "I was always acting before."

It had happened in the past. He had had women who opened to their first full discovery of themselves with him, and he had gathered all the considerable benefits to his vanity, but he had never encountered so perfect an identity of taste. Eitel thought it remarkable that they should be so adjusted to the nicety between love-making and extravagance, so identical in preference that his sense of her body could not play him wrong. It had been always his outstanding talent, or so he considered, to be able to identify himself with a woman's body until he had the certainty at various high instants that he could discover every sympathetic nerve. "The onanist at heart," he had thought, and made love to a woman with care enough to have made love to himself. But Elena stimulated him to mark above mark. Her body was alive, she was alive, he had never made love to anyone who understood him so well. The balance was perfect, without any shame that too little had been done or too much.

Eitel fell asleep king of the universe. Like most cynics he was profoundly sentimental about sex. It was his substitute for bounty, and as a substitute it contained enough for him to awake with the hope that this affair could restore his energy, firm his courage, and make him the man he had once believed himself to be. He lay in bed with Elena beside him and thought for the first time in many years that for him the most priceless thing in the world was to make a great movie.

Down one could go, very far down, but there was a bottom. Himself, corrupted beyond corrupting, and this girl he knew hardly at all. Children of corruption, and together each of them would make something of the other. He felt full of tenderness for Elena. She was adorable. Her back was exquisite in its contours. "Wake up, little monkey," he whispered to her ear.

Through the day he toyed with the thought that she should come to live with him. He was far too cautious to give her such an idea before he was certain of it. But time passed well. They were now in the stage of talking about previous affairs, a subject which always fascinated Eitel. He found that Elena not only loved to gossip, but was aroused by the mention of situations and combinations.

"Did you ever do it with two women?" she asked.

He had. She insisted he give the details and listened like a child to a fairy tale, hugging herself with pleasure at the story. "Maybe we can do something like that," she offered.

"Maybe."

"Oh, what a crazy conversation." But she was a greedy rabbit for more carrots. Her heart-shaped face dimpled with interest, she wanted to know if he had ever been to a ball.

"Usually I've stayed away from that," Eitel said. "I'm a little afraid of it." He went on, however, to assure her that he knew people in Desert D'Or with whom it was possible. Was she interested?

She was interested. They must do it sometime. "I've been with women," Elena confided. "And once . . ." It appeared she had figured in a combination as well, "Collie wanted to kill me when I told him. He found that one hard to forgive."

"You little demon. You did it just so you could tell him."

"Well, he had to worm it out of me." She giggled. "I'm awful."

"I'm wondering how you would describe me," Eitel said.

"I wouldn't talk about you at all," she said with complete seriousness. "Never. I couldn't." He looked away, but the inevitable question came. "Why?" she asked, "would you describe me?"

"No, of course not." Eitel winced. "Absolutely fantastic," he could hear himself saying, "the best woman I ever had." He slapped her bottom. "You're a funny monkey." Before he realized it, his voice had said, "And who do you love now?"

"You," she said, and then looked away. "No, I don't. I don't love anybody at all."

"You feel free?"

"Yes."

"It's a good way to feel." With scarcely a pause he went on to tell other such histories. Cozily the day went by, and only at its end did they begin to talk about what she would do. Elena still insisted she would return to the capital next day, and Eitel said he would not let her go. At the end of an hour of such argument, he announced in full enthusiasm, "Let's live together."

To his surprise she seemed more troubled than pleased. "I don't think so," she said quietly.

"Why?"

She tried to give her arguments. "I've been with one man for so long . . ."

"Not really," Eitel interrupted.

"Well, now I'm free of Collie, and I don't want to start . . . that is, not yet. I want to see if I can live by myself."

"You're not giving the real reason."

"Yes, I am," she said and looked at him. "Besides it wouldn't work with you."

"Let's try."

Elena became agitated. "Sure, let's try. What can you lose?"

He was about to say, "What can *you* lose?" and restrained himself.

They settled on a compromise. Elena would stay in Desert D'Or and they would see each other whenever they felt like it, even every day if so it worked out.

"You can do what you want," Elena said, "and I'll do what I want."

"Perfect," Eitel said. "Do you need any money?"

"I've got enough to get on by myself for a while," she said modestly.

It was really better than he could have expected. To have her, and to have his privacy as well. She was clever he thought, she knew how not to spoil things. Eitel insisted on paying a week in advance for her room, and that night he saw Elena to the hotel and slept alone. The moment she was gone he knew he had been looking forward to this. There came a time in every affair, no matter how diverting, when he wished to be by himself; fortunate she had the sense to demand some respite.

Eitel fell asleep quickly, remarking to himself in the last moment before unconsciousness how easily sleep came now. But in three hours he was awake, and could not close his eyes again. The long wait from early morning until the dawn brought back the torment he knew so well. All of his life came in review before him, wretchedness multiplied upon wretchedness, until no one had ever seemed quite so odious to him as himself. The smell of Elena's body in which he had delighted, clung to him still, somehow was penetrated into the cave of his throat. The tension of his nerves became insupportable; his limbs might have been on a rack. It was too late for a sleeping pill, and in this condition he would need several. Eitel got out of bed and began to drink, finishing half a pint before breakfast. But it did little good, no more than to keep him from feeling worse.

He found that he was playing with the idea of calling Elena, and that he wanted her to come over to his house. The thought of having her with him was more than pleasant; it seemed a necessity; he did not want to wait by himself for the dawn to come. So he picked up the phone, dialed the number of her hotel, and asked the desk to ring her room. There was a long ten seconds in which she did not answer, just time enough for him to be aware by the pressure on his heart of what a disaster it would be if he were forced to learn that she was out at this hour. Then he heard her voice. He could not be certain but he had the feeling Elena was simulating drowsiness.

"Oh, darling," she said, "is something the matter?"

"Nothing." He cleared his throat. "It's just that I want to hear your voice."

Her answer came softly back at him. "But, Charley, at this hour?"

Eitel lit a cigarette. "Listen, you wouldn't want to come over here now, would you?" He made his voice casual.

She seemed to be debating. "Honey, I'm tired," Elena finally murmured.

"Oh, well, forget it."

"You're not angry?"

"Of course not," Eitel said.

"I'm so sleepy."

"I shouldn't have called. You go back to bed."

"I missed you tonight," Elena said. "It'll be even more fun tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he repeated, "I missed you too," and sat looking at the phone long after he had hung up. Somehow, he could not rid himself of the idea that there had been a man in her room while she spoke to him.

To his enormous amazement, Eitel discovered that he was jealous, he was jealous of Elena. It had been so many years since he had felt jealousy that the emotion was gratifying, indeed to feel any kind of emotion was gratifying. Nonetheless, he began to endure some fine tortures. The thought of Elena giving her unique sounds of pleasure to someone else crawled upon his flesh.

Eitel fought one of those heroic battles of the night which reveal not a single corpse in the morning; a dozen times at least he reached out his hand to the phone and then withdrew it. By that terrible insight of jealousy, the most radical of the emotions, Eitel penetrated to the honest root of all those giggling anecdotes she had told him, so that he had no more than to think of a man she had mentioned, and her chance comment, "Boy, was I drunk," to enter into the hysterical center of how she had given herself, acting he knew, bleating, crying, purring, all of it false and drink-inspired, his imaginative eye gouged by the ultimate horror of jealousy—these orgiastic pictures were arousing him as well. The man she had been with, trust that man not to have known she was acting and to boast afterward to his friends of just what she had said and what she had done. It was intolerable to Eitel. If he had listened in the past to numberless confessions by other mistresses

and considered it no more than a revue of the comic, the salacious, and the entertaining, no more disturbed by the woman's past adventures than by those of a stranger's, he could by now have murdered every one of the men Elena had known. They did not appreciate her and that was their crime; they did not appreciate her any more than she could appreciate herself—like all jealous lovers Eitel thought Elena took poor care of his property. She was only what he could make of her, and if he were jealous of her past it was because whatever she had done before could be understood only as something she was doing now. Those ecstatic appreciations she might once have whispered to some other man, existed now precisely to deny the truth and passion of what she whispered to him. Like an ice pick to the breast, he heard his own words about her but a few days before, "When Collie's not around, his little kitten will go for a romp. A couple of actors who've worked for me, have been with her. They tell me she's extraordinary in bed." He could have wrung her throat because she had not waited for him; why hadn't she known it was unnecessary to act for he would appear and provide everything? Gone was the bracing reason which declared that one got on a roller coaster in order to feel certain emotions. He considered it a crime if she had ever felt even a moment's passing desire for some other man.

The next few days were remarkable and unbearable. He spent his time waiting for Elena to arrive, and when she had come to his house, he would take her with a fury and an ardor he had believed gone forever. When she was absent he would drink, he would sit at the Yacht Club, he would go for a drive, he would pass her hotel, he would circle the town in order to pass her hotel once again. When I visited him after an absence of several days, he was distracted and nervous with energy. In an hour he told me one anecdote after another, converting them into productions where he acted all the parts and created person after person by no more than a gesture of his hands. I had put off seeing him, I had been reluctant finally to confess what had happened with Lulu, afraid it might alter our friendship, but he had merely roared with laughter when I announced the fact, had congratulated me, had gasped, "I knew it would happen. By God, I knew it would happen."

"But how?"

"She's always stayed away from handsome me. I had the idea, I just had it, that now she was ready for the main bouts."

"What is Lulu like?" I begged.

Unable to sit still, he sprang to his feet and paced about. "Oh, no! Oh, no! You've got to discover her for yourself." And then he did the uncharacteristic thing of slapping me powerfully on the back. "How we're to be pitied," he cried theatrically.

At the end of a week, just when he was convinced his jealousy was unfounded, or to describe it right, just at that time when his jealousy had begun to ebb and he kept it alive for the pleasure of entertaining the pain, thinking he could end it whenever he desired, Eitel learned that indeed Elena had been unfaithful to him.

She had come into his bungalow quietly, she had kissed him a touch abstractly, she was sweet and a little distant. "I met an old friend of mine today," she announced after a while, "somebody who knows you, too." When he did not answer, his heart already beginning to pound, Elena said, "It was Marion Faye."

"Marion Faye. How do you know him?"

"Oh, I knew him years ago."

"He's an old friend of yours?" Until now, Eitel had managed to hide his jealousy, but the effort demanded too much. "Tell me," he said roughly, "were you shopping for prices?"

Her eyes became wary. "What are you talking about?"

"Marion Faye is a pimp."

"I didn't know that. Honest I didn't." Elena's face became expressionless. "Oh, my God. He's just an old boy friend."

"And now he's a new boy friend?"

"No."

"You just talked to him?"

"Well, a little more than that."

"You went to bed with him?"

"Yes."

Eitel felt almost gleeful. If his knees were numb, his tongue was sharp. "Obviously, I haven't been satisfying you."

"How you talk."

"Still, you had something left in reserve."

"No. I wouldn't say that."

"Just went to bed for Auld Lang Syne?"

"You're enjoying this," Elena said, "you're making fun of me."

"Forgive me for hurting you." If he had had a needle in his hand, he would have left it in her body. "Well, why did you do it?"

Her face assumed its familiar defiance, so much the protective spite of a child. "I felt like it. I was curious."

"You've always been curious, haven't you?"

"I wanted to see . . ." She stopped.

"I know. You don't have to tell me. I'm an expert on that monstrosity called female psychology."

"You must be an expert on everything," Elena said. She stopped and began again. "I didn't know, and I wanted to find out if . . ."

"If this burgeoning of the flesh were something you could cultivate only with me, or whether you could have it with any man at all. Is that it?" From far away, Eitel was offended by the absurd precision with which he was speaking.

"Something like that."

"Something like that! I'll kill you," he shouted hopelessly.

"I had to find out," Elena muttered.

"What did you find out?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you. I felt like a statue with him. I thought that would make you happy."

"Only you didn't act like a statue with him."

"Well . . ."

"You're a pig," he said to her.

"I'll go if you want me to go," she said stiffly.

"Stay here!"

"I think we'd better quit now, you and me," Elena said. "I'll pay you for my hotel room . . . I'll owe it to you."

"And I suppose you'll get the money from Faye?"

"Well, I didn't think of asking him," she said, "but now that you mention it . . ."

To his surprise, Eitel began to shake her. Elena started to cry, and he released her and walked away. His head ached.

"You don't care about me," she said. "You don't really care. Just your pride is hurt."

He tried to calm himself. "Elena, why did you do it?"

"You think I'm stupid. Well, maybe I am stupid. There's nothing interesting I can tell you. I'm just a sexual object. You're too smart for me. All right." Her weeping increased. "I'm not your equal. I know that."

"What has this got to do with it? I think you're smart. I've told you."

Again she was defiant, as if guarding herself from him. Her little heart-shaped face tried to express indifference. "When a woman's unfaithful, she's more attractive to a man."

"Stop reciting your lessons." Eitel shouted again. In a kind of frenzy, he caught her to him. "You idiot!"

"It's true. It is true. It's not lessons. I know." The pain in her face was momentarily real to him. She was right. If her flesh were tainted, she had never seemed more pure to him, nor ever so attractive. "You idiot," he repeated, "don't you understand? I think I love you." From the paralyzed center of his mind came the thought, "you're in the soup now, friend."

"You don't love me," she said.

"I love you," he amended.

Elena began to weep again. "I worship you," she sobbed. "Nobody ever treated me the way you do." With an excess of emotion, she was kissing his hands. "I love you more than I ever loved anyone," she said with final abandon.

So their affair really began, and Elena consented to live with him. With this, the first conclusive act Eitel had done since I knew him, a change came over his habits. I was amazed at how quickly they settled into that domestic tranquillity which may be found so much more often in a serious affair than in marriage itself.

To the people I knew in Desert D'Or, the liaison was startling. It was considered proof of Eitel's utter collapse that the girl he installed in his house ought to have been known for only a night. Whether it was coincidence or not, he was asked about this time not to come to the Yacht Club any more, and as is so often the case when morality is turned on its head, Eitel had his sentimental champions among the most unexpected people. I remember a middle-aged woman at the edge of the Yacht Club pool who had dyed blonde hair arranged in a nest of battlements and turrets, its shellacked surface harder than an ostrich egg. As the wife of a gambler, she wore diamonds with her tropical pajamas, yet she had said, "I think it's touching. Charley Eitel's done a lot for the girl. I didn't know he could be so decent."

It was true. Being their most frequent visitor, I could notice the change perhaps less than others, but it was remarkable to me how Elena had blossomed. There was nothing startling as such; if she had been awkward before, she was awkward still, and I had no doubt a large party would still be a most frightening dragon, but nonetheless she had certainly improved. I had rarely seen a woman I thought so much in love. Her eyes never left Eitel's face; her mood was the precise barometer of his own spirits; if he were gay, she was delighted; moody, he made her morose. No one else existed for her—I think I say it without exaggeration. It is one thing to be faithful, it is another not to covet, and I never had the impression, not for a moment, that she had any interest in other men. Her face emanated the tenderness of a woman abundantly in love.

Eitel loved these weeks, he loved the situation. He felt as if he were in that happy stage of convalescence where appetite returns and each day one is stronger. In contrast to the restlessness which had had him stirring fruitlessly from place to place, he was now capable of spending hours at a time on the patio which adjoined their bungalow, reading seriously as he had not done for some years, thinking that he had allowed his mind to deteriorate and that it was important for him now to read, to learn, just what he could not say, but the act itself was necessary. And at night, in culmination to the fondling warmth of the sun, they would lie in bed, mellow lovers, delighted with each other, caught each time with surprise at how they had forgotten how very magical it was, every embrace seeming therefore more perfect than the one before. Poor memory is so indispensable to passionate lovers.

They had their troubles, they had their quarrels, but they enjoyed them like children. Elena had insisted that he let his cleaning woman go because she could do the housework. Pleased by her offer, and mindful of the need for economy, Eitel had agreed. Only Elena was a wretched housekeeper, and the constant messiness of the house irritated him. Their fights obeyed a predictable routine—making breakfast often ended in a crisis—but for Eitel these fights were without precedent; in the past, arguments with his women had ended in chilly silence, and so he could enjoy these quarrels, enjoy their childishness. He would criticize Elena for something and she would lose her temper.

"You're tired of me," she would say, "you don't love me."

"It's you who don't love me," he would tell her. "The moment I criticize you, you're furious at me."

"You think I'm not good enough for you. You tell me I don't love you because you don't love me. It's all right. I'll leave." And she would actually start for the door.

"For God's sake, come back," he would command her, and five minutes later, reunited, the scene would be forgotten. He understood. He knew that beneath her taste for the dramatic she disbelieved in her happiness, waited for it to end at a sudden stroke, and judged the danger not by the quarrel but by the ardor or lack of ardor with which he mended the quarrel. It was exhausting to him at times, it was annoying, he sometimes felt as if he had invited a subtle animal to share his quarters. Her concern for what he thought was so intense that he knew nothing to measure it by.

They had only one jealous quarrel, and it was Eitel who began it. By chance, in a bar, they had run into Faye, and he had sat at their table, he had been attentive to Elena. Eitel knew she was now indifferent to Faye, but when they got home he accused her of wanting Marion, knowing all the while it was not true, knowing that with her odd capacity to love, infidelities did not remain with her, not even the picture of them. Such pictures were left for Eitel, who nurtured them with the miserliness of a curator. If he had only one real treasure of his own, there were the many he had borrowed from Munshin. So Eitel forced himself to be hurt with the sense that to lose his jealousy completely was to lose as well his knowledge of how she could hurt him, blessed woman who could cause him pain after so many dozen who caused him nothing.

It was not for this alone he loved the situation. He saw it now that he had one true love—those films which had flourished in his mind and had never been made. In betraying that love, he had betrayed himself. The sentimental ran riot with Eitel. He had a thesis. The artist was always divided between his desire for power over his work and desire for power in the world. Only with this girl cast out by the other end of that world could he find a mate. With her it was impossible to return, he could triumph now only by his art, and for these weeks, these domestic weeks when all went well and the act of sitting beside her in the sun could allow him a sense of his strength and the confidence of liking himself, he could feel a delightful indifference toward that world he had found so hard to leave. To quit it by the bottom—that was nice, it gave one a feeling there was fruit to life. And with emotion which warned him deeply, how emotion had entered his life again, he was moved by the knowledge that he was good for Elena, that for the first time in was-it-forever? someone improved by knowing him, someone grew, he did not spoil all he touched. So, with enthusiasm, he could see their affair hopefully. Elena would improve. He would teach her all the small things, that was nothing; what was more important, she possessed the rest. Eitel could see her as the tranquil mistress of his home, loving, serene, confident in herself and what she could give to him. Thus, at the end of fantasy, was his return to the world after all,

He was always making references to the future, he would talk of what they would be doing together a year from now, two years from now. As if captive to his tongue, he would listen with a kind of amazement while he wrapped the net about them. "Let's go to Europe sometime, Elena," he would say. "You'd love Europe." She would nod. "You know, when the picture is finished," he would go on, "then maybe . . ."

"Maybe what?"

"I don't offer you anything now, do I?"

She would become agitated. "I don't think about it. Why do you?"

"Because you're a woman. You have to think of it." He would be furious suddenly. "I know all these people, sitting around, waiting for us to break up."

"They're middle-class. I don't care about them." It was her word. Somewhere she had picked up the word, and it served for her one shield. When he was jealous he was being middle-class; when she was nothing she was at least not middle-class. "If I left you because you wouldn't marry me," she said quietly, "it would mean I didn't really love you."

He adored her for that. She did possess dignity. If he could make his film, if he could reach for that work which would be his redemption, then . . . He would do well by her. No matter what, he would treat her well. He promised that to himself.

All this while, ideas formed again for that movie with which he had teased himself for so many years, and for the script which he had begun several times in the last months. There were nights when he would lie awake in the intoxication of creating whole passages of dialogue, whole scenes, and he would hear Elena murmur in her sleep as he turned on the lamp and scribbled still another item into the notebook he kept by the bed table. The notebook was filling quickly now, and he had the hope that finally he was ready, his ideas had matured, and he could succeed. With the pride that other people might feel for the beauty of their children, Eitel was charmed with the beauty of his creation, and endured impatience for all the months which must elapse before he had a script, and then money, and then his production.

Eitel had decided to tell the tale of a modern saint. He would create a man who had risen in the world by profiting on the troubles of others, a man who had a famous television program where people were selected to exhibit their problems and were given the sententious advice an audience wished to hear. Through the seasons his hero would market sentiment and climb the heights of his own career while the anonymous faces which visited his program and stammered their laments and disasters about the parents who were incurably ill, and the children who would not obey, and the spouses who were tortured with jealousy—all would be given no more heed than for the moment when they would emerge prior to disappearing again, their suffering converted into theatrical material.

But Eitel's movie would be a fairy tale for there would come the moment when his hero could not bear to listen to these stories any more. If he had prospered through the suffering of others, that suffering would finally engulf him. There would be no more than a little door opened to his heart, but through that door would flood the gulfs of the world's pain. Inexorably, his hero would drown in it, seeking to give genuine advice to his supplicants, and thereby destroying the interest of his program because the moment he would try to tell the truth he would be entertaining no longer.

94

So then the hero would go down to the base of that world upon which he had been enthroned, and he would wander through the slums and the soup kitchens and the dreary cheap saloons of that city where he had been king, trying to comfort the people he saw and merely defeating himself until in anger he would turn upon them, his sainthood evident only by the despairing round of his sins. Then, if Eitel worked it well enough, there would be perhaps in the fall of the hero a beauty above and beyond the picture, the beauty of a man who opened himself to an ocean of pity and there was drowned. How Eitel would scathe the world with this mirror of itself; a hypocritical world, a brutal world, unfeeling and lost and unrepentant, the spawn of vice, the betrayer of virtue—at times he would think that this picture would be the justification of his life, a return to youthful creative anger when he had been unafraid, and the evils of the world had seemed to exist only so that he might destroy them. Yes, his hero would be beautiful, and the picture a masterpiece if he could achieve it. The greatest of the odds against him, Eitel would decide ruefully, was that one rarely made a masterpiece if one began with that idea, and he would wonder if what he played with were no more than the enthusiastic emotions of the night.

Elena and he had taken the habit of going to a little bar a few doors from their house. It was a tiny place and the only entertainment was accordion music. The musician was not very good, and yet the melody of the accordion wound itself into their affair, its breathy plaintive notes conveying the whisper of the *bal musette*: "Life is sad, life is gay, life is gay because it is sad," soft as the music in a film one has loved, and it turned Eitel back upon those movies he had made when he was young. He was getting ready to begin work again. For a change, he was concerned with his financial affairs, and he wrote letters to his business manager, calculated the funds he still had left, and with a kind of pleasure at the modesty in which they lived, announced to Elena that possibly they would have money for three more months. Afterward, he could sell his car and sell the mortgage on the bungalow. That much was left from fifteen years, and the expensive marriages, and the houses he had owned, and the elaborate suites in all those hotels where he had stayed. Yet it did not leave him depressed.

One night in his house with the accordion in the background sounding through the desert air, he showed for Elena and himself, upon his own projector, a print in sixteen millimeter of one of his early films. It was beautiful, he felt. It was so good that he knew why he had not looked at it in many years, and while the camera and the actors went their short course, saying, "Life is sad, life is gay," which in a film if it can really be said, opens vistas of profundity, he watched with an aching heart, delighted with the artist's self-love for what he had wrought, suffering from the dull fear that he could never do it again, and yet stirred by the sudden enthusiasm that he could do more, that he could do everything. And all the while he wondered at the bold, sincere, and warm young man he had been in his youth to be able to make such a film. Elena kissed him when it was done. "I love you," she said. "You'll do a wonderful movie like this again." And Eitel, romantically, frightened beyond fright, knew his vacation was over, and he must begin again that script, that first skeleton, of an artwork he had been hitherto unable to fashion.

95

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I had never known a girl like Lulu, nor had I ever been in such an affair. Of course, I did not have any vast experience by which to judge, but I believe Lulu would have had her surprises for any man. It seemed impossible to tell from one hour to the next whether we were in love or about to break up, if we would make love or fight, do both or do nothing at all. The first time I saw her again, she was with friends and never allowed me to be alone with her, the following day she came to visit my house and not only gave herself but told me she was in love. Naturally, I told her the same. It would have been impossible not to, and indeed I was in love if love is the incapacity to think of anything else. Before she left, we had a quarrel; we would never see each other again. A half hour later she telephoned me from the Yacht Club and burst into tears. We loved each other after all.

It was frantic beyond a doubt. Yet, like a baby bird which tries its wings, I was able to discover emotions I never knew I owned, and I must have enjoyed it no less than Lulu. I suppose I was capable of appreciating society only as a cannibal; to enter the world it was my idea beneath ideas that I must have eaten another, made them my own. So I thought that by virtue of the things we did together in bed I would put my mark upon Lulu forever. My love-making must have resembled a track and field event in which I snapped the tape with bursting lungs, knotted muscles, and mind fixed upon the need to break a record. It was the only way I could comprehend her and for a brief while subdue her. Bewildered by Lulu in anger or Lulu in tears or most bewildered of all by Lulu as the elusive image of a movie screen, I could reach into what I believed was her self only when she was nude, disheveled, her body wet, and I was at her flesh, ready to ravish it, ready to eat it, young cannibal. Like a squad of weary bitter infantrymen who are billeted for the night in a museum, my pleasure was to slash tapestries, poke my fingers through old paintings, and drop marble busts upon the floor. Then I could feel her as something I had conquered, could listen to her sweet wounded breathing, and believe that no matter how she acted otherwise, these moments were Lulu given to me as if her flesh murmured words more genuine than her lips. There is folklore we carry upon our shoulders when we make love. To the excitement of having so beautiful a girl was added the greater excitement of knowing that I embraced her with the envious shadow of millions of men behind me. Poor millions with their low growl! They would never have what I had now. They could freeze outside, make a shrine in the drawer of their office desk or upon the shelf of their olive-drab lockers, looking in fantasy on the photograph of Lulu Meyers. I was so proud of myself, whether disdainful for those millions or violent in their cause when I perched them on my shoulder.

96

But if I possessed her in bed, I possessed her nowhere else. There were days when Lulu insisted she be left alone, there were other days when she would not allow me to quit her for a moment, but the common denominator was that I must obey each passing impulse. I could go over at noon to her suite in the Yacht Club, responding to a summons by phone; she would be determined that we must go horseback riding in the desert. I would arrive to find her still in bed. Breakfast had not yet come, would I have coffee with her? The moment room service had left a tray, however, Lulu decided she wanted a Stinger.

"I don't know how to make Stingers," I would tell her.

"Oh, sweetie, everybody knows how to make a Stinger. There's brandy, creme de menthe. What did you drink in the Air Force, cocoanut milk?"

"Lulu, are we going horseback riding?"

"Yes, we're going horseback riding." She would hold up a mirror, study her face with the uncompromising stare of a beauty-parlor operator, and stick out her tongue at the reflection. "Do I look good without make-up?" she would ask in a professional tone which allowed no nonsense.

"You look very good."

"My mouth's a little too thin."

"It wasn't last night," I would say.

"Oh, you. A cow could satisfy you." But she would hug me matter-of-factly. "I love you darling," she would say.

"Let's go horseback riding."

"Do you know, Sergius, you're neurotic."

"I'm neurotic. I can't bear to waste a day."

"Well, I don't feel kile getting on a horse," Lulu would decide.

"I knew you wouldn't. I didn't want to either."

"Then why did you wear your jodhpurs?"

"Because if I hadn't worn them, you would have wanted to go."

"Oh, I'm not like that." She would hug herself, sitting in bed, her beautiful face arched above her lovely throat. "Honest, I'm not."

The phone would ring. It would be a call from New York. "No, I'm not marrying Teddy Pope, Bill," she would say to a columnist. "Of course, he's a son of a bitch. Yes, say we're good friends and that's all. Good-bye, sweetie." She would hang up, she would groan. "That stiff of a press agent I've got. Why can't he handle those dopes?"

"Why don't you let him?"

"He's stupid."

So it would go. About the time I would be most exasperated she would begin to dress. The coffee was cold she would inform me and call room service for more. I would lose my temper. I was definitely leaving I would tell her. She would run after me in her negligee, catch me at the door, and truly I was willing to be caught. "I'm a bitch, I tell you," she would say. "I was trying to get you mad."

"It's all right."

"You'll end up hating me. You will. Nobody likes me who really knows me. I don't like myself."

"You love yourself."

She would grin delightfully. "It's not the same thing. Sergius, let's go horseback riding."

Finally we would go. She was forever dawdling or at a gallop. One time we were riding parallel to an abandoned wooden fence and she insisted I jump it. I argued. I was a bad jumper I told her. It was an honest estimate. I had been riding for only a month.

"The lousiest stunt man will fall on his ass for fifty bucks," she said harshly, "but you won't try anything."

Actually, I wanted to jump. I had the anticipation of falling and Lulu nursing me. That was a part of our affair which had never been practiced. When I took the jump, and I thought it was a good one, I turned around for her approval and saw her cantering away in the opposite direction. For all I knew she had not even looked. After I caught up to her, she turned on me. "You're a baby taking a stupid dare like that."

We rode back in silence. When we reached the Yacht Club, she went into her cabana, came out in a bathing suit, and talked to everyone but me. The only time our eyes met, she held out her glass indifferently, as she had done the night of the party, and said, "Sugar, get me a small Martin please."

Her caution when our affair began was often ludicrous. She used to come to my house on foot, or she would admit me to her room only after dark. "They'll crucify me when they find out," she would complain, "look at Eitel," thereby comparing me to Elena. About that affair she was furious. "Eitel never had any taste," she would say. "Any tramp who tells him he's terrific can always sell him a ticket to her favorite charity." And once when we met them on the street, she was hardly gentle about Elena. "I bet she has dirty underwear," Lulu said. "You watch. She's going to be fat as a bull." When I argued that I liked Elena, Lulu became sullen. "Oh, sure, she's the underdog," Lulu snapped. Yet, a few hours later, pensive, self-absorbed, she said to me, "You know, Sugar, maybe it would have been better for me if I had to struggle. Maybe my character would be better." Her finger to her chin, she asked, "Am I really a horror?"

"Except when you're in bed."

"You'll pay for that." And she chased me around with a pillow. When she had finished pummeling me, she made me lie down beside her on the couch. "I'm awful, but Sergius I want to be good. You know why I love you? I have such fun with you. It was terrible with Eitel. He would laugh at me and some of his friends were intellectually very overbearing." She chuckled. "When I was with Eitel, I used to study to be an intellectual."

If she had been determined to keep our affair a secret, she changed her mind one day by sitting on my lap at the Yacht Club pool. "You ought to try Sugar some time," she said to several of her woman friends, "he's not bad at all." For a few days she could not walk in public without my arm about her. Pictures were taken of us by night-club photographers. I awoke one morning to find Lulu by my bed, a gossip column in her hand. "Look at it. How awful," she said to me. I read the following:

Atom bomb Lulu Meyers and the potential next Mr. Meyers, ex-Marine Corps Captain Silgius McShonessy, scion of an Eastern-or-is-it-Mid-western fortune are setting off those Geiger counters in Desert D'Or.

I did not know if I were pleased or horrified. "Don't they ever get a name right?" I blustered. Lulu began to giggle. "You know that's not bad," she said. "Atom Bomb Lulu Meyers. Do you think people really think of me that way?" Her husky voice showed her pleasure.

"Of course they don't. You know your press agent wrote it."

"I don't care. It's still interesting." Like so many of the celebrities in Desert D'Or, it mattered very little to Lulu that the news came virtually from herself. Seeing the printed lines produced an alchemy; I am certain it made our affair more real to her. "Geiger counters," Lulu said thoughtfully, "that's a smart line, publicity-wise. Oh, he's a good press agent. I'm going to call him right away."

Now that our romance was publicly big, or better, torrid, Lulu took pains to confuse people again. "They make Sugar sound so good in the newspapers," she declared one night to some people in a bar, "that I'll really try him. I really will, Sugar." And she gave me a sisterly kiss.

We soon developed another dispute. I had discovered that to make love to Lulu was to make myself an accessory to the telephone. It was always ringing, and no moment was rare enough to hinder her from answering. Her delight was to ignore the first few rings. "Don't be so nervous, Sugar," she would say, but before the phone had pealed five times, she would have picked it up. Invariably, it was business. She would be talking to Herman Teppis, or Munshin who was back in the capital, or a writer, or her director for the next picture, or once even her hair dresser—Lulu was interested in a coiffure she had seen. The conversation could not go on for long before she was fondling me again; to make love and talk business possessed a special attraction for her.

"Of course I'm being a good girl, Mr. Teppis," she would say, giving me a lewd wink. "How can you think these things of me?" As the ultimate in virtuosity, she succeeded one time in weeping through a phone call with Teppis while entertaining a passage with me.

I would try to get her to visit my place but she had developed a sudden aversion. "It depresses me, Sugar, it's in such bland taste. Do you know you're a bland boy?" For a while everything would be bland. Her own place was now spoiled by that word. To my amazement at her prodigality, she insisted one day upon having her room suite redecorated. Between morning and evening its beige walls were transformed to a delicate blue, which Lulu claimed was her most flattering color. So, too, were the sheets. Now, she lay with her gold head on pale-blue linen, ordering from that telephone, as essential as any limb or organ, pink roses and red roses; the florist at the Yacht Club must arrange them himself. She would buy a dress and give it to her maid before she had even worn it, she would complain she had not a thing to wear. Her convertible she traded in one afternoon for another car almost its duplicate, and yet the exchange must have cost her a thousand dollars. When she remembered she must drive the new car slowly until it had accumulated the necessary mileage, she hired a chauffeur to trundle it through the desert and spare her the bother. Her first phone bill was five hundred dollars for the month.

Yet when it came to making money she was not without talent. While I knew her, negotiations were in progress for a three-picture contract. She would phone her lawyers, they would call her agent, the agent would speak to Teppis, Teppis would speak to her. She asked an outrageous price and received more than three quarters of it. "I can't stand my father," she explained to me, "but he's a gambler at business. He's wonderful that way." It developed that when she was thirteen and going to a school for professional children in the capital, Magnum Pictures had wanted to sign her to a seven-year contract. "I'd be making a stinking seven hundred and fifty a week now like all those poor exploited schnooks, but father wouldn't let me. 'Free-lance,' he said, he talks that way, 'this country was built on free-lancing.' He's just a chiropodist with holdings in real estate, but he knew what do do for me." Her toes nibbled and twisted at the telephone cord. "I've noticed that about men. There's a kind of man who never can make money for himself. Only for others. That's my father."

Of her father and mother, Lulu's opinion changed by the clock. One time it would be her father who was marvelous. "What a bitch my mother is. She just squeezed all the manhood out of him. Poor daddy." Her mother had ruined her life, Lulu explained. "I never wanted to be an actress. She made me one. It's her ambition. She's just an . . . octopus." Several phone calls later, Lulu would be chatting with her mother. "Yes, I think it gives me hives," she would say of some food, "glycerine, will that do, mommie? . . . He's what? . . . He's acting up again . . . Well, you tell him to leave you alone. I wouldn't put up with it if I were you. I would have divorced him long ago. I certainly would."

"I don't know what I'd do without her," Lulu would say on hanging up the phone, "men are terrible," and she would have nothing to do with me for the next half hour.

It took me longer than it need have taken to realize that the heart of her pleasure was to display herself. She abhorred concealing an impulse. If Lulu felt like burping, she would burp; if it came to her mind that she wished to put cold cream on her face, she would do it while entertaining half a dozen people. So it went

with her acting. She could say without embarrassment to the most casual acquaintance that she wished to be the greatest actress in the world. Once, talking to a stage director, she was close to tears because the studio never gave her a part in a serious picture. "They ruin me," she complained. "People don't want glamour, they want acting. I'd take the smallest role if it was something I could get my teeth into." Still, she quarreled for three days running, and how many hours of telephone calls I could not guess, because Munshin who was producing her next picture would not enlarge her part. Publicity, she announced, was idiotic, but with her instinct for what was pleasing to an adolescent, she did more than co-operate with photographers. The best ideas always came from Lulu. One occasion when she was photographed sipping a soda she shaped the second straw into a heart, and the picture as it was printed in many hundreds of newspapers, showed Lulu peeping through the heart, at once coy, chaste, hoydenish and loveable. On those few times I would be allowed to sleep the night with her, I might awaken to see Lulu writing an idea for publicity in the notebook she kept by her bed table, and I had a picture of her marriage to Eitel, each of them with his own notebook and own bed table. With pleasure, she would expound to me the subtleties of being well photographed. I learned that the core of her dislike for Teddy Pope was that each of them was photographed best from the left side of the face, and when they played a scene together Teddy was as determined as Lulu not to expose his bad side to the camera. "I hate to play with queers," she complained. "Teddy pulled seniority and they gave him his way. I thought I had mumps when I saw myself. Boy, I threw a scene." Lulu acted it out for me. "You've ruined me, Mr. Teppis," she shrieked to my private ear. "There's no chivalry left."

In bed, in those interludes she permitted me at her caprice, matters had altered considerably. To my idea of sport, which must have left her exhausted, she directed me by degrees to something quite different. Lulu's taste was for games, and if she lay beneath me like a captive, pallid before the fury she aroused, her spirits improved with a play. In my innocence, there seemed a fabulous lewdness to her imagination, and I thought I had managed at a coup to reach the heart of sexual delights. I was convinced no two people ever had shared such excesses, nor even conceived of them. We were extraordinary lovers I felt in my pride; I had pity for those hordes who could know none of this. Yet, like the Oriental monarch who feels a subtle malaise on seeing the beggars of his kingdom, I was at a pitch of greediness to prove everyone else a beggar. For that, Lulu was the sweetest of mistresses. She would never allow comparison. This was completely the best. I was superb. She was superb. We were beyond all. Unlike Eitel who now could not bear a word of Elena's former lovers, I was more than charitable to all of Lulu's. Why should I not be? She had sworn they were poor sticks to her Sugar. I was even so charitable that I argued in Eitel's defense. She had marked him impossible as a lover, and in a breach of friendship my heart had quickened with spite. I overcame that quickly enough, I wished to set Eitel at the place nearest my feet, vizier to the potentate, and it charmed me that in my first big affair I should be so proficient.

We played our games. I was the iceman and she was the housewife; she was the movie star and I was the bellhop; she the queen, I the slave; or in reverse of those situations she adored so well, Lulu mimed the prostitute to my client. We even met in equality. The game she cherished was to play the bobby-soxer who petted with a date in the living room and was finally seduced, always for the first time natural enough. She was never so happy as when we acted at theater and fornicated on clouds of myth. I was exactly young enough to wish nothing else ever than to be alone with her. It was not even possible to be sated. Each time she gave herself, and I could never know, not five minutes in advance, when it would happen, my appetite was sharp, dressed by the animus of what I had suffered in public.

To eat a meal with her in a restaurant became a torture. It never mattered with what friends she found herself nor with what strangers, her attention would flee, her eye would wander with impatience. It always seemed to her as if the conversation at another table were more interesting and more provocative than what she heard at her own. She suffered the intolerable anxiety that she was missing a word of gossip, a tip, a role in a picture, a financial transaction, a . . . it did not matter; something was happening somewhere else, something of importance, something she could not afford to miss. Therefore, eating with her was like sleeping with her; if one were interrupted by the telephone, the other was broken by her need to visit from table to table, sometimes dragging me, sometimes parking me, until I often wondered what mathematical possibility there was for Lulu to eat a meal in sequence since she was always having a bit of soup here and a piece of pastry there, joining myself and her friends for breast of squab, and departing to greet new arrivals whose crabmeat cocktail she nibbled. There was no end, no beginning, no certainty that one would even see her during a meal. I remember a dinner when we went out with Dorothea O'Faye and Martin Pelley. They had just been married and Lulu treasured them. Dorothea was an old friend, a dear friend, Lulu assured me, and before ten minutes she disappeared. When at last Lulu returned, she perched on my lap and said in a whisper the others could hear, "Sugar, I tried, and I couldn't make doo-doo. Isn't that awful? What should I eat?"

Five minutes later she insisted upon picking up the check.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In time, I came to meet a great many of Lulu's friends. The person to whom she was most attached was Dorothea O'Faye Pelley, and my evenings at The Hangover which had been interrupted, began again. Some few years ago when Dorothea had her gossip column, Lulu was one of her favorites, and the friendship remained essentially the same. Of all the people Lulu saw, and they were numerous enough, it was only with Dorothea that I ever found her humble. On those evenings we spent visiting, Lulu would place herself on a hassock near Dorothea's feet and listen meekly to what was said, her face set between her hands. Since Lulu was now more of a celebrity than Dorothea, it must have been startling for any new visitor to find her placed inconspicuously between the real-estate operator and the drunk O'Faye, but I know if Lulu had ever tried to contest Dorothea's importance, they could hardly have remained friends.

For me, Dorothea's charm had turned, and the better I came to know her the more I thought of her as a stranger. I had come to realize that it was mandatory for everyone in the court to expose their private lives to Dorothea. She liked nothing better than to discuss their problems aloud and she always gave the interpretation which fixed her friends more permanently at The Hangover. So, for example, Jay-Jay parading his loves:

He had a girl friend I never saw. She was supposed to have saved him from the needle—he had been on main-line Jay-Jay would explain in his whinnying voice—and his girl had taken him through the cure, the two locked in a room for a week. He was over it now and he would never go back so long as he had his girl. She was a true diamond.

"Only you don't want to marry her," Dorothea would say adroitly.

"Well, now, that's it, I don't," Jay-Jay would admit. "I got to marry her, she's put in five years on me, but I got a wandering eye. I can't think about nothing but cheating on her."

"With that face she has," Dorothea would snort, "I'd cheat on her myself."

Jay-Jay would laugh as hard as any of the others. "Oh, I pick them, I can really pick them," he would say, and then with a seriousness which begged to be thrown on its back, he would add, "A lot of the time like now, when I think about her, I think I'm really in love, so help me."

Pelley would cough. Handmaiden to Dorothea, he would say sternly, pompously, "If a man's really in love he wants to get married," and Dorothea would chuckle with her heavy laughter. "How's that other bag you're running around with?" she would ask.

"You mean the one that looked like she was sucking a fig?" Jay-Jay would ask innocently, and shake his head. "I gave her up before she could wear me down." Jay-Jay would smile. "I got another gal now," he said, "she's crazy. Sweet little kid with two little girls. Roberta, her name is, Bobby. Her husband and her has broken up and she wants to become a call girl. Man, she's crazy. I could be a call girl before she could."

This sort of story brought Marion Faye to mind, and Dorothea's pleasure was spoiled. Perhaps Jay-Jay wished to spoil it.

Sooner or later, it would be my turn. Dorothea had come to the conclusion that I was good for Lulu, and so it had become one of her projects to better my life. Dorothea always had a job for me—she knew a columnist who would take me on as a legman, there was a studio where she could arrange a place as assistant to a very successful director, there was a business man who could groom me for a spot in his factory—I had only to say yes. I would try to turn the conversation, I would be flippant, I would even be sullen. Once, facetiously, I temporized. "It's all right, Dorothea," I said, "one of these days I'll become respectable."

To everyone's amazement, Lulu came to my defense. It was the only time she ever crossed Dorothea. "Leave him alone, sweetie," she said. "Sergius is respectable now. If he gets a job, he'll be a schnook like everybody else." That ended it for a few days and I was left in peace without a career.

Lulu's dilemmas were treated at greater length. She loved to give Dorothea each new bulletin on the progress of Herman Teppis' intentions to marry her off to Teddy Pope, and it became one of the staple jokes at The Hangover. Lulu was always wondering aloud how she could entertain Teddy's friends. "They'll have to know who I am," she would say, "I mean, how will they be able to tell I'm not in drag?"

"Just leave off the make-up, dearie," the drunk O'Faye would lisp with a lopsided smile.

"Oh, God," Lulu said amid the laughter of the court.

"Oh, God, my eye," said Dorothea on this night, "if you don't want to marry Teddy, you better do something. Herman Teppis is one man who really scares me."

"Why don't you marry Sergius?" Pelley asked, and I knew Dorothea had instructed him.

"Cause he won't have me," Lulu said, and showed her pretty teeth.

Such conversation left Lulu more nervous than ever. She was forever insisting these days that we get married, and I think she never found me quite so attractive as when I would refuse her. The thought of marriage left me blackly depressed. I could envisage myself as Mr. Meyers, a wan valet who mixed drinks for Lulu and her guests, and was always dreaming of something at which to try his hand. I suppose what depressed me most was that I was forced to think about myself and what I wanted, and I was not ready for that, not by far. Once in a while with a lack of ambition dull as a liver complaint, I would remember that I wanted to be a writer, and if I discarded that for the notion of some other occupation, the occupation was always vague—I would be a doctor, a social-welfare worker, a foreign correspondent—the only link was that I wished to find some work I liked.

But talk of marriage is absolutely the death of enjoyment in an affair. Lulu and I had come to the point where we quarreled more often than not, and the quarrels had increased in bitterness. There were times when I was convinced we must break up, and I would look forward with a sort of self-satisfied melancholy to the time when I would be free. Indeed I felt it would be easy to give her up. That much confidence is generated by a woman's demands for marriage.

Other times I have to admit she succeeded in making me completely miserable. No sooner had she asked me to marry her than she would reveal how attractive she found other men, especially for those qualities in which she considered me lacking. One man was suave, another mysterious, a third forceful—she was always entertaining the fancy that to have an affair with such men would somehow create in herself the same qualities. At those times I would realize I was in love with her, unhappily in love, for I used to seek for her flaws like a man obsessed by hatred, feeling a false relief at each flaw discovered, as if I believed that I could thereby reduce her attractiveness to me.

Of course it was hopeless. Preparations on Lulu's new picture were advancing and she decided to go to the capital for a few days to attend some conferences. Each of us looked forward to the separation. She was always saying she had become bored with Desert D'Or, and I thought how pleasant it would be to remain in my house, to read a book, to relax and see nobody. I found myself remembering the pleasures of loneliness, thinking that if loneliness were difficult and frightening then so was love, and loneliness was easily as attractive until I would wish Lulu off to the capital in order to leave me with the delights of isolation.

Once she was gone, however, I could not concentrate; the book I held merely emphasized my restlessness and the few days passed with nothing accomplished. I had become so accustomed to indulging her will that I could now spend a morning debating whether or not to take a walk. While she was gone, we were constantly on the phone. I called her up to tell her I loved her, she called me back half an hour later and we had the same conversation again. So, like old gypsies who cross themselves a hundred times a day to ward off disaster, we declared we loved each other. A day earlier than she had planned, she ran back to Desert D'Or, and we had an elaborate tourney that night. "You carry me so far," she said. "Sergius, it's just wonderful." This she told me many times. By morning she was depressed and so was I. We had overdone it. Once we were dressed, Lulu insisted she could smell herself. "I have the most awful body odor, Sugar."

"All I can smell is your perfume."

"No, you have no sense of smell. I tell you, I know it's there. That happens to people. They suddenly develop terrible smells and they have them for the rest of their lives."

"That's nonsense."

"It isn't. I know someone it happened to. Sugar, I have to take a bath."

She bathed, she came out of the bath, she bathed again. She made me powder her; she had now decided the smell was somewhere in the room. "Oh, it's awful," she cried aloud.

For several days she was taking baths on any pretext. Then she decided she had breast cancer, she demanded I search for a lump. I told her to see a doctor if only to relieve her mood. Instead, she went to see Dorothea, had Dorothea examine her, and came back afraid of something else. "When I get older, my breasts are going to droop," she said sadly. "There's no way I can stop it. Will you promise to be careful when you touch them, Sugar?" She burst into tears. What was the matter, I asked? Nothing was the matter. Something must be the matter; I begged her to tell me. It developed that Lulu had always planned to have an operation to raise her breasts once they began to sag. But, today, she had seen Dorothea's breasts, and Dorothea had had such an operation.

"They're so unattractive," Lulu said miserably. "They're square."

"They aren't."

"But they are. She showed me. They're square. I feel like it's happened to me."

"Well, it hasn't."

"You don't know anything."

As the starting date to the shooting of her next picture came nearer, was only a few weeks away, her nervousness increased. One day she declared she was going to take acting lessons. "I'm going to begin from the very beginning. I'm going to learn how to walk. I've never been properly trained, Sergius, did you know that?"

"You'll never take lessons," I snapped at her.

"Of course I will. I'm going to be the greatest actress alive. That's what nobody understands."

I learned later that this was the reaction to studio publicity which had offended her. I felt her anguish as she showed me a news photo of herself. She was bruised because the photo was not complimentary. "Look at Tony Tanner, he looks better than I do, and he's just a schnook actor. I dislike him intensely." She was right. The young actor whose arm was about her waist did look more handsome than Lulu. "They ought to shoot the photographer," she said bitterly. "Haven't they any brains, releasing such a still?" Lulu debated whether to call Herman Teppis. "I'll put it up to him. I'll say, 'Mr. Teppis, they're ruining my face, and it isn't fair.' It isn't."

"When did you meet Tanner?" I asked.

"Oh, he's a schnook. He's going to be with Teddy Pope in my next picture. They're coming out here soon to do publicity with me."

"You don't look so unhappy with his arm around your waist," I commented.

"And you're a dope," Lulu said. "Why, that's just publicity. I can't stand him. He's an ex-pimp, that's all he is. He and Marion Faye used to be around together, only he's even worse than Marion. I think they're both despicable."

"Marion isn't that simple," I said to irritate her.

"Yes, dear Marion. He's a homo like you," Lulu said. "Why don't you go see your homo friend again?"

"Just because I don't want to marry you doesn't make me a homosexual," I said.

"Poor Dorothea," Lulu said out of nowhere.

It piqued Lulu that I saw so much now of Marion Faye. I had taken the habit of visiting him in those early morning hours after I had been with Lulu and she insisted I go home. I could never explain to myself what I looked for in Faye. I had even wondered at Lulu's accusations, trying to find in myself some fear which might prove her correct. If I looked hard enough I could find anything, but I think what I really looked for at Faye's was something else entirely. Marion had not changed a bit toward me; implicit in everything he said was an absolute contempt for my affair with Lulu. And it was for this reason, I believe, that I went to see him. I have noticed more than once how people in an affair surround themselves with those friends who favor their affair or disapprove, even selecting a number of friends in disagreement in order to create from outside themselves tangible expressions of their own emotions so often contradictory. As Eitel looked for my company since I liked Elena and liked their affair, enabling him therefore to see it optimistically, so I sought out Marion to reinforce my flabby determination that I would not marry Lulu, a determination weathered and eroded by her constant attacks, her declarations of helplessness, my sense of my own helplessness before my need for her, and perhaps most pressing of all, the constant adulation and approval which Dorothea insisted the court pay to our romance, the social pressure to love being stronger finally, I decided, than love itself, until I was forced to wonder if people would ever love if there were not others to insist that love they must, and I was certain that Lulu and I marooned upon a desert island would quarrel over whose turn it was to catch the fish, and leave love to the people on those ocean liners which passed just out of sight.

I say, therefore, it was probably for that, for his criticism, his disbelief, that I saw Marion so often. Still, we did not talk so very much about Lulu and myself. There is probably no passion greater than that of the philosopher searching for his audience, and Marion seemed determined to make me his audience. I did not have to be surprised that we ended by Marion talking about himself. Somewhere, he had picked up a line in a book he had read: "There is no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered repugnance," and as an example of how perfect he considered the idea, he would talk to me about his adventures with Teddy Pope.

"All right," he would say, "take being queer. When I first got involved with Teddy, I figured I'd hate it and have to work to be homo. Then that way I could really make it. Only it didn't turn out just so. You see what I grasped is that deep down I'm half a queer anyway, so it wasn't repugnant. I was doing the whole thing backwards."

"I saw you once with Pope," I said. "You seemed to be enjoying yourself."

"Cruelty, yes. That's where I dig being homo. You see, cruelty is repugnant to me. When I tell Pope he's disgusting and repulsive, and all he wants is for me to love him, not even that, just to give him the time of day cause he's willing to do all the loving, deep down he's nothing but a sweet little flower and a born masochist, well at times like that I have to force myself to be cruel, but afterward I feel fine. Almost, that is. I've never made it all the way, not in anything in life."

"You know," I said, "you're just a religious man turned inside out."

"Yes?" murmured Faye. "You have a brain like a scrambled egg."

"No, look," I said. "Take your formula and change one word."

"What word?"

"Listen: 'There is no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered vice.'"

He looked stricken. "I have to think about that," he said.

Two nights later, he answered me. "I think I've worked it out," he said. "Nobility and vice—they're the same thing. It just depends on the direction you're going. You see, if I ever make it, then I turn around and go the other way. Toward nobility. That's all right. Just so you carry it to the end."

"And what's in the middle?" I asked.

"Slobs." He gave the complaint of most mystics. "They're the ones who get in the way." He snuffed the ember of marijuana on the edge of his lip, and carefully put the remains back in the jar. "I hate slobs," he said. "They always think what they have to think."

Self-swindles enraged Faye; in that sense he was absolutely opposed to the human race. Through the course of those nights we spent in talk, I came to know him better, and he grew less mysterious to me although I never thought I understood him. But at least I gained a picture of how he spent his time when I was not there, and in those stories he occasionally fed me in his grudging way to make a point, I came to have an idea of what his activities could be when I was not present, and from that vague notion of how he spent his afternoons—for he was never up before twelve—passing through the larger hotels to take a drink at the bar and drum up those assignments he was obliged to make for his girls, I saw past the rounds of the gamblers, the oilmen, the actors down for a night, and the politicians from the capital, into some of the smaller corners of his daily activity. He rarely went to bed before dawn, and it was his habit to keep the last two hours of the night for studying odd books, laying new arrangements of his Tarot cards, and thinking about little, or so he described it. For the evening and the night, that hiatus between the work of afternoon and the solitude of early morning, he took whatever happened, and I learned finally that it was usually something new which happened, so for a night he could be busy with the hysterics of one of his girls, for another be host to mobsters and hoodlums, for a third be active at that business he despised—it had become so mechanical—of working a new girl in, for the fourth make his appearance on impulse at Dorothea's, for the fifth drive to the capital to hear some musicians he liked, or as easily drive in the other direction across the state line to one of the gambling cities of the desert. He might visit friends like Eitel, he could drop in on Teddy Pope, he could even catch a movie or a drink in a bar, but by three o'clock or four, he was home. Out of all this, so varied, so similar, there are a dozen stories, two dozen stories, I could tell about him, but I choose the one which most applies.

This passed in the not so early morning, shortly after I left his house one night. He was sitting there alone, the deck of the Tarot out, when the telephone rang. He was used to this no matter how it irritated him; his occupation surrounded him with people who believed it was urgent to talk to him right away, and if he were as equally convinced that there had never been a message which could not have waited a week or more, he accepted the annoyance as one of the hobbies of his work.

So Faye answered the phone, and was hardly surprised when it was Bobby, Jay-Jay's girl, who had been working for him just ten days.

"Marion, I had to phone you," she said.

Conversations at four in the morning always began that way. "Swell," Marion said. "I thought I told you not to call me after three."

"I had to. Please, Marion."

He smiled to himself. "How'd it go?" he asked. When his girls called this late, it usually meant they had been humiliated and wanted to complain. He could hardly believe, however, that this had happened tonight.

"That's what I mean," Bobby said, "it was so extraordinary and unusual."

"Then tell me about it." He was the father of the garter girls and he had listened to children's stories so long that he was ill.

"I can't tell you over the phone."

No whore ever would, he thought. "All right, tell me tomorrow."

"Marion, this is a special favor, I know, . . . but could you come over and see me tonight so I can tell you."

Bobby irritated him. She had the wheedling watered charm of a small-town girl and he resented that she tried to employ it on him. "Knock off," he said into the phone.

"Well, can I come see you?"

"Yes, tomorrow."

"Marion, our mutual acquaintance gave me five hundred dollars," Bobby announced.

"Congratulations." He was dumbfounded. He could not understand it.

"Will you come see me now?" she asked.

"No."

"Can I come see you?"

"If you don't take too long."

"But, I can't, Marion. I let the baby sitter go when I came home with my date."

He had, of course, not forgotten. There were the two little girls in the bedroom of that tiny four-room cottage. What was it Bobby had been after her divorce? a salesgirl probably in one of the Desert D'Or shops.

"Get the baby sitter back," he said patiently into the phone.

"I don't know how I can, Marion."

"Then leave it until tomorrow."

There was a pause. He could almost hear Bobby's little brain with its quick calculations. Finally, she gave a girlish sigh. "All right, Marion, I'll get the woman somehow."

"You be over soon," he said, and set the phone down.

While he waited, he put on a dressing gown. The marijuana in his jar was low and he told himself to get more tomorrow, debating whether to make another stick or not. Marijuana gave him far from complete pleasure. He never felt drunk on it nor had he ever found companionship when smoking it with others. The drug made him cold, cold sensually, cold mentally, his temples even felt as if ice had been laid to them. Once in a while it made him mildly ill.

Still, he smoked it habitually. He had come to enjoy its stench of burning tea, and he found upon occasion that it placed him into the most curious mental states. He would become utterly detached from himself to the point where a thought occurring which must be written down—something for example which could seem as profound at night and as meaningless in the morning as, "The three eyes of love"—he would discover that his brain watched the thought, and the thought watched his hand, and his hand the pencil, the pencil the paper, until the paper stared back at him with a hostile grin, "You're flying, man." He had tried to go on from marijuana. There had been a period a few months ago when he had moved onto main-line, but the results had been impossible. Heroin made him very sick and then drugged him into sleep.

There was a knock and Bobby came in. It was legend that his door was never locked, and this was another of his disciplines. There were enough people he had to fear, enemies he had made one way or another, some purposefully, some incidental to his trade, and he was full of fear. Many nights he lay awake listening to the desert sounds, the rare fleeting animals, the wind, the noise of automobiles, his heart beating from anger at his fear. For punishment he never used the latch and he allowed people to know that. The thought that he must not bolt his door had come on him one night in a sweat-soaked terror, and he had revolted at the severity of the idea. "Oh, no," he had almost said aloud, "do I have to do *that*?" and in the act of begging leniency from himself, had made it impossible to lock his door again.

Bobby kissed him on the cheek, girlishly, falsely. It was one of the mannerisms of call girls he had always detested. They loved to act like sorority queens, and he would watch with omniscient amusement how each new one would pick up the affectations of the others.

"It was a wonderful night, Marion," Bobby said.

"Sure," said Marion, "you made five hundred."

"Oh, it wasn't that. He was so nice to me. He called it a loan. Do you know, Marion, if I ever hit it," Bobby declared, "I'm going to pay him back." She wandered around the room looking at him, moving a little restlessly from chair to chair. Bobby was tall and not extraordinarily pretty for a call girl and she had a wan demure expression which annoyed him enormously. "What a wonderful pad you have here," she said.

This bit of jargon, obviously so foreign to her, left his expression as impassive as ever. He had rented his house furnished, and he had never felt it bore any relation to him. The modern furniture was as impersonal to his eyes as stones and cactus on the desert flats. "How'd it go in bed?" he asked directly. He was not really curious; Marion had accumulated so much information about the sexual performance of everyone in Desert D'Or that a new item could hardly alter the statistics. He asked out of the onerous duty of the encyclopedist.

"Well, it was wonderful. I was really living," Bobby said.

This, Marion could doubt. His taste, lately, had been for frigid women, but he had found her less than frigid; the act was a nightmare to her, and what was most disgusting of all, she was not even aware of how horrible she found it. There had been a stiff little-girl smile on her mouth. "Living it high," Marion said.

"I was sent."

"Yes," Marion said, "Eitel's got lots of technique."

"It wasn't technique. I think Charley has a crush on me. You don't know how sweet he was."

"He's a sweet guy," Marion said.

"It was so funny when he saw the kids. Veila woke up and began to cry, and he held her and rocked her. I could swear there were tears in his eyes."

"This is before he paid you off?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you know?" said Marion.

"You're not being nice," Bobby said. "You don't understand. I had the blues today. I was thinking that maybe I couldn't make it so well for this kind of work, and Charley Eitel gave me a terrific-type lift. He makes you feel like you're . . . something."

"When did he say he'd see you again?"

"Well, he didn't say exactly, but the way he smiled when he left, I know it won't be but a day or two."

"Five hundred," Marion said. "Figuring it one third to me, two thirds to you, you owe me one hundred and sixty-seven. I can make change."

Bobby was surprised. "Marion," she said, "I thought I only owed you seventeen dollars. After all, he was supposed to leave just fifty dollars, wasn't he?"

"One third, two thirds. That's how it's done."

"But I didn't have to tell you how much he gave me. You're penalizing me for being honest."

"Baby, you felt like shooting your mouth off. That's what you're paying for. It's all vanity. You pay for vanity. I have vanity that I want to be paid."

"Marion, you don't know what the extra money means for the kids."

"Look," he said, "you can go and drown them. That's all right with me."

He was wondering if he ought to hit her. This was something he very rarely did, but she irritated him so much. She was such a small-town girl, and masochist on top of it. She believed she had come down in the world. Of such characters, he thought, was his stable made. It would be impossible to hit her. Bobby would enjoy her self-pity for at least a week.

"Marion, I feel as if there's something I ought to tell you."

"Why don't you stop announcing everything you have to say?" he snapped.

She went right on. "I think I've got a strong crush on Eitel," she said, "and it's brought up a certain dilemma you ought to know about. Marion, I don't think I'm made out to be a party girl."

"Sure you are. I never met the chick who wasn't."

"I was thinking that if it takes with Charley Eitel and myself, that well, what I would like, is to leave this and all this work as being just a little interlude when I was on the rocks. I mean, think of the kids." Bobby put a hand on his shoulder. "Marion, I hope you won't be disappointed and think you wasted time on me. You see, I really have a very strong crush on Charley. An experience like tonight doesn't happen that often. With the money he gave me, less the seventeen dollars that belong to you, I mean, out of fifty, I could get everything sort of straightened out."

He didn't listen to her. Marion was thinking of the parakeet she kept, and how she would stand before the cage in the shabby little living room of her cottage, lisping to the bird in baby talk. Of all her distasteful airs this was the one he found most intolerable, and he wondered if he were very high on marijuana for he was thinking that Bobby's bird talked to her, and now the bird who was Bobby talked to him in the pad of his cage.

"Look," Marion said abruptly, "you think Eitel has it for you?"

"I'm sure he does. He couldn't have acted that way otherwise."

"But he didn't say when he'd see you again?"

"I just know that it's going to be soon."

"Let's find out," Marion said, and he reached for the phone.

"You're not going to call him now," Bobby protested.

"He won't mind getting up," Marion said, "he'll just take another sleeping pill."

Over the line he could hear the phone ring and ring again. After a minute or more, there was the sound of the receiver going over with a crash, and Marion smiled to himself at the thought of Eitel groping on the floor in the darkness, half dumb with sleep, half dumb with Nembutal.

"Charley," Marion said brightly, "it's Faye. I hope I didn't disturb you." Bobby had snuggled next to him to hear the responses.

"Oh. . . . it's you . . ." Eitel's voice was thick. There was a pause, and over the wire Faye could almost feel how Eitel tried to compose himself. "No, no, it's all right. What's it about?"

"Can you talk?" Marion asked. "I mean like is your friend around?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking," Eitel said vaguely.

"You're still asleep," Marion laughed. "You just tell your friend I called to give you a tip on a horse."

"What horse?" said Eitel.

"I'm talking about a date of yours named Bobby. You remember Bobby?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Well, I mean like she just left here, and she was talking about you." He kept his voice as neutral as a legal referee. "Charley, I don't know what you got," he said, "but Bobby digs you. Man, she really digs you."

"She does?"

He was still groggy, Marion thought. "Now, look, Charley, try and concentrate cause I have to make arrangements." His voice very distinct, he asked, "When would you like to see Bobby again? Tomorrow night? Night after?"

This would wake Eitel up. As if the phone were an antenna by which he could probe, he felt sleep vanishing, the line becoming clear, and Eitel tense and nervous and wide-awake before him. Perhaps it was ten seconds until the answer came.

"When?" Eitel repeated. "Oh, God, never!"

"Well, thanks, Charley. You go to sleep. I'll get you a different kind of chick next time. Give my regards to your friend." And with a thoughtful look, Marion put the phone down.

"He was asleep," Bobby said. "He didn't know what he was saying."

"I'll call him again."

"Marion, it wasn't fair."

"Sure, it was fair. Did you ever hear of the unconscious? That's what he was talking from."

"Oh, Marion," Bobby whimpered.

"You're tired," he told her, "you better get some sleep."

"He meant the things he said when he was with me," Bobby blurted out, and began to cry.

It took him fully ten minutes to bring her around and send her home. At the doorway, with a sheepish smile she handed him one hundred and sixty-seven dollars, and he patted her and told her to rest. When she was gone he wondered if he should have slept with her, and wished that he had. Life was a constant battle against sentiment, and to copulate with Bobby while she still cherished the wound of being in love with Eitel would have been novel. When Bobby made love, her body would grow rigid. The last time he had had her—was it for two nights altogether or three that he had slept with her?—he had proceeded calmly despite her hysterics.

Woman's vanity. He wanted to crush it like a roach, and was wistful that he had taken too much tea. When he was on tea it was impossible to make love, his entire body was numb. A pity, because it would have been exactly right to burn into her brain the seed of what she had never possessed: one grain of honesty. She had never loved Eitel, Eitel had never loved her, not for thirty seconds. No one ever loved anyone except for the rare bird, and the rare bird loved an idea or an idiot child. What people could have instead was honesty, and he would give them honesty, he would stuff it down their throats.

It occurred to him that he had missed a perfect chance with Bobby. What he should have done, what he had never thought of doing, was taking her to bed with his complete if temporary incapacity. There was a caress she claimed to loathe, and he could have kept her at it for endless minutes while nothing happened, and so humiliate her doubly. Why hadn't he thought of that sooner? and knew it was his pride that held him back. There was the danger of Bobby talking.

Suddenly, he decided that he was without pride. He could have done it. He was impregnable because sex was of disinterest to him and that was how he was superior to everyone else. That was the secret to life. It was all upside down, and you had to turn life on its head to see it straight. The more he thought of what he could have done with Bobby, the more frustrated and agitated he became. There was still time to call her, he could call her back, he smiled at the idea of the baby sitter who would be hired for the third time.

Yet, thinking about the lesson he should have given Bobby, thinking of that exertion which would end in fatigue rather than heat, he found to his surprise that he was excited. No matter the marijuana, he was no longer numb, and so it was now ridiculous to phone her, he would only demonstrate the opposite; Bobby would decide she loved him instead. Faye didn't know if he wished to smash his fist through a wall or burst out laughing.

"Hey, Marty, how you doing, kid?" a voice said.

He realized that he was standing in the middle of the floor with his eyes closed, his fists pushed with all their force into the pockets of his dressing gown. "Well, Paco, what do you say?" Faye asked quietly.

"I'm flying, Marty, I'm flying." Paco looked at him like a foundling come out of the storm, a skinny Mexican boy of twenty or twenty-one with a long stupid face and large sad eyes. They were feverish now, and Marion knew why he had come. It was unmistakable. Paco needed a fix. He strutted, he was jaunty, he waved his hands, he was holding himself together by the most intense effort of will.

"You know what I was thinking," Paco went on in the same bright voice, "I haven't seen Marty in a while, tail-hound Marty, the kid who helps out a kid . . ."

"What are you doing down here?" He knew Paco from the capital; there had been a time when he had run around with the club of hoodlums to which Paco belonged.

"Here? Here? I been here a day. This town is for birds."

"It's a town," Faye said mildly.

Paco had been the sad one in the club. He was worth nothing in a fight, he was funny-looking, he was a natural butt. Still, nobody bothered him for he was considered a little crazy and completely unpredictable. That was the thing about Paco. Of all those hoodlums he was the only one who would do things no one else would ever dream of doing. Once he had picked up a scissors and stabbed the club leader because the club leader had been teasing him about his sister.

Marion had not seen him in a long time. Paco had been caught in a robbery and had received a term in state prison. The fact he had dropped in like this after an absence of three years did not startle Faye. Such things were always happening to him.

"I hear you're peddling gash," said Paco, "you got some gash for me?"

It was weird. Paco was neurotic, Faye thought, a pimply dreamy kid, begging for dough. In his family his mother hounded Paco, he used to call her obscene names; in the clubhouse he would lie around for hours reading comic books; once he had announced he wanted to go to the South Seas. Even at the age of seventeen, tears had come into his eyes at a harsh word. And now he was a junkie, and he needed a fix. Sudden compassion for Paco burned Faye's eyelids. The poor slob of a *pachuco*.

"You're on horse, aren't you?" Faye asked.

"Marty, I kicked the habit, so help me, but I'm sick now, this boy's sick, it's part of the cure, I need a little." Stupid cunning beamed through his lies. "Fifty bucks, Marty, and I got enough for a week. I sail, and then I kick the habit." When Faye didn't answer immediately, Paco went on. "Twenty-five, that holds me. Marty, I got to get out of this town. It disgusts me. I'll go nuts here."

He could give him a hundred, Faye was debating, and then he caught himself thinking of the pistol he kept in his bureau drawer, and the automatic in the glove compartment of his car. From the self-imposed judge Faye could never escape, there came the suggestion: "Give him nothing at all." His compassion was not pure; there was fear in it.

"Paco," Faye said, "no loan."

"Ten bucks. I need a fix. Marty!"

"Nada."

"Five bucks. Jesus God." Paco had begun to come apart. He sweated abominably and his poor sad pimply face was unbelievably ugly. In another moment he might faint or throw up.

Faye was almost giddy with pain and excitement. He fought his compassion with the fury of a man searching for purity. "Get out, Paco," he said gently.

Paco sat down on the floor. He looked as if he were ready to chew on the rug, and from what seemed an infinite distance, Faye remembered Teddy Pope and the yucca tree, and thought with a pang that to make it, maybe one had to be a slob and suffer like Pope or Paco. Was that why he had tried to get on main-line? So that he could crawl on his hands and feet and bark like a dog?

"*Chinga tu madre,*" Paco was swearing at him.

He had to get the *pachuco* out of here. But where? There was only the police station. Faye shrugged. A month from now, two months from now, it was possible he could be killed by Paco's friends for leaving a junkie with cops. Of course, he paid the police protection, they could handle it quietly. But he had forgotten something. The police themselves would give Paco a fix, they would have to. They would send him to the county farm of the capital all fixed up. So, no matter what, Paco would get his horse.

For an instant Faye thought of killing him. Only that was killing a zero, and if he were ever to kill somebody there should be a point to it. However, he had to do something with Paco. But what? He could take him in his car and leave him somewhere on the road. People would find him, they would drop him at a hospital, they would fix him there, too. Whichever way he considered it, Paco was going to get his fix.

Now, Paco was threatening to kill him. Only a junkie would tell you he would kill you while he lay flat on his face.

"Why don't you knock over a store?" Faye said.

"What store?" said Paco hoarsely.

"You don't think I'm going to have it on record that I told you the store?"

This thought had revived Paco. If he robbed a store there would be money, and with money there was horse. So Paco got to his feet and staggered to the door. Possibly he could hold himself together for another hour. In his own body, Faye felt how Paco's head was bursting.

"I'll kill you soon, Marty," Paco said from the door with his swollen tongue and his aching mouth.

60—Deer Park 10|12|24 T. R. Lining (Rinehart) No. 1144

"Come around and we'll have a drink," said Faye.

Once the sound of Paco's footsteps had disappeared down the sidewalk of the empty street with its modern homes and its endless cement-brick fence, Faye went into the bedroom and put on a jacket. He felt as if he were close to bursting. There was nothing so exhausting in all the world as the effort to beat off compassion. Faye knew all about compassion. It was the worst of the vices; he had learned that a long time ago. When he was seventeen, he had spent a day out of curiosity begging money on the street. There had been nothing to it; the trick was only to look people in the eye and they could never turn you down. That was why bums made so little; they couldn't look people in the eye. But he could, he had stared into a hundred faces, and ninety had blanched their little bit and given him a coin. It was fear, it was guilt; once you knew that guilt was the cement of the world, there was nothing to it; you could own the world or spit at it. But first you had to get rid of your own guilt, and to do that you had to kill compassion. Compassion was the queen to guilt. So screw Paco, and Faye burned for that sad pimply slob.

It was impossible to sleep. Instead, he went to the garage, got into his little foreign car, and raced it down the street, cashing a tight smile at the thought of how he might be waking people. To the east, ten miles perhaps, there was a small rise; it was nothing, but on all those roads which were laid in lines across the mesa of the desert it was the only one which provided a view. There was a dirt track over the mountains, but he could never reach that summit in time. The dawn would be coming very soon and he wanted to see it and look into the east. There was Mecca. Faye raced his car until its light chassis quivered like a bird whose wings are clipped, giving all of himself to the task, looking for the peace which comes from absurd contests, the ice-cream-eating derby, the public-speaker's symposium, the knitting-needles jubilee.

117

He made the rise in time to see the sun lift out of the table of the east, and he stared into that direction, far far out, a hundred miles he hoped. Somewhere in the distance across the state line was one of the great gambling cities of the Southwest, and Faye remembered a time when Eitel and he had gambled around the clock, not even pausing at dawn when a great white light, no more than a shadow of the original blast somewhere further in the desert, had dazzled the gaming rooms and lit with an illumination colder than the neon tube above the green roulette cloth, the harsh dead faces of the gamblers who had worn their way through the night.

Even now, there were factories out there, out somewhere in the desert, and the tons of ore in all the freight cars were being shuttled into the great mouth, and the factory labored, it labored like a gambler for twenty-four hours of the day, reducing the mountain of earth to a cup of destruction, and it was even possible that at this moment soldiers were filing into trenches a few miles from a loaded tower, and there they would wait, cowering in the dawn, while army officers explained their purpose in the words of newspaper stories for the words belonged to the slobs, and the slobs hid the world with words.

So let it come, Faye thought, let this explosion come, and then another, and all the others, until the Sun God burned the earth. Let it come, he thought, looking into the east at Mecca where the bombs ticked while he stood on a tiny rise of ground trying to see one hundred, two hundred, three hundred miles across the desert. Let it come, Faye begged, like a man praying for rain, let it come and clear the rot and the stench and the stink, let it come for all of everywhere and bring a new harvest behind it, just so it comes and the world stands clear in the white dead dawn.

PART 4 | CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eitel did not go to sleep after the telephone call from Marion Faye. Elena had stirred just long enough to ask who was on the phone, and when he gave the answer Faye had been considerate to provide—that it was a tip on a horse, no more, no less—Elena had grumbled drowsily, "Well, they have some nerve. My God, at this hour," and had fallen back to sleep again. In the morning she would not remember, he knew, for she often had conversations in the dark of which she had no recollection later.

So it was hardly the fear of Elena discovering his adventure with Bobby which kept Eitel awake now. Nonetheless, the conversation with Faye played itself back in mocking repetitions, and the longer he thought about it the more convinced he became that Bobby must have been with Marion while they talked. He knew Faye; Faye would not have called otherwise, and Eitel's recollection of how he had groaned, "Oh God, never!" tortured him now. He was sick at the thought Bobby might have overheard him. In a day or two he could have paid the girl a visit, he would have known how to tell her that he would not see her again. He could even have left a present, not five hundred dollars this time, but something.

Abruptly, Eitel decided that he must have been out of his mind. For these last months he had been trying to remember that he was not rich any longer, that money would come slowly and he would have to work for it hard. Now on a ridiculous, sentimental, and sickly impulse, he had thrown away five hundred dollars, and thinking of that, Eitel knew no matter how long he lay in the bed, the next day was ruined for work. Pressed next to Elena, trying to soothe himself from the warmth of her body, his memory like a drunk at the end of a cocktail party plucked at the spoiled canapé table which comprised the events of the last few weeks.

Was it just so short a time ago that he had started work on his movie script? He had begun with high hopes, all the obstacles to his success only stimulating him. He had been in the state of mind of the gambler who puts all he owns on a single bet, so convinced of winning that he comes to believe the longer the odds against him the better his chance. Thus, Eitel, in imagination, devoured his obstacles. Of one thing he was certain; let him but write the script he wished to write and he would find the way to make his picture, be it with the producer in London or by producing it himself, but he would make it.

There had come a morning when Eitel began work. Deciding the old script was hopeless, he had given himself to the new beginning with the fury of a man attempting to demolish a wall. He could remember with what exuberance he had begun. It was the third time he had started this script in fifteen months, not to mention the half-dozen occasions over the last ten years, and he was confident that finally his ideas and his creative energy were ready for the task.

119

The work had gone badly. Each day the story would turn into something shoddy, or something contrived, into something dull, into something false. He could not rid himself of the technique so hermetically sealed against art which he had spent fifteen years in acquiring. He could only work within that technique, composing a bag of tricks one day, floundering in a trickless bog of blunders for the next. During two weeks Eitel spent all his energy on the script and in certain ways they were the worst two weeks of his life. It seemed to him that his view of himself had never changed so drastically in so short a time, and what he learned caused him to suffer intensely from depression. No matter how he labored, and there were days when he worked himself into exhaustion, sitting before his desk twelve and fourteen hours, he could not give to his script the faintest shadow of that majestic structure he saw in his mind. In the evenings he would lie morosely in a chair, not saying a word to Elena, picking at the wreck he had made of the day's effort. Somehow, he had never believed that this script would be beyond his powers, no more than an ambitious young man expects his life to consist of defeat and failure. One way or another, for so many years, he had had the idea that this film was going to be his justification. In the last fifteen years, through all of his wandering, his marriages, his adventures, back perhaps so far as the Spanish Civil War, and certainly through all of the cocktail parties and the jeep rides and the requisitioned castles which had been the Second War to him, along all of that trip from one film to another, one mistress more handsome than the previous, one celebrity more renowned than the last, there had been the luxury of looking at his life as something he decanted in a glass, studying the color, admiring the corruption, leaving for himself the secret exit: he was above all this, he was better than the others, and one day he would take his life and transmute it into something harder than a diamond and as imperishable, an art work. Had he been afraid to try the exit for so long, he would think now, for the fear that it did not exist? The manuscript lay like a rag on his desk, and Eitel found, as he had found before, that the difficulty of serious art was that it forced a man back upon his life, and each time the task was more difficult and distasteful. So, in brooding over his past, he came to remember the unadmitted pleasure of making commercial pictures. With

them he had flourished, despite all pretenses that he had been disgusted, and looking back upon such emotions, concealed so long from himself, Eitel felt with dull pain that he should have realized he would never be the artist he had always expected, for if there were one quality beyond all others in an artist, it was the sense of shame, of sickness, and of loathing for any work which was not his best, his purest, and his most defiant. It was not for artists to sip cocktails with café queens; artists were hungry children, and it was best they remained hungry, just a little at any rate, for was not the artist the crippled brother of the sensualist?

It was at such times that he would find himself making the sentimental speculation of, "Where have I lost the way?" and he would laugh unhappily at the conceit—where, indeed, had he lost the way? He had only to remember himself twenty years ago; he had been married more or less happily, he had had work he enjoyed, he had enthusiasm, he had hope, he had been eager to make art-works, he had even made a few. And there had been all the others, the actors and directors and writers he had known, poor like himself, hungry; and now like him, most of them had prospered, the muscles had gone flabby, the work predictable. Where had the talent gone and where the energy and where the courage? Was it all their own fault, the work that brought too much money? He would try to think of his first wife, the woman with whom he had lived for nine years, and he could not even remember her clearly. Once he had loved her or thought he did, and now she had ceased to exist. But that was true of all his past, all of it was equally unreal to him. Could there possibly have been a time when he had been so young as to break his nose trying out for the college boxing team because he wished to demonstrate to himself he was not a coward? Had there been equally a time when he thought he loved some of the Spanish soldiers among whom he moved as a volunteer courier, believed he loved them so much he had wept when they had been killed? Where had it all gone, the good along with the bad? It was not true, he would think, that as one grew older the past grew clearer. The past was a cancer destroying memory, destroying the present, until emotions dulled and the events in which one found oneself were always in danger of being dead as the past.

But, truly, truly, was it all his own fault? he would wonder. If he had had less charm and it had not been so easy for him to make his way, if his mind had been more honest and his taste for success less sharp, what more could he have done? If he were an artist at all, he was an artist who had wanted to make films, and so if he had been more uncompromising, the answer was simple: he would have made no films, he would not have been hired, he would now be grinding out his life in some angry frustration. No director of his generation was a major artist, no more than himself, not if integrity were a requisite. But, then, he would think, it was none of their faults and all of their faults for the age permitted integrity no more than the industry, and the twenty years through which he had been carried were a black time. Crises had come and gone, wars had enlarged, a civilization was dying, and that cataclysmic revolution whose overtones and echoes had once been intoxicating was now a monstrosity to him. Where could he fit into all of that, and were there not worse occupations than to have been the raconteur, the false artist, the lover of a hundred beautiful women?

No, the time had come to face himself, to take account, and go on into new work. Only Eitel could not think of other work to do. Most remarkable cancer! It not only obliterated the past and stunned the present, but it anticipated the future, eroding it before he could create it. So for days after he had ceased to believe in his script, he continued to work at it, the first despair moderating into that other mood he knew so well, that fine depression he could carry with him to dull his work and level his effort and move him from one day into the next, depression not even complete for he would catch himself from time to time off on the heroic fantasy of still finishing the script, still making the movie, last fling of the hungry child, he would think, thumbing his nose at the black age.

Under such a burden, much of the joy in his affair with Elena had disappeared. In the beginning he had cherished the idea that she brought him nothing. Since he had searched for obstacles, that had been perfect—whatever he might create would come from him. Living with Elena, however, he worked no better than he had worked alone. The fact of the matter, he would recognize, was that he was growing critical of her faults. He would wince as he watched her eat for she waved her fork, scattered bits from the plate to the cloth, her mouth often full as she spoke. He had attempted to correct her. She would listen with sullen eyes, she would promise to try, and with her stubborn insight would never learn at all, as if she were saying to him, "If you loved me more, I would learn everything."

She had an ugly temper, and in their quarrels she sometimes shrieked such crudities as "You know what you can do?" At such times he could hardly recognize her—her voice took on another tone, seemed to belong to someone else, and he often felt it was the repetition of words she had heard as a child, that it was Elena's mother speaking, a woman he had never met but still detested. In what Eitel had been able to learn of Elena's life, he found out that her parents owned a candy store in the center of the capital, that their marriage had been miserable, her father an unsuccessful jockey, a vain little man, a bully; the mother a pretty shrew, a calculator, another bully. She had coddled Elena and scolded her, made much of her and ignored her, given her ambitions and ridiculed them away. The father, cheated of life, ridden with children, had merely disliked her. It gave Eitel a picture of a most sordid brawl. There were brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents, family parties where they all got together and fist fights started, and then there had always been sex. The father was handsome, he was a dandy, he could not be alone with a woman without trying to make love to her, but he was also righteous, he was moral, he told others how to live; her mother was a flirt, she was greedy, she was jealous; as a child, Elena would scream in her bed while the mother and father bawled insults at one another. Her childhood had been spent listening to their jealous quarrels.

172

Elena had had the courage to leave home before she was twenty. Somehow—she was often so helpless he could well wonder how—she had moved into a furnished room, and from there, through the friends she had, girls who worked at Supreme, young unemployed actors, college boys who went to night school, Elena had learned to go bohemian, that was the word she used. So she had taken night courses as well, and studied dancing, and worked as a model in art schools, and wandered through the California sunshine, taking what jobs there were to find. Then had come Collie and three desperate years.

Eitel would grow tender when he would think of her life. She had opened his sympathy in a way nobody else had for years. She had come out of nothing, and with such pain, such waste, such backward looks. Even now, though she had not seen her family ten times in the last six years, she was always thinking about them. She had a cousin who sent her all the news. That was the only tie, and Elena always answered with long letters, eager to hear that this relative was married, that cousin was sick, her brother was trying to get on the police force, her sister was studying to be a nurse; Elena told him these items about people he had never seen in a wistful gossipy voice. She could not go back to her family—that was the short of it. They would take her, but her life would be unbearable. The last time she had visited her parents, they had found nothing to say to one another and had gone to a movie. In the middle of it, her father had started to insult her for the way she lived and Elena had fled the theater.

Now, she was Eitel's charge, without family and without friends; Collie had taken care to separate her from bohemia, and for that matter Elena made friends poorly. If she could chat easily with Eitel, often prattling like a child, she was stiff in company, and Eitel knew his constant emphasis on her manners did not make it easier. She had improved for a time, but that was in the beginning; once he began work, his depression made her believe he did not love her. It was maddening to him that she was so stubborn about those small things he would teach her; he was such a snob, he knew. It was not that his own family was so extraordinary; his father had started as a junk dealer before he prospered enough to buy the automobile agency, and his mother's great virtue, or had it been a vice? was to love him to distraction and spoil him permanently. His parents were dead now, but there had been years when he was young and had to fight his battles against them, against the bonds of his mother's love and the force of his father's contempt that he had a son who wasted time in the theater and was supported by his wife. Eitel had had to work to erase that background, it had taken years for him to acquire his style of speech and learn his own manners. So Elena's lack of presence could only be doubly painful, and all the while his script progressed badly he would suffer at her clumsiness. They might see some people, and if the conversation were even adequately clever Eitel knew the evening was ruined for her. Elena would be despondent, she would sit among the others with a smile stitched to her face, her nervousness evident. If she roused herself to ask a question of somebody it would become only too evident she had not been listening; the question had been asked five minutes before. Eitel would ignore her for an hour at a time, talking to others, including her in what he said by no more civility than is given to the least interesting corner of one's audience. When she tried to say something, and that was rare enough, he would feel

123

that everybody was suffering. Someone, for example, might tell a joke, others would laugh, and Elena would repeat the last line and then explain it. "He didn't really want to," Elena would say, "isn't that funny?" When they got home from such an evening, she would be in a bad mood. "No, don't talk to me," she would say as he would start a gentle lecture. "It's my fault, I know it is, I just don't want to talk about it."

"Elena, you can't hope to be smarter than everybody you know."

Recollecting the details of the evening, she would cry out, "But, I'm stupider," and fling herself on a couch to stare at the wall. "It's you," she would say bitterly five minutes later, "don't put the blame on me. If you like those women so much, go get one of them. You're not stuck with me." Sometimes she would begin to weep.

The fact was that he did not desire those women at all. Since he had been in Desert D'Or, particularly since the party at the Laguna Room, the number of people who sent him invitations had become smaller and smaller. Socially, his life was now all but empty, and he had found Elena and himself restricted to a small group whom he termed the emigrés. They were writers and directors and actors and even a producer or two who had refused, as he had refused, to co-operate with the subversive committee. Years ago many of them had bought winter homes in Desert D'Or, and like Eitel they had come here now for refuge. The social life he was obliged to share with them, since they were accepted nowhere else in Desert D'Or, was hardly satisfying to him, however, and he hated the thought of being classed with the emigrés. To his mind, most of them were pompous men, and pompous men thrive upon self-pity. Eitel thought it ridiculous how they welcomed him now. In their small bitter circle they liked to announce that he was a great artist who chose to live in obscurity rather than betray himself—indeed a view they had of themselves as well—but since he had known most of them and their wives for years, and knew the slander they had spread about him in the capital because of political differences, and knew only too well the quality of their movies, which with rare exceptions had been average vulgar, Eitel could hardly be impressed with the adulation they gave him now. Evenings at their houses consisted of listening to gossip and ugly family histories about their former friends who had testified. If anything the women were more irritating to him than the men; since his first wife Eitel had never been partial to women who were too intellectual. Yet no matter how he disliked the emigrés and their women, he would find himself wishing that Elena was not so abysmally ignorant of everything they talked about, and there were times when he found himself making every effort to protect her, even going to the point of matching some clumsy remark she might make with one of his own, and being properly annoyed afterward that she did not realize what he had done for her.

One night, in contrast to the usual drama with which she announced she would leave him, Elena said quietly that it would be better if they broke up. "I could live with an ordinary man. I could be happy with somebody who isn't an artist," she said.

"Of course you could," he soothed her.

"I mean it."

"I know you do, but I need you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I wish I could be better," she said.

She had a childlike habit which wore on his nerves. In the midst of one of her scenes she could say anything to him. She might say, "I don't love you. You give me a pain," and often it was worse. Invariably she would come up to him a few minutes later and whisper that she was sorry. At such moments she looked so contrite that his determination to punish her by silence would weaken, and he would hug her to him, pleased at how protective he felt. Afterward, however, he would be depressed. These quarrels were demeaning, and their effect repeated at length was deadening to emotion.

Once, unexpectedly, they were visited by an acquaintance of Eitel's. It was a man named Nelson Nevins who had worked as Eitel's assistant for several years, and was now with a reputation of his own as a director. Eitel despised Nevins' work; he considered it tricky, overblown, cheaply sentimental, and with pretensions to art—in short, all the blemishes he found in his own work. What irritated him most about this visit was that Nevins had not been able to stay away; he had come to gloat.

Eitel and Elena spent a miserable time with him. Nevins had been in Europe for a year, he had made a picture there, it was the best he had ever done he assured Eitel. "Teppis cried when he saw it," Nevins said. "Can you believe that? I didn't believe it myself."

"I never used to believe it when Teppis would cry for my pictures," Eitel said languidly, "and I was right. He calls them degenerate now."

"Oh, I know," Nevins said. "He always cries. But that's not what I mean. He really cried. You can't fool yourself on something like that." Nevins was plump, he wore a gray flannel suit and a knit tie. He smelled of soap and toilet water and his nails were manicured. "You should have been over in Europe with me, Charley. What a place. It's a beehive. The week before the coronation was fabulous."

"Oh, was there a coronation?" Elena asked awkwardly. Eitel could have throttled her.

"You know the princess is just fascinated by movie stars," Nevins went on, and Eitel suffered it. Nevins had been here, he had been there, he had slept with a famous Italian actress.

"How is she?" asked Eitel with a smile.

"There's nothing fake about her. She's beautiful, intelligent, alive. One of the wittiest women I ever met. And in the hay, oh, man, she's genuine."

"I think it's terrible how men talk about women," Elena essayed, and by an effort Eitel restrained himself from saying, "Don't feel obliged to join every conversation."

An hour went by and Nevins continued to talk. He had had a most marvelous twelve months. It was the best period of his life, he would admit. There had been so many people he had met, so many fantastic experiences he had had; there was the night he got drunk with a distinguished old boy from the House of Lords, the week he had spent with the highly placed American statesman who wished Nevins to write his speeches; all in all it had been a diverting year. "You ought to get to Europe, Charley. Everything's happening over there."

"Yes," said Eitel.

"I hear you expect big things from this movie you're on."

"Little things," Eitel said.

"It's going to be marvelous," Elena said in a dogged little voice.

Nevins glanced at her. "Oh, I'm sure," he said. It chafed Eitel to see how Nevins disregarded Elena. He was polite, indifferent, and rarely looked at her. It could as well have been rude dismay; Nevins seemed to be saying, "Why do you have to go to such lengths, old man? There are all those amazing women in Europe."

When he left, Eitel walked him to his car. "Oh, by the way," Nevins said, "don't mention I was here. You know what I mean."

"How long are you going to be in town?"

"A couple of days only. That's the worst of it. I'm busy as hell. I guess you are, too."

"The script does have me working."

"I know." They shook hands. "Well," said Nevins, "give my regards to your lady, what is her name again?"

"Elena."

"Very nice girl. Give me a ring and maybe we can find the right sort of place to have lunch."

"Or ring me."

"Of course."

After Nevins had driven away, Eitel hated to go back in the house. He was met by Elena in a tantrum. "If you want to go to Europe, you can go right now," she said in a loud voice. "Don't think I'm holding you back."

"How you talk. At the moment I can't even get a passport."

"Oh, so that's it. If you could get a passport, you'd take off in five minutes and tell me to kiss your ass."

"Elena," he said quietly, "please don't shriek like a fishwife."

"I knew it," she declaimed between her sobs, "it was just a question of time, just waiting for the trigger to explode."

He could be distantly irritated by her use of metaphor. "All right, what are you so upset about?" he said in a weary voice.

"I hate your friend."

"He's not worth hating," Eitel said.

"Only you think he's better than you are."

"Now, don't be ridiculous."

"You do, that's what's so awful. That's why you call me a fishwife, just cause you can't screw a princess the way he did."

"He didn't screw a princess. It was just an actress."

"You'd like to be over in Europe right now. You'd like to be rid of me."

"Stop it, Elena."

"You stay with me just cause I'm somebody you can feel superior to. That's how you get your opinion of yourself. By what other people think of you."

"I love you, Elena," Eitel said with an effort.

She did not believe him, and all the while he comforted her, all the while he declared that a thousand Nevinses were not so important to him as even a passing unhappiness for her, he hated himself that it was not true, hated the pang of jealousy, call it more properly the anguish he had felt that he was being forgotten, and men who had been his assistants went to coronations and slept with women more renowned than he had possessed in a long time. "Will I never grow up?" he asked himself in despair, and wondered if he could ever lose that appetite whose food was the celebrated. How he would have loved to be superior to himself, to cleave to Elena because she loved him and made him happy.

Finally, he had come to restrict himself to seeing the few people with whom Elena felt comfortable. I was one of them, and on those nights when Lulu did not wish me to be with her, I would visit Eitel and Elena. With me, Elena could be gay, she could be silly. We spent evenings, the three of us, listening for the most part to Eitel's stories and anecdotes which he told with delightful flourishes. On those evenings he would seem content with her, and she would glow with love for him. It was all fine until the morning; then work began again and his depression with it. At such moments, deep in the frustration of conceiving a film he could not create, Elena seemed a poor companion with whom to take in the coronation. "Hello, your duchess," he could hear her stammer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

About this time Collie Munshin flew up to Desert D'Or and spent his first evening in the resort with Eitel and Elena. Collie's explanation that he had come for a week of leisure in order to think about a picture he would soon produce hardly sounded convincing to Eitel, but in any case, whatever Collie's reasons, he repeated the visit on the following evening. The next day Collie was over for late afternoon drinks. In my absence—for Lulu had taken me on a gambling binge to one of the towns across the state line—Munshin became the friend of the family.

They were cosy, the three of them. Now that Munshin had lost Elena, he enjoyed the idea that the loss was enormous, and everything Elena did delighted him. In the midst of talking to Eitel about productions and budgets and temperaments and rivalries, at exactly those moments when Elena would begin to feel herself most secluded, Munshin would beam at her and say, "Doll, you're ravishing."

But these were only preliminaries. It took Collie less than an hour to become more personal. "I hate civilization," he announced after a short silence.

"Why?" asked Eitel obediently.

"Because here we are with the most involved and intricate relationships, and what do we do? We talk about trivia."

"What else is there to talk about?" Elena asked.

He turned on her. "Elena, you can't know the emptiness you've left in the way I live. I don't even exist for you any more." He took a swallow of his drink. "There's a savage core to women. I'm convinced of it." His voice had become resonant, and Eitel had more than an idea of the rhetoric to come. "You women forget things the way a man never could," Collie declared. "I can imagine what you've said about me, Elena, and it's true, it's all true no doubt, you're a sensitive person, but did either of you ever think it was painful to me, and that it's me who remembers the good things, not you, Elena, the solid things that existed between us, yes, even the passion, the passion, do you hear, Eitel?"

"What do you want, Collie?" Eitel asked. "To vindicate your reputation?"

Treat me like a human being," Munshin roared. "Tell him, Elena, how I used to come over and we would listen to symphony records together. I used to cry in her arms, Eitel. Can you imagine me doing that with anyone else? Why don't you believe that I suffer like everybody?"

"You can afford to," Eitel said.

He knew however that Collie had been successful. It was difficult for any woman not to forgive an old lover who claimed to suffer, and for Elena it was almost impossible. Once Collie had made his speech, she became vivacious, she started to tease Collie with the sharp little malice, not wholly unkind, that a woman often feels toward a past lover. She showed a subtlety Eitel had never noticed before. Elena began to chat, she laughed her charming laugh, she would put little questions to Collie. "I read in the papers," Elena would say, "that your wife won a prize for the dogs."

"Yeah, Lottie took it again."

"I bet you got a big kick out of it," Elena said quickly.

Collie loved it. Each time Elena attacked him, the moist sheepish look would appear in his eyes. "I deserve it," he would seem to say. "Don't think I don't know."

At night when they went to sleep, Elena kept saying, "I feel so good tonight, Charley."

She could not sustain her mood however. As they were turning over in bed, she said thoughtfully to Eitel, "You know, Collie doesn't care about me. It's you he's interested in."

Intoxicated with the admiration of another man for her, Eitel did not want the intoxication spoiled. "You're silly," he said.

"No," she said almost sadly, "now that it's over, Collie likes to talk about what he lost. But he knows better." She surprised him by what she said next. "Charley, if he should start telling you things about me, don't believe them. You know how Collie gets carried away when he tells a story."

Still, Munshin's daily visits became something they anticipated. After the depression of working, it was very pleasant to spend a few hours this way, the three of them welded in the most agreeable fiction: Eitel and Elena ten years married and Collie the bachelor friend. It was indeed so agreeable that for the first time in all the years he had known Munshin, Eitel decided that he was genuinely fond of him. He had almost come to the conclusion that Collie was changing. At the very least he was the only executive at Supreme who had wished to see him. It was hard to resist this sort of attention.

Yet Eitel was still distrustful; he could not quite understand why Munshin had come to Desert D'Or, nor why he saw them so much. There was an explanation: Eitel could remember what he had once said to me, "Collie can't bear to let go of anything," and perhaps he wanted to be near Elena again. Only this was not Munshin's style; more like Collie to keep Elena from forgetting him in other ways, a phone call every six months, "Doll, how are you getting on . . . ?" a bouquet of flowers once a year. Therefore, it was to Eitel's surprise that he found himself telling Munshin the story of his movie. It was on the third or fourth visit the producer had made, and they stayed up late talking. After Elena had gone to bed, Collie began to talk about his own problems. It was part of the technique Collie used to borrow ideas, but Eitel did not resent it this time. Collie was being frank and even confessed he was in trouble on a picture and he asked Eitel's advice.

Finally, it was Eitel's turn. Munshin had sighed, he had squirmed his heavy bulk in the chair and asked, "Tell me, Charley, tell me the truth," his high-pitched voice almost gentle, "how are things going with your script?"

Eitel thought of lying. Instead, he answered, "It's going very badly."

"I figured it that way," Munshin said. "Charley, you're used to working with people. If you want to tell me about it, maybe I can make a contribution."

"Or steal my story."

Collie smiled. "I got an idea I couldn't steal this one even if I wanted to."

Eitel was wondering why he felt so tempted. Collie could not possibly like his story and yet it might prove fruitful to relate it. Perhaps in Munshin's resistance itself, he might find stimulation. Eitel did not really know why he wanted to tell it to Collie. "You're trying to kill it," he told himself.

To tell a story was an aptitude he had acquired years ago, and this time he told his story well, too well indeed; he felt even as he was telling it that if the story were as important to him as he had believed, he should not be able to describe it so easily. It took a sort of life as he continued to speak, it was immeasurably better than anything he had written for it until now, and all the while Collie provided a fine audience. Munshin was known for the way he could listen to a story; he would exhale his breath heavily, he would cluck his tongue, he would nod his head, he would smile in sympathy; Collie could always give the impression that he had never listened to a better story. From experience, Eitel knew how little this meant.

When he was done, Munshin sat back and blew his nose. "It's a powerhouse," he said emotionally.

"You really like it?"

"Extraordinary."

All this meant little. Collie's genuine reactions would come later. "I believe," he went on, "that this can make the greatest picture in the last ten years."

"Not with the script I have."

"You can't have a script for this. You need a poem." Munshin fingered his belly. "That's the one weakness," he commented. "It's abstract, it's like poetry." Then he sighed. "I don't say I'm sure, Charley. If anyone could surprise me, it's you, but can you put poetry on the screen?"

Eitel did not know if he were satisfied or disappointed. "Collie, why don't you say what you really think?"

It took ten minutes for Munshin to come to the point. "I'll tell you," he said at last, "I like it. I like stories that are offbeat. But no one else would like this property because they couldn't understand it."

"I disagree. I think it would be amazing how many people could appreciate it."

"Charley, you don't understand the story yourself. You're a director, you think in terms of film. You're concrete and this is abstract. I know why you've had trouble working. You're trying to write a script which violates everything you know about film-making."

"Exactly."

Munshin put his hand on Eitel's arm. "I love this story," he said, "and I know what it suffers from."

"What?"

"There's no rooting interest." This was the death sentence. "Charley, they won't give a damn about your hero because he's a creep. He'll get on people's nerves. A character who's making thousands of dollars a week on TV, and he decides to give it up. For what? To go out and help people? To end suffering? It's ridiculous. Audiences will hate him. They'll laugh your picture off the screen. You think they want to pay their money to be told this character is better than they are?"

Eitel did not bother to argue. With each word Collie had been burying his hopes. The masterpiece was impossible, he felt suddenly. That must have been why he had told it to Munshin, to learn that it was impossible, something he had probably always known, but he had needed someone to tell him. Perhaps, now, he would not waste his effort. Relief came over Eitel, an old relief; he was rid of a burden.

"You know," said Munshin, "I see a way to make this property successful. It needs a handle, that's all." One of Collie's fat arms went up into the air. "Let me think about it a little." But that was affectation. Collie would do his thinking aloud. "Eitel, I have it," he said. "The solution is simple. You need a prologue to the picture. Let your hero start as a priest."

"A priest!"

"You haven't been using your head. A priest takes you off the hook. I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself." Collie was talking rapidly now, the story being reshaped by his producer's mind, nimble as the fingers of a puppeteer. In the beginning Eitel's hero ought to study to become a priest. Personality-wise, he would have everything, Munshin stated, charm, intelligence, poise—everything but the most important thing. "The guy's too cocky," Munshin said. "I see a terrific scene where the principal or the head monk or whatever they call him at a priest school, a kind of wise old priest-type Irishman calls in Freddie"—one of Munshin's habits when telling a story was to call the hero, 'Freddie'—"and tells the kid that it's no go, he doesn't think Freddie ought to become a priest, not yet. Scholastically, he says, the kid's got everything. He's tops in Church History, in Holy Water, in Bingo Management, he's A plus in Confessional Psychology, but he doesn't have the heart of a priest. 'Get out in the world, son, and learn humility,' the old priest says. Do you see it now?"

Eitel saw it. He had no need to listen further as Collie explained. "Let's take it from Freddie's point of view," Munshin said with the pleasure of a man digesting a good meal. "If you want motivation for Freddie, you can present the priest as a sort of father figure to him. The kid takes the advice like a rejection. He's bitter. He feels unloved. So what does he do? He goes out from the priest school, and one way or another—we'll work it out—he gets into television, a bitter kid, the kind who plays the angles. Yet at the same time we can drop hints that he's feeling full of guilt for the crap he feeds people. And all the while his career is going up like a skyrocket." Munshin interrupted himself, holding his hands forward expressively. "You build him up as a heel, and then you give the switch. Something happens to give him humility. I don't know what we can find, but I wouldn't even worry about it. Something with a crucifix or a cross. Show a Christ motif on the screen and who gives a goddamn about motivation? The audience will buy it. Once Freddie starts his binge-sequence, we can give him a *wanderjahr*, stumbling around bums with tears in his eyes, lots of business where he just loves everybody. I'm telling you even the kids will stop eating their popcorn. You get what I mean. I don't even have to elaborate it. At the end . . ." Freddie didn't have to die in the gutter, Collie explained; he could go back to the seminary and be accepted. An up-beat ending. "Something with angel's voices in the background. Only not full of shit."

Munshin was so excited he could not sit still. "This story's got me," he declared as he walked back and forth. "I won't be able to sleep tonight."

Eitel laughed, grudging his admiration. "Collie, you're a genius."

"I'm serious, Eitel, we have to do this picture. H.T. will love it."

"I could never do it."

"Of course you could."

"I don't approve of the Church," Eitel said.

"You don't approve of the Church? Baby, when I was a kid in the slums, one cut above a hoodlum, I used to spit on the street when I passed a church. What's that got to do with it?"

"For one thing, you know and I know how much the Church has to do with these subversive committees."

"If they weren't interested, somebody else would be. Charley, I've been a liberal all my life, but for God's sake keep politics out of this."

"Let's leave the story," Eitel said, "for tonight."

"For tonight we'll drop it. All right. But you think about what I said, Charley. I swear, I want to do it with you. This property is a gold mine." He patted Eitel's shoulder. "You don't realize what you have there," Munshin said again before he left.

Eitel never found out whether Collie could sleep that night, but it was certain he did not. Everything seemed turned on its head. The professional in Eitel hungered for the new story; it was so perfect for a profitable movie, it was so beautifully false. Professional blood thrived on what was excellently dishonest, and Collie had given him the taste of that again.

In the morning when he tried to work, he found that his mind was fertile with ideas for what was already titled Masterpiece-Sub-Two. Had the story to which he had given such pain disappeared already? Was his dislike of the Church unreal? was he himself unreal? He was even wondering what financial terms he could make with Munshin. "I won't appear before the committee again," he found himself thinking, "I'll do the script black market first, no matter how much I lose that way." And all the while he was wondering how serious Collie had been.

Munshin did not visit them that day, and when Eitel called the Yacht Club, he learned the producer had taken a plane to one of the gambling resorts. So it was clear enough. Collie could afford to wait twenty-four hours and let him worry. It was an obvious tactic, but Eitel was still uneasy.

Early evening Marion Faye stopped by their house. Eitel and Elena were used to seeing him once or twice a week; the tension which had existed for a time after Elena's episode with Marion was now less noticeable. Lately, Eitel had even enjoyed Faye's visits.

Marion had a habit of appearing at odd times; a week might go by without even a telephone call and then he would show up suddenly with a few strangers in tow; they could be anything from hoodlums to a typical tourist he had picked up in town. However, he usually came alone. It may have been the marijuana or just that he was very drunk, but Faye was quite capable of sitting in their living room for half an hour without saying a word, sometimes not even answering their few polite questions. Then he would get up and go out the door.

Other times, he would talk a lot, and once in a while he might give them glimpses of his extraordinary charm. It was extraordinary, Eitel had often thought. When Marion was pleasant he seemed more than pleasant; the relief one felt served to exaggerate his passing amiability.

Curiously, he was often nice to Elena. He would even flirt mildly and dispassionately. Nights when Faye had been particularly attentive, she would preen a little bit and tease Eitel once Marion was gone. "Oh, would he love to cause trouble between us," Elena might say.

"I've never seen him so interested in a woman."

Elena would become sullen again. The compliment had been too direct. "He would just like to make me one of his prostitutes," she would say.

"Oh, that's ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous. That's what he thinks of me. I don't like him," Elena said unconvincingly.

"Never think too poorly of yourself," Eitel said angrily.

In truth he was so anxious for Elena to grow. Once, just once, she had had a success on one of the evenings with the emigrés. Someone had put a *naso doble* on the phonograph, and Eitel had seen her dance her flamenco. She had been marvelous. Her head had been proud, her teeth white, her skin golden, and she had danced with a kind of scorn, her skirts flying, her sharp little heels beating out the rhythm with a precision, a fury, and a confidence that had him watching her in complete admiration. Then she had become too drunk and stopped dancing, but the glow he felt at her triumph lasted through the night. In the morning he had scolded her for not practicing dancing, and for a few days on the impetus of his enthusiasm, she had begun to do exercises; she even talked about trying to find a night-club career again. But in watching her practice he knew that she would never be a professional, and he had a picture of how unhappy she must have been in those shoddy engagements her agent had been able to get for her, no more than an excuse for drinks between two strip-teasers. Probably, everyone had talked while she danced.

No, she could never attain the first requisite of the profession which demanded that no matter one's mood, there was always a minimum level to the performance. One was never terrible. Elena could not be like that. Watching her work, he knew she was gifted, but she had the wild gifts of the amateur. No wonder she took her talents to bed; love was for amateurs. So he knew, although he hated to believe it, that the more he wished to make of her, the less she would become. She had only her one cry, "Love me, really love me, and maybe I can do what you want."

Faye told him as much. The night Eitel spent waiting for a phone call from Munshin, Marion stayed for hours. At the beginning of the evening, Eitel told him about Munshin's idea for his story, sensing uneasily even as he spoke that in some curious way he wanted Marion to encourage him.

"It sounds like one of Collie's contributions, all right," Marion said.

"I find it so awful that I'm half-intrigued," Eitel murmured casually.

"Don't like being out of things, do you?" Marion commented, and was silent until Elena came back into the room. He remained silent, and it made Elena uncomfortable. When, finally, Faye mentioned a new girl he had acquired whose name was Bobby, Elena was eager to hear everything about her. At each grudging detail Faye offered—that Bobby had tried modeling, that she had hoped to be an actress, that she had been married and divorced and had two children—Elena would listen with perfect absorption.

"But how did she get started?" Elena interrupted. "I mean what was she doing before?"

"How do I know?" Faye said. "She sold ties at a hatstand, or she took photographs in a night club. What does anybody do?"

"No, I mean, how did she make up her mind to go into it?"

"Do you think it's complicated? Jay-Jay took her over the hoops, and then I talked to her."

"But how did she *feel*?" Elena insisted.

"How would you feel?" Faye said.

Elena giggled for her answer. "It's terrible," she said to Eitel. "I guess a girl like her gets started because she can't have a decent relationship with a man."

"And you can," Faye said. Eitel knew the signs. Marion was becoming ugly.

"Yes, I can," Elena said. "Don't you think so?"

Faye laughed. "Sure I do, sure. Just find the right man. That's every girl's trouble."

"What do you mean by that?" Elena said needlessly.

Eitel smiled. "He means, get rid of me."

"Marion hates you, Charley." She made this announcement defiantly as if they both would turn on her. Eitel could only laugh. For years he had protected himself with that laugh. "Is she right, Marion?" he said lightly.

Faye inhaled on his cigarette and then flipped it into the fireplace. "Sure, I hate you," he said.

"But why?"

"Because you might have been an artist, and you spit on it."

"And what is an artist?" Eitel asked. He felt a pang at the venom in Faye's voice.

"Do you want to start a discussion?" Marion sneered. "I thought I wouldn't have to tell you what it is."

"I'm sorry you feel this way," Eitel said in a controlled voice. He had a feeling of curious loss that Marion no longer respected him. "Another protégé gone," he thought drily. In mockery at the years which had gone by, Eitel thought for a moment of the time when Marion would seek him out. That had been the fruit of his affair with Dorothea, and if one looked at it coldly, there was little enough. He had loaned the boy a few books; here and there he had given advice; and once, at Marion's request, he had spent an hour or two with the club of hoodlums to which Marion belonged. Yet, in another way, there had been so much more. He knew without it ever being said that he was important to the boy, and in his own turn, Eitel had been rarely sentimental about the relationship. So he had taken the trouble to lecture Marion that he was different from other people, more intelligent, and that he must never believe anything until he discovered it for himself.

"If you feel that way about Charley," Elena said, "why do you come here all the time?"

Faye stared at her as if she were a specimen. "Do you mean that?" he asked, "or do you say it because Eitel is your meal ticket?"

"I think you're . . . Leave this house!" Elena shouted at him, and like all commands which possess no threat, she could only carry it out by stalking from the room herself.

"What in the name of heaven did you have to say that for?" Eitel groaned.

"Because our baby gets on my nerves," Faye said.

135

Eitel went to the bedroom. Elena was in tears; he had known as much. She would not listen to him, she merely lay on the bed. "You shouldn't let anybody talk to you like that," she sobbed. "And they shouldn't talk that way to me either." He reasoned with her; Marion had not meant what he said, Marion's nerves were tense, she should not have asked Marion so many questions. He had known Marion for years; no one could understand him who hadn't known him as a boy. Hopelessly, Eitel continued. All the while he knew that what he was really trying to do was convince her that Marion was wrong; they would not break up, he would always take care of her.

At a given moment, Elena turned on him. "You think so much of your friend out there. You ought to know the kind of friend he is."

By the way she said it, he knew there was more to follow. "What are you talking about?" Eitel asked.

"Every time your back is turned, Marion says he wants me to go live with him."

"Did he say that?"

"He even said he loved me," she complained, as if what hurt the most was that tonight Marion did not love her.

If Eitel were startled, he could tell that he was also pleased. Let someone else care for her, and perhaps his own responsibility was less. "Then can't you understand why Marion was so nasty?" he heard himself asking.

"Aren't you even angry?"

"Elena, let's not make too much of it."

"You're cold, Charley," she said.

"Oh, come on back. You can't really be angry at Marion if he has a crush on you."

Finally she consented to say good night. Sheepishly, with red-rimmed eyes, she came back for a moment and smiled at Marion. "You're beautiful, sweetie," Marion said, and threw her a dry kiss. "What I mean, you're better than all of us."

When Elena had gone to bed, and they were alone, Marion's mood was very bad. "Why won't you believe I love her?" Eitel said to him.

"What do you want me to say? I'll say it."

"You see something in her yourself," Eitel went on. "Admit it. She has such a need for dignity," he exclaimed.

"Dignity!" Marion leaned forward as though to drive himself through an obstruction. "Charley, you know like I know, she's just a dirty little girl."

"That's not true. That's not all of it." And Eitel was offended at the calmness of his voice. "If I loved her, I wouldn't talk to him now," he thought, and smiled sourly, inwardly.

"You can do anything with Elena," Faye said almost dreamily. "She's the kind of girl you wipe your hands on."

Eitel made one more attempt. "In certain ways she's the most honest woman I've ever known."

"Absolutely," said Faye. "Do you know why you stay with her?"

"Why?"

"Because you're scared, Charley. I'll bet you've been faithful."

"I have."

"And you're the one who used to tell me that faithfulness is an outrage to the human instincts."

"Perhaps I still believe that."

"You're really scared. You're even scared to take one of my girls for a night."

"I've never been interested in call girls," Eitel said.

"That's your excuse. What are you trying to argue? That it's a matter of taste?"

As Faye spoke, Eitel felt again something of the rage he had known during the first weeks at Desert D'Or when he had come to realize that the kind of women he once had known would never enter an affair with him now, certainly not the ambitious ones, nor the young ones, nor the ones he might desire; for him had been left only the wives of the emigrés, sour, discontented, anxious to cuckold their husbands, and those second-rate call girls and downright prostitutes so low in the esteem of Desert D'Or that he would still have prominence to them. Or was Faye right? Was he frightened even of such women? As he thought these things, Eitel had a glimpse of the contempt he felt for Elena. But instead he answered, "If you think so little of my girl, why are you interested in her?"

"I haven't figured it out yet." Faye yawned and got up. "Do me a favor," he said as he was about to leave, "ask Elena if she ever did it for money."

Eitel felt an unmistakable thrill. "What do you know?" he asked, almost advancing on Faye.

"I don't know, Charley. I just got an instinct for this." And Faye sauntered out the door.

Eitel didn't have a chance to ask Elena until the following afternoon. She was asleep when he went to bed and awake before him in the morning. No call came through from Munshin, and while Eitel tried to work, sexual urge for Elena teased him powerfully. In the middle of the afternoon, he took her to the bedroom, and they had an exciting hour, doubly exciting for Elena he knew because his desire appeared so spontaneous. Afterward, it seemed harmless to ask her the question. Had she, indeed, ever taken money? Well, never exactly, she told him, except for once. Except for once? he had said, and how was that? That was a funny time, Elena had reminisced. How had it happened? he asked, his chest frozen. Well, there had been a man, and he had wanted to sleep with her, and she had refused, and then the man had offered money, fifteen dollars he had offered.

"So what did you do?" Eitel asked.

"I took it. It make the man seem exciting to me."

"You're a dirty little girl," Eitel said, as Faye had said.

Elena's eyes were alive. "Well, you know I am," she said intimately. "You're dirty too."

"Yes." The worst of it, Eitel thought, was that these stories aroused him so.

"I enjoyed spending the fifteen dollars," Elena went on.

"It didn't bother you?"

"No."

"It bothered you," Eitel insisted.

"Well, I did get hysterical the next night, but I'm so loused up anyway."

She sat on his lap. "You remember when we were talking about two girls and a fellow?" Eitel nodded. "Well, maybe we can find a girl sometime. It would have to be the right kind of girl though. The kind I wouldn't be jealous of." Elena laughed at herself. "Isn't it terrible talking like this and planning?"

He squeezed her to him, feeling so many things he could never have told her, excitement at the thought of himself with two women, sensuous pain that she had sold herself for fifteen dollars, and with it all, concern, a concern for Elena which almost forced the tears to his eyes. Whatever would happen if he didn't take care of her?

A little later they decided to go for a swim. While they were having a drink beside the pool, he remembered that Collie was still missing. It was so easy to believe anything; equally possible that they would never see Collie again, or instead see him that night. Playfully, Eitel flipped a coin in the air, and it came down tails. "I'll never see him again," he thought to himself, and was slightly depressed. Did it mean he had decided to depend upon Collie?

So much for superstition. The coin was wrong and Munshin came to their house that evening. It took hours before Elena would go to sleep, and as if there were a tacit admission between the two men, not a word was said about movie scripts. When she had finally left them, Munshin became reflective. "We're in a fantastic occupation," he said philosophically.

Eitel hardly had patience for this. "How's the head monk?" he asked.

Munshin smiled. "Charley, I hope our little conference the other night was productive."

"It gave me an idea or two."

"I'm still wild about it," Munshin said. "I haven't felt enthusiasm like this in years." Collie often said such things; he would use them as a way of passing from one subject to another. "'What are you gambling here for?' I said to myself last night," Collie continued. "'The real gamble is back with Eitel in Desert D'Or.'"

"Where's the gamble?" Eitel said. "Last time we talked you seemed to think the story couldn't miss."

"Charley, let's not negotiate at arm's length. We're each too smart for that. Your story, even with my contribution, is a gamble. It's straight gamble all the way down the line."

Eitel made a small performance of mixing a drink. "Maybe we ought to drop the idea then," he said.

"Cut out the sparring, Charley." Munshin was nibbling on his upper lip with all the pleasure of a fat little boy. "I've given a lot of thought to this. Lover, if you want to go it alone, the suggestion I made is yours, and I hope it helps you to pull down a fortune for the script when you want to sell it."

Eitel made a sound of disgust. "You know very well, Collie, that nobody in the industry will go near me."

"All you got to do is clear yourself with the government."

"Just that little thing. I have my pride, Collie."

"Then you have to work with me."

"Maybe there are other possibilities."

"Who are you kidding? If you want to make it in Europe, you got to get over there first." Munshin beamed. He had a better deal worked out, he said. Eitel would do the script, and he would contribute editorial advice, and when it was done—did Eitel think he could do it in twelve weeks?—Collie would present it to Teppis as his own screenplay. He didn't have to remind Eitel, he went on, what a record he had as a writer-producer. A Munshin original was worth a great deal on the market.

"You ought to be able to get between seventy-five and a hundred thousand for it," Eitel said.

"Charley, why talk about money now?"

"Because I want to know how we'll split."

Munshin pursed his lips. "Charley, talking like this is not your style at all."

"It may not be my style, but I want ten thousand dollars now, and I want us to divide the rest, three quarters to me, one quarter to you."

"I'm bewildered. Charley," Munshin said. "I don't understand your point of view."

"Make an effort."

"You make the effort. What's in this for me except worries? If Teppis ever found out I was working with you, he'd hand me my head. Today, I'm established. You think I'd take a chance on losing it all for a lousy few thousand bucks?"

"Plus the prestige of a Munshin original."

"Not worth it." Munshin shook his head. "No, Charley, no. I see it the other way. Since you're short of ready money, I'll give you twenty-five hundred for the script, and then we'll split three quarters to me."

"Collie, Collie, Collie."

"We'll also forget that loan I gave you."

"Don't think I don't know why you gave it to me."

They played, they discussed, and they haggled for another hour before the rough treaty was drawn. Later—Munshin explained he would have to discuss it with his lawyer—they might or might not draw up a contract, and the proper method to pay Eitel would have to be devised for income-tax purposes. But these were details; they could trust each other.

The perfect contract, Eitel thought. Collie would have the money, and he would have photostats of the script in his own handwriting. He took the best terms he could get. Collie would give him four thousand dollars for writing the script, two thousand tonight, two thousand when it was done. If the script were not sold, it would belong to Munshin; if it were sold, Collie would take two thirds of the sale price. Subsidiary rights would belong to Collie, but he would make certain Eitel got a percentage. It was a simple arrangement. Eitel would do the work and Collie would get the money. In return, if Eitel would make another appearance before the Subversive Committee and be co-operative, Collie would do his best to have Eitel direct the picture. They might even share credit for the story.

"So, now," Eitel thought bleakly, "I'm one of the peons Collie keeps locked in a hole." He was furious. Collie knew people; all of Collie's peons were honest; he would never make an arrangement like this with a man he could not trust for there was potential blackmail in the situation. "After all these years I'm still an honest man," Eitel said bitterly as Collie passed over twenty one-hundred dollar bills. The bargain was made. Eitel felt a tingling in his hand.

Yet, if he thought their business was finished for the night, he was to learn that it had only begun. Collie went off on a long account of how he had met Lulu in the gambling casino. "She was with that kid. Your friend. What's his name?"

"Sergius."

"That's right, Sergius." Collie sighed. "He's a nice kid."

"Yes." Eitel merely waited.

"Charley," Munshin said, "I could cry every time I think of how you ruined your career. You and Elena could be so happy now in the industry."

Eitel refused to answer. It was the quickest way of learning what Munshin wanted.

"Did you have to flaunt Elena under H.T.'s nose the night he gave the party?" Collie asked. "You don't know what a mistake that was. Why do you think he invited you in the first place?"

"I've never really understood why."

"Charley, for all your intelligence and all your perception, you've always treated H.T. the wrong way. H.T. wants to act like a father to people, and you never give him a chance. Two hours before that party started, before I even knew you were invited, he said to me, 'I want to do a rehabilitation on Charley-boy.' Those were his words."

"No less!" Eitel finished his drink and poured another. "I suppose he was going to take me off the black list?"

Munshin nodded wisely. "He would have fixed it so you testified in secret session. Nobody would ever have known what you said."

How clever they were, Eitel thought. A secret session, a few lines in the back of a newspaper, and he could have his career again. The word would be out for the gossip columnists to be kind.

"H.T.'s a hard man," Munshin said, "but he's a lonely man. Deep down, he misses you. He gave that invitation to the party because he had an idea for a picture that only you could make."

"Sergius told me," Eitel said. "A desert musical."

"Baby, you're wrong," Collie stuck out a finger. "You don't understand H.T., I keep telling you. What he had in the back of his mind was to make a picture about Sergius O'Shaugnessy."

This was worth a drink. "I'm blind," Eitel said, "I don't see it."

"You're just rusty. The kid is a war hero with ten planes to his credit."

"Three planes, Collie, not ten. If you ask Sergius, maybe he'll tell you it almost made him a mental case."

"Sue me if I build it up a little," said Munshin. "The essence of the yarn is not how many planes, but the fact that Sergius is a kid who was left on the steps of an orphan asylum. Movie-wise, could you have anything more viable?"

"It sounds revolting."

"Take the girl who's his mother," said Munshin. "I see her cast as a bobby-soxer. It's got a perfect beginning. You could open on her setting a two-month old baby on the steps of this orphan home and ringing the bell. Then she runs away crying as if her heart will break. Somebody opens the door, an old janitor say, and there's a note pinned to the baby's diapers. This was H.T.'s idea. 'I wish I could give my baby a family name' the note says, 'but since I can't, please call him Sergius because that's beautiful.'" Munshin's face showed the delight of a man who stares at the Kohinoor diamond. "How can you miss?" he said, "Sergius, because it's a beautiful name.' Take it from there. He goes on to become a war ace. The orphan is a hero."

Eitel could well believe it. Once, twice, three times a year, Herman Teppis would get an inspiration, and then it was up to somebody to develop a movie from his idea. The origins could consist of less than 'the orphan is a hero'; years ago, Teppis had called Eitel one morning and said, "I have a movie in my mind. 'Oxford and Cambridge.' Make that movie." He had managed to divert Teppis to another director, and the movie as it was finally made had another title, but the inspiration had been enough to keep people at Supreme worried for half a year. When all was said, it was as good a way to make movies as any other; most of Teppis' inspirations showed a profit.

"What do you think?" Munshin asked.

"This story has nothing to do with Sergius. I don't understand why you even want to bother to buy the rights."

"The kid could never sue us. That's not the point. Only look at the story. It stinks, it's corny. Nobody would believe it unless you could build around a real-life person. That's what's got H.T. excited. The publicity values."

"I don't believe Sergius will give you the rights," Eitel said.

"You think so," said Munshin, "I think differently. There's twenty thousand dollars in it for him."

"Then why don't you have a talk?"

Munshin sighed. "It's too late. You know how H.T. is with his enthusiasms. He wanted you to make the picture because the kid would co-operate with you. Now it's all ruined because you had to insult H.T. gratuitously."

"Collie, why are you bringing up old history?"

"Why? I don't know." Munshin put a finger in his ear and rubbed vigorously. "Maybe it's because I have an idea in the back of my mind," he announced. "If we could get Sergius to okay this project, I feel, Charley, that I could still talk H.T. into letting you direct it."

Eitel laughed. "In other words you want me to prove to Sergius that it's a good idea."

"I want you to help me and to help yourself as well."

"Everybody benefits," Eitel said. "Sergius is rich again, I direct, and you bring back what H.T. sent you here for."

"If you want to put it that way, yes."

"What if H.T. won't let me direct?"

Munshin looked the least bit tentative. "I've been thinking about that," he said. "What we might be able to do in that case is change the terms of our agreement on the priest script. I don't want you left out in the cold."

"How fortunate we're partners already," Eitel said. Collie was marvelous, he decided. He had come to Desert D'Or because H.T. had told him to buy the life of Sergius O'Shaugnessy, and that was a royal command. But if Collie came to the market, it was to borrow with one hand while he exchanged with the other. So it did not matter what happened now: Collie could hardly lose. Eitel found himself wondering how many other deals Collie had made in this last week.

"Sergius doesn't want your twenty thousand dollars, does he?" Eitel asked abruptly.

"We left it an open question."

"What did you do, discuss it over a roulette wheel?"

"It's as good a place as any."

"And is Lulu working on Sergius too?"

Collie had to smile. "Well, it's a little complicated. H.T. is just morbid on the subject that she should get married."

"To Teddy Pope?"

Collie nodded. "The thing is, however, given favorable circumstances, I believe H.T. could see his way clear to Lulu marrying Sergius."

"What a beautiful end to the movie." Eitel roared with laughter. "For a fat man, Collie," he managed to say at last, "you can certainly squeeze into a lot of narrow places."

Munshin laughed with him. They sat in Eitel's living room, laughing and laughing, but Collie was the first to finish. "I'm crazy about you, baby," he said, wiping his eyes, "you're the only character I know who can see through me."

"That is a compliment," Eitel said genially.

"You'll give me a hand with Sergius, won't you?"

"No," said Eitel, "I won't lift a finger."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Munshin shook his head. "Charley, why don't you go to my analyst? I don't say he'll perform miracles, but he's helped me tremendously."

"You can abuse me all you want. I'm not giving you any help with Sergius." Eitel sat back and waited for Munshin's performance.

It came with all variety. Munshin unbraided him, he accused Eitel of stealing his woman, he recited every grievance of the last fifteen years, and complained that he had tried over and over, in every way he knew, to save Eitel's career. He even hinted he would find some other writer to do Eitel's story. For over an hour he would attack first in one direction and then another. He even said their partnership was finished and asked for his money back. Eitel laughed at him.

Yet with all Eitel's experience, it was difficult to know when Collie was serious. In the midst of the threats, the complaints, and the anguish, his little fat eyes never seemed to lose their twinkle. By the time the night was over, Collie had reversed himself completely and they were friends again. Crossing his hands over his belly, Collie announced, "I'll give you a demonstration of my good faith. No matter what you do about the kid, I'm still convinced we're in on the birth of a great movie. The hell with the two thousand dollars you're supposed to get when you finish the script. You can have it now. I'll send it over by messenger in the morning."

"I appreciate that, Collie, but it's not going to change my mind."

"I didn't think it would. I didn't intend it to." Collie sighed. "What a night this has been. Let me take one drink for the road."

At the door they shook hands. "If you won't help me with Sergius," Collie said, "at least don't interfere."

"It's his decision. I won't mix into it."

Collie gave one of his long sad looks. "I don't understand it," he said for the tenth time. "Why don't you help the kid get twenty thousand dollars?"

"How you put it," Eitel said.

"Why won't you?"

"Maybe he reminds me of the way I used to be."

Munshin shrugged. "I don't expect sentiment from you, Charley. The kid's a nothing."

Eitel patted him on the shoulder. "Lover, I could never explain it to you," he said.

He was in a good mood when he went to sleep and he awakened in the same good mood. It lasted until the moment he realized he would have to tell Elena that the script was no longer his own.

She was distressed, and all the while he was explaining that working for Collie meant nothing, it was merely that he needed time and money was time, he knew that last night, far at the back of his thoughts, he had been dreading to tell her. "Nothing is changed really, darling," he said. "I mean this script I do for Collie will be so different from my own that I'll be able to do the other one later."

She looked dejected. "I didn't know you were so close to being broke."

"Very close," he said.

"Couldn't you have sold your car?" she asked.

"Is that a solution?"

"I just hope you didn't give up too soon," Elena sighed. "I don't know about these things. Maybe you're right." She was convincing herself even as she spoke, and all the time he knew that she did not believe him really; at bottom nothing fooled her. "I'm sure the new one will be good," she said, but she was gloomy all day.

His work on Munshin's script went smoothly. Years ago, Eitel had described a commercial writer as a man who could produce in an hour three pages on any subject assigned. That was the way it went with the new masterpiece. There were hitches, there were delays, there were mornings when he could not work very well, but over the whole, what amazed him, annoyed him, and pleased him, was how easy the writing had become. Where he had written scenes many times only to discover that the latest version was inferior to the previous failure, now ideas flowed, sections fit together, and walls of plot grew to support one another. Eitel knew nothing about the Church, and yet Freddie's scenes in the seminary were good, they were commercially good, they boiled with movie ingredients. What did one have to know about the Church? There was a fine Irish wit to the old priest, and Freddie was properly arrogant. One could rely on the stenographic code of the film which would say: Here is a heel, but it is a Teddy Pope heel, and regeneration is on the way.

Eitel began to enjoy himself by the time he started writing about Freddie's success on the Advice To Troubled Souls program. To the sugar of the seminary Eitel added the vinegar of television, and knew as he worked that the scenes which came later could not fail. A little syrup, a little acid, and lots of heart. Those were the cupcakes which won Hercules awards, and it was fine to be working again with cynical superiority.

Munshin would telephone almost daily from the capital. "How is Freddie coming as a character?" he would ask.

"Freddie's fine. He's really alive," Eitel would say, and think that no problems about character could exist any longer; Freddie was now an actor, any actor with a skier's body, a sun-tanned face, and cartloads of heart.

"How's Elena?" Munshin would ask, and answer himself by saying, "That's great, that's great," even as Eitel was muttering, "She's fine, thank you, she says to send a kiss."

Only that was hardly true. If Eitel were in good spirits these days, Elena was not, and her depression, regular and predictable, lapped like water on the brave sand-front of his optimism. The short of the matter, he had come to decide, was that he was bored with her, not sexually, not at all sexually, but the responsibility he felt so recently now chafed. What did he want with her really? It was becoming very clear to him these days that soon he would be able to go back to the capital and direct pictures again. That seemed inevitable. One way or another he would arrange dispensation from the Subversive Committee, just how was too unpleasant to think about, but on the crest of Masterpiece-Sub-Two, celebrity would come again; he might even force Munshin to admit whose work it was, and this time he could enjoy such things as fourteen-room houses and the sycophancy of men like Nevins. He even came to think that his last bad year had been no more than the painful lessons of providence, the parent admonishing him to enjoy his milk. There were lessons in that milk, the lessons of his life, and he had thrown them up too often, been the romantic too long. The milk was prosaic but it was very wise; it was never sentimental like whisky or enthusiasm or hope. "Be good," said the milk, "but if you cannot be good, be big."

For the first time since he had been living with Elena, he found himself repeating the emotions of many old affairs. The time had come to reckon how he would break up with her. This was always delicate, but with Elena he would have to be more than subtle. No matter how he might dislike her these days for her sullenness, her vulgarity, her ineptitude, her love itself, he was always aware that it was his fault. He had begun the affair, he had insisted upon it, and he was determined to hurt her as little as possible. At the same time he did not want to break up with her immediately; that would be too disturbing to his work. The proper time was in a month, two months, whenever he was finished; and in the meantime, ever so adroitly, like fighting big fish on slender tackle, he must gently exhaust her love, depress her hope, and make the end as painless as the quick blow of the club on the fatigued and blunted fish-brain. My one hundred and twenty-four pound sailfish, Eitel would think, and what a match she gave him. He was cool as any good fisherman, "I'm the coolest man I know," he would think, and with confidence, aloofness, and professional disinterest, he maneuvered Elena, he brought her closer to the boat. There was always the danger she would slip the hook before he had pulled her in, and so the battle was wearying. He could not let her realize how his attitude had changed; she would force a fight which would go too far; that was her pride; she would not stay a moment once he told her he did not love her, and he had to struggle with temptation not to reel in line too fast, too soon.

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He had wrapped his work about himself, and it gave him the distance he needed, the coldness, the lack of shame. He would be far away from her, he would eat a meal without speaking, his eyes on a book, he would sense through all of his body how despair swelled in her, fatiguing love, fatiguing spirit, and at the moment when he would feel that she could stand it no longer, a spasm of fury, a spasm of determination, "We can't go on like this," about to burst from her mouth, he would confuse her completely.

"I love you, darling," he would say out of a silence, and kiss her, and know her bewilderment had seated the hook more firmly.

"I was just thinking you were sick of me," Elena would answer, uncertain tears in her eyes.

The hook had to be seated over and over; she had resources for such a struggle; he would be amazed at times how she read his mind, the two of them sitting perhaps over a drink, chatting about nothing, while his thoughts were working on the problem of being finally free of her. He might even be telling her how pretty she looked that evening, and the child's eyes would stare back at him, the open green eyes, and she would say, not even sadly, "Charley, you want out, don't you?"

"What gives you these ideas?" he would say, pretending to be angry, fighting the single word, "Yes!" which twitched at his nerves so much did he want to say it. But that would be fatal, for however it ended the damage would be too great. Either she would leave him and he would be unable to work just when he had found his rhythm; or what was worse, the calculating numbness he had been at such pains to cultivate in himself would disappear, and he would be open to her pain, there would seem nothing more terrible in all the world than that she should suffer, and so the fish would be free, it would be no longer a fish, it would be Elena, and he would have to start all over again. So he must be patient, he must be cold, and all the while he must act, manufacturing warmth he did not feel.

He had come to the conclusion that to be able to end this affair, he must understand it first. Why should a second-rate man spend so much time on a fifth-rate woman? It was not logical. Second-rate men sought out second-rate women; the summits of society were inhabited by such people, and so why had he deserted his caste? But he knew the answer or thought he did; there was always Faye's mocking presence, and the words he had said a week ago, "You're scared, Charley, you're really scared." Was it true? In the last two years he had performed badly with so many women. Those were the laws of sex; borrow technique in place of desire, and sex like life would demand the debt be paid just when one was getting too old to afford such obligation. If he had clung to the Rumanian, he was anchored to Elena. Could the fishing contest be merely another joke he played on himself, and would he never let her go, not so long as his delicate manhood depended upon her? He had come to resent the perfection of their love-making.

In the past his pleasure had always been created by the situation; a rendezvous with a woman in a hotel room had more flavor than to take her to his home. He thought of an actress he had visited secretly for many months, so secretly that not even their closest acquaintances had guessed. What a charming frame the secrecy had provided. Now, his life seemed stripped of interest. The inevitable progress of a love affair, Eitel thought. One began with the stimulating notion that life had recovered its intensity, and ended with the familiar distaste of no adventure and no novelty. It was one of the paradoxes he had cherished. The unspoken purpose of freedom was to find love, yet when love was found one could only desire freedom again. So it was. He had to resent Elena. If she allowed him to explore the army of sex more completely than he ever had before, she deprived him as well. For he had always seen it as a search. One went on, one passed from affair to affair, some good, some not, and each provided in its own way a promise of what could finally be found. How sad to finish the journey and discover that one was unchanged, that indeed one was worse; still another illusion was lost. He had merely succeeded in spoiling the memory of his old affairs. Elena stimulated his perception of what it meant for a woman to desire a man, and with his vulnerability to being found unattractive, he wondered now how he could make love to someone else. It was true; he was frightened; and he brooded for such comforts as the blessing of living alone and the joys of pornography. He had once remarked that his deepest affairs were with obscene literature, and he began to think again of that pornographic library which he had bought and sold a dozen times in a decade like a love at long distance which may last for a life. "Pornography is one of the magic islands of the tropics," he thought. There, people could live as they dreamed and not as they must. He had come to desire the thought of having an affair with a woman about whom he cared nothing, whose deceptions and adventures were merely diversions, an affair simply exciting, exciting as the pages of a pornographic text where one could read in safety and not begrudge every passing emotion the woman had felt for another man. It was the only sort of affair for which he was suited, he told himself, and instead he was locked in Elena's love. He could not even manage to have some trivial affair, for he had neither time enough nor money and Elena could never be deceived three times a week. It was true, Eitel would think, marriage and infidelity were wed, and the one could not exist without the other. Many nights he sat in the living room with Elena and felt if he did not quit her for an hour, he would leave her forever.

The visits of Marion Faye made these feelings more intense, for Faye would always insist that sex could not live without its setting and love never. Eitel tried to say to Marion, "But she loves me. Don't you understand why I feel responsible?"

"She doesn't love you," Faye said. "She wouldn't know what to do if she didn't think she was in love with somebody."

"You give her no credit," Eitel insisted, but something turned in him. How loathesome was the idea that she had never loved him at all.

"When a man gets older," Faye said, "there comes a time when there's only one woman he can still be a man with." He smiled. "For instance, my stepfather, Mr. Pelley."

"Maybe one of these days I'll ask you for a girl," Eitel heard himself say.

"What's the matter? You getting tired of the circus?" Faye said, and Eitel could imagine clearly what Elena's night with Marion must have been. "Let's make it for this evening," he said.

"What will you tell Elena?"

"I'll tell her something," Eitel snapped, and his date with Bobby was arranged.

Now, lying in his bed beside Elena, watching the desert morning gather light, the memory of the last three weeks, like an egg which has come to term, seemed about to burst. For hours he had been juggling his evening with Bobby against the five hundred dollars, the first script he had abandoned against the gold façade of Masterpiece-Sub-Two, the hostility of Marion Faye thrown upon the expansive friendship of Collie Munshin, and all the while, shivering beneath the blankets, he clung to Elena's drowsy body, his hundred and twenty-four pound sailfish promoted to mermaid. Temporarily the fishing contest could be suspended. What a horrible night it had been.

He had told Elena that Collie wanted him for a conference on the script and that they were going to meet in a town midway between the capital and Desert D'Or. That had been easy enough. For one night almost any excuse would do, and the arrangements having been made, he drove out to the bar where Jay-Jay was waiting for him, trying not to think about Elena alone in the house. She hated to be alone, starting at noises, oppressed by the silence of the desert, careful to lock all the doors and windows.

Jay-Jay was drunk already. He was crazy about Bobby he told Eitel, she was a good little girl. She had registered already in a hotel room and would be waiting for them. So they went off together, Jay-Jay stopping long enough to buy a bottle, and then they went on to meet her. As luck would take it, the hotel where Bobby had rented a room was the one in which Elena had stayed, and with the sad sour bite of memory Eitel was obliged to think of the morning he had come here to pick up clothing for Elena.

As soon as he was introduced to Bobby, he was convinced it was a mistake. If he had a type, Bobby was certainly not it; her manner seemed to say, "I wish we didn't have to meet under such circumstances." This would be another of Faye's grim jokes; Eitel had specified what he wanted: a hard girl with brassy sex and basic indifference. So Faye had complied by giving him Bobby.

The three of them sat around in the hotel room trying to chat, Jay-Jay passing the bottle while they dipped into a melting bowl of ice cubes. It had been idiotic to meet here; they should have spent an hour first in some bar getting to know one another but Eitel had dreaded the thought of being seen.

Bobby was shy. She would keep her head turned to Jay-Jay, talking to him about friends Eitel did not know, saying Larry had lost a roll at poker dice, and Barbara was pregnant again, and Dan was marrying a bar girl in the capital, and Lillian had her band organized but no good contracts—who wanted a lady clarinet player?—and on it went; Vance was doing female impersonations and Renee had another crush. Eitel listened, saying a word whenever he could, watching Jay-Jay with amusement for Jay-Jay was so warm, he liked Bobby so much, he was so considerate, he would cluck his tongue at other people's troubles and give Bobby passing compliments. "You're the loveliest, sweetie," Jay-Jay said, and Bobby smiled at Eitel, "I adore that man," she told him.

"It's a romance," Jay-Jay said and looked at his watch. He would have to be moving on, he declared. Eitel knew where; in the course of an evening Jay-Jay might arrange three or four such introductions for Marion. As he was about to leave the room, he motioned to Eitel. "Sweetie, you got to excuse us," he said, "Charley's promised me a tip on a horse."

"If it's a good bet, let me in," Bobby chimed, and Eitel smiled. "Jay-Jay and I only bet losers," he said.

In the hotel corridor, Jay-Jay swayed slightly. "Charley," he muttered, "she's a good kid, she's all right, Bobby. Only I ought to tell you, she's kind of cold, can't help it, one of those. But you don't have to worry cause she'll do anything you want." In a rapid clinical style, Jay-Jay explained exactly what was 'anything.' Eitel listened with distaste. "Poor Jay-Jay, he's worse than me," Eitel thought, and gave him a farewell tap on the shoulder.

Back in the room Bobby continued to chat in her bright little voice. "Jay-Jay's a wonderful person," she said to Eitel. "Do you know anyone nicer?"

"Hard to say," said Eitel.

"When I get the blues he's always very kind and considerate to me. Sometimes I wouldn't know what to do without him."

"Do you have the blues often?"

"Well, the last couple of months have been very hard. You see I just got divorced a little while ago."

"And you miss your husband?"

"Lt isn't that. He was hard to take. But I don't care how old-fashioned this sounds, you need a man in the house, don't you think so?"

They had to get out of the hotel room, Eitel thought; it was stifling to remain here. "I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?" he said, as he had said once to Elena.

Bobby nodded. "You did, Mr. Eitel."

"Recently?"

"Well, maybe it was two years ago. You see I was an actress. I still am, of course. I think I'm good, really I do, people have said I have talent, but you know, no pull." She sighed. "Anyway, my husband knew a producer who owed him a favor, and so I was able to get an extra card. Once I was an extra in a crowd scene in one of your pictures."

"Which one?" he asked.

"Flood on the River."

"Oh, that," Eitel groaned.

"No, Mr. Eitel, really I think it was a wonderful picture. You're a wonderful director." She looked carefully at him, and then said with energy, "I'm so happy to meet you at last."

She had a personality which was interchangeable with a thousand other actresses. It was obvious she had been taught that an actress must use her personality, and so she was forever using it, forcing her wan face and soft voice into artificial enthusiasm, artificial disgust, artificial gaiety.

"You enjoyed working with me?" he offered.

"It was an awful day for me," Bobby said despondently.

"Why?"

"Well, you see I was such a crazy kid. I mean . . . oh, I don't know, I had all kinds of ideas. I thought if I could get my face in the camera, maybe somebody would recognize me."

"You mean some studio executive would say, 'Who is that girl? Send for her!'"

"That's right." Bobby sipped her drink reflectively. "What a nut I was," she said in a tone which tried to be both cheerful and valiant. "I remember at the end of the day, a woman who'd been an extra for years came up to me and told me not to get up front so much. 'They won't hire you, honey, if your face gets too familiar to audiences,' she said to me, and she was right." Bobby laughed nervously. "So, you see, no stardom."

"Unhappily, I'm afraid your friend was right about not working close to the camera if you're an extra." The conversation reminded him of things Elena had said the night he met her, and he felt despondent. How could he ever possibly make love to Bobby? Not one hope of anticipation could he feel.

It was obvious Bobby expected him to make the first move. She was so green. He held out an arm to her, and she put her hand in his, and sat timidly on his lap. After he kissed her, he knew he had to get out of this room. Her lips were stiff and frightened, and her body had a rigidity he understood only too well.

"Look," he said, "couldn't we go someplace else? Hotel beds always look like corpses to me."

She laughed and seemed a little more relaxed. "I don't know," Bobby said doubtfully. "You see, we could go to my house, but it's nothing much. I hate to show you what a mess it is."

"I know it's more pleasant than this place."

"Oh, it's comfy all right, but you see, Mr. Eitel . . ."

"Charley."

"Well, Charley, my two little girls are there."

"I didn't know you had children."

"Oh, yes. They're wonderful kids."

That was the answer, Eitel thought. He would go home with her, he would talk awhile, he would pay her and excuse himself on the plea that the children made him uncomfortable. "Let's go," he said softly.

On the drive across town, she continued to chat. There were times, she told him, when she was sick of everything. She had had such a rotten time in the capital. If she ever got a little bit ahead, she thought she would go back to her home town. She knew a fellow there who still wanted to marry her, children and all; they had been sweethearts in high school. He knew her mother and father who were the sweetest people in the world. Only she had been so stupid, she had married a musician. "That's advice I can give anybody," Bobby said. "Never follow a man who blows a horn."

In her tiny furnished four-room bungalow with its cheap maple furniture, one red sofa and two green armchairs, the spindly overdecorated lamps, and the mounted photographs of her parents and children on the wall, he felt not a great deal better. Bobby was making drinks, the baby sitter had left, and somewhere, probably in the kitchen, she had turned on the radio. Directly across from where he sat was a bird cage with a parakeet. If she ever succeeded as a call girl, she would move to another house, the furniture would be changed, there might even be a maid, but the bird would remain with her. He felt unaccountably sad for Bobby, so sad that surprising tears came to his eyes; only Marion could find joy in making Bobby one of the girls.

She had come back with a drink for him, and because she did not know what to do, she was talking to the bird. "Pretty Patsy, pretty Patsy," she lisped, "do you love me, pretty Patsy?" The bird was silent and Bobby shrugged again. "I never can get him to talk when company's around."

"Let's dance," Eitel said.

She did not dance badly, but still she was rigid. Nothing with her body would come easily. When the number had ended, she sat down on the couch beside him and they began to neck. It was all wrong; she kissed with the tense worried activity of a fifteen-year-old, and it seemed as if their lips never quite met. He would have to get out of here, Eitel told himself again.

At that moment the baby began to cry. "It's Veila," Bobby whispered, and with relief, she sprang away and tiptoed into the bedroom. He hardly knew why, but he followed her and stood beside Bobby as she rocked a one-year-old child in her arms. "She's wet her pants," Bobby said.

"I'll hold her while you change the diaper."

He had always been indifferent to babies, but his mood transformed the child he held in his arms. He passed through one of those drunken moments when years, decades, and lives seem to balance on the sensitive edge of alcoholic wisdom, and all is understood, forgiven, and put away. With whisky, the squire to love, he could love Veila for that instant, see her life as it must be, or see another life, or ten lives, or see himself at the age of one and Bobby as a child and Elena as a child, a little monkey-faced Italian child with brown hair and surprising green eyes, so different, so similar, to the tiny blonde package in his arms. Would Elena be like Bobby in another few years?

Bobby had taken the child from him and was fixing the diaper. She looked up at him in some bewilderment, and he knew to his horror that there were tears in his eyes again.

"Veila had pneumonia last month," Bobby said, "so I have to take special care of her now. God, those doctor bills."

Eitel was mourning the death of the unwritten hero; buried by Freddie; no, buried by himself. All the troubles of the world had been borne by a character in his mind, and now they were borne no longer. "Poor baby, she must have been very sick," he said, and he turned away and went back to the living room. He had to control himself; these were whisky tears. And all the while, tearing as the rupture of flesh tore the thought: when Elena becomes like Bobby, how will men treat Elena?

So from nowhere, or so it must have seemed, he heard himself calling to Bobby, "May I give you a loan?" She had come back to the living room then, and stared at him quizzically, almost warily. "No, look," said Eitel, touching a hand to her cheek, "this is for nothing, this is a loan." And pulling out his wallet, he drew three, then four, then five one-hundred-dollar bills and folded them into her fingers.

She almost squealed. "Why, I could never . . . Charley, I could never pay you back."

"Sure you can. It doesn't matter how long it takes. Even five years, ten years, someday you'll hit it, and I'll be happy to find the money drop in on me just when I need it."

"But I don't understand."

He wondered if he had ever been as sentimental in his life. "No, look," he said again like an adolescent enraged at existence, "it all stinks, do you understand? Let this be a present. That's how things should be. Some people have given me more," he said finally, inarticulately.

He had been ready to go then. At that moment he wanted nothing more than to leave the house, leave the present, leave his minor miracle.

But Bobby was overcome. She would not let him go, and made him sit beside her on the couch.

Glowing from his generosity, he was still doubtful of his motive. "How much I paid to avoid a fiasco," he thought, and then gave himself up to necking with Bobby again. It was better than before, she wanted to please him, and so, inevitably, they set about transacting the prearranged business of the evening. But it did not go quite so smoothly as that, for with an air close to hysteria she begged him to allow her a few more minutes, and the sight of her thin boy's body, and her grateful inept kisses damped any pleasure he might have felt. Then it became necessary to choose one of the items from the schedule of crossed pleasures Jay-Jay had offered, and with the aid of that, and the aid of every obscene memory Eitel could call to crutch, they succeeded the two of them, he was able to embrace her, and for five minutes, the sweat on his back, the sweat on his face, he pretended to be happy and finished with a smile.

Bobby was delirious, or at least she presented the facsimile of delirium. Something had happened to her apparently, a tremor of sensation perhaps which had wormed free out of a frozen wilderness of fears. "Oh, you're wonderful," she said, "it was marvelous." And on she went, babbling a little, trying by language to swell that tremor into a lion of passion. It was impossible, he thought, he could not have been wrong. Almost to the end she had borne him with a cramped smile and eyes which she turned away. He had never felt so lonely in his life as when he had made love to her, and now she was trying desperately to believe they had had a triumph. "Darling Charley," she was saying, kissing his eyelashes, fondling his hair.

She was tender as sticky jelly, and it took him half an hour to leave her. At the end, just as they kissed good night, Bobby looked at him with shining eyes and said, "When will I see you again?"

"I don't know. Soon," he said, and hated himself for a liar.

When he got back to his house, he showered with a rough washcloth, and took Elena in their bed, hugging her to his chest with clenched fists until she purred with pleasure that he was breaking her, and he gave himself into her at climax, sobbing, "I love you, I love you," her body a cove where he could bury himself. Then he had taken a sleeping pill and drifted into unconsciousness until Faye's call had come.

Now it was morning and everything in the last three weeks took its turn at tormenting him. He suffered these sleepless hours the way men with shattered bodies fight for that time which will be the end of their pain. So Eitel fought for the minute when Elena would awaken and he would no longer be alone. But while he waited, he could only think that if Elena had lied to him the way he had lied to her, had been with another man, washed, and come to his bed, he could have strangled her. It was ridiculous. One did not compare the pleasure he had found with Bobby to the pleasure Elena gave him. Still, someone watching Bobby and himself might have thought he found pleasure; considerably, he had uttered sounds of enjoyment. That was meaningless, it came from him, but the thought of Elena uttering such sounds with another man . . . that was odious. Abruptly, he recognized how completely he must own her.

"I'm willing to grant her no life at all," Eitel said to himself, and with a sickly perspiration could only think, "How I'm degenerating, oh how I'm degenerating."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Munshin was telling the truth. He had talked with me for a few hours in the roulette casino where Lulu and I spent our time during our trip away from Desert D'Or. Perhaps we came back the night Eitel was visiting Bobby; it is certain at any rate that I missed nearly all of what was happening, and I knew nothing about Eitel's new script nor that Collie had seen him so often.

I was much too busy with my own concerns. Lulu had suggested one afternoon that we get into her car, pack a picnic supper, and travel several hundred miles across the state line to her favorite gambling hole. Since Lulu did not know how to drive below ninety on the desert roads, the picnic was not so impossible as it sounded. As things developed, however, we ate the sandwiches she brought, at two in the morning, and we would have needed a fifty-gallon drum of coffee to supply us while we stayed.

I had gone ready to gamble. The fourteen thousand dollars with which I had come to Desert D'Or was half spent already, and I had the idea it was time to make more. I was ready to win a lot or to lose a lot, and I did both before we were through. We arrived with only a few hundred dollars between us, but Lulu had standing credit, and I borrowed from it until I knew we were going to stay and then cashed in my account from the bank in Desert D'Or.

For twelve days we gambled, and we might have gambled for thirty more if Collie had not come to distract us, betting through the long working day of the gambler, from ten at night to nine in the morning, and for that stretch of time there could have been a heat wave for all we knew or an earthquake or even a war declared; we worked all night, we tried to sleep through the day, and at mealtime Lulu would be counting the serials on dollar bills to find her lucky number for the night while I would be busy covering page after page with astronomical computations in order to discover a system for roulette. I came up with one just as I was beginning to lose interest, and it was exactly the system of a man who is bored; with thirty thousand dollars of capital, I could be certain of making a hundred dollars a night, or at least almost certain; the odds were two hundred and fifty to one in my favor; but if I lost, I lost everything, all thirty thousand. I explained it to Lulu, and she made a face. "You have ice water for blood," she snapped at me.

154

Lulu played like a one-man band on amateur hour. She would have her lucky number or two numbers or ten, and she would play her choice only long enough to desert it and pick another, any number, the count of people at the table, or the amount of buttons on the croupier's vest, and then she would swoop off into red and black or odd and even, make a stand on double-zero, and come running back to two, three, seven, or eleven, as if a pair of dice were interchangeable with a roulette cloth, cleaving to two and three during what she called the 'evil hours,' seven and eleven when things went well. If she won a sizable sum she squealed with delight, if she lost she groaned, and sometimes she was so preoccupied and confused, for she could never remember the odds, nor for that matter, I often suspected, even the idea of the game, that a winning bet on red would accumulate for several rounds until she finally discovered it with a gasp of surprise, or just as often never knew how much she had finally lost because she forgot her chips too long. With it all, she tipped the croupiers lavishly, and to everybody's irritation would come out ahead more often than not. Watching her gamble made one believe in the lion and the lamb, or the wild boar who turns away from the crippled rabbit. Roulette was her passion Lulu would declare to anyone who listened, but she gambled with the passion of a child for a toy, or for a dessert which must be eaten ritually every meal for a week, and then is pushed away with indifference.

She certainly irritated me. I was professional no more than Lulu, but I had talent—at least I thought so—and I was more than serious. Ten hours of gambling was hard work to me, and I was forever occupied with a dozen calculations at once, listing every number which had come up on the wheel that night and marking it as red or black, odd or even, adding a Roman numeral to denote its third of the cloth, trying all the while amid the confusion of five half-developed systems to determine how the imbalance was moving; was it red now or was it black which must be ready to have its run or the law of averages would be sadly roiled?

I would become aware of myself every once in a while in that tremendous room with its glittering chandeliers of Louis the Fourteenth hovering in no apology above the fluorescent lights of the gaming tables while the modern bar that bordered one wall of the room was invariably deserted except for the tourists who came to get drunk, to drop their thirty dollars, and to sport the worried leer of the Anglo-Saxon in a tropical brothel. Then, looking at the hundreds of people in the room, listening to the hush, and the dry popping sounds of the ball jiggling its route against the wheel, I would be startled to discover myself, as if I were suddenly without clothes, and for a moment I would seem incredible, life would seem incredible. For money was usually tangible to me, I had had so little of it, and even in Desert D'Or, with the uneasiness of the rube who has become rich, it was not a casual thing for me to buy a sixty-dollar jacket or order a five-dollar meal. Once, it is true, I had swept that poker game in Tokyo, but I was sick then, I was ignorant, I was lucky as Lulu, and now with a coldness that frightened me whenever I became aware of the size of the gaming room rather than the spin of the wheel, I would put up twenty dollars, forty dollars, eighty dollars, and double it several times again, the sums no more than numbers on my pad, the sign of talent; among all the people each of us contains within himself, there was the cold gambler in me.

Nonetheless, despite my systems, despite my talent, I ended by losing a lot of money. There could be no point in describing it with full detail nor all the emotions I would feel afterward on winning nights and losing nights. The common denominator was the same; I wanted to go back for more, convinced if I had won that my new system had proven itself, convinced even more if I lost that the mistakes I had made were now understood and the error would be avoided tomorrow. Win or lose, within my mind I always controlled the situation, I was superior, I understood; that is the sweet of gambling; and so real description is unnecessary—all gambling which goes on for more than an hour is the same. Why give the facts and omens and convictions and superstitions with which my seven thousand dollars became five, and the five, eight, and how eight thousand dropped to three, nor the fantastic hours of that night when three thousand became ten thousand and sank to five again. What is important is that I came back to Desert D'Or with a third of the money I owned when I left, the passion for gambling spent with the cash.

But while it lasted, what a passion it was. Lulu and I shared adjoining rooms in an air-conditioned hotel, and there were heavy drapes on the window to give us night when it was day. Those rooms were made for sleeping, and sleep we did, swimming through the day in the light restless slumber of people suffering from fever. In all those days we did not make love once; Lulu could have been a goat or a wagon of hay for all I cared, and she cared less. We lived together, we ate together, we gambled together, and we slept next to one another, but there was a distance between us which temporarily nothing could have brought together. We were not even roommates whose habits had become irritating, we were no more than strangers sharing by lot the upper and lower berths of a Pullman, so concerned with our destination that such annoyances as sticking a foot in the other's nose were often received with a gritty smile. We had never been so polite to each other.

As I have said, it could have gone on for a month, but Collie distracted us. It happened that he came to look for me after we had been gambling only a few days, and nothing he said at the time seemed very important. A stranger might as well have approached and said I had inherited a million dollars. "Fine," I would have answered, "but have you noticed that seventeen has come up three times in the last twelve plays? There's a fortune to be made on that number."

Collie put it very directly; he told me that once I gave the rights, a signature, no more, he would give me ten thousand dollars. When I failed to understand and showed disinterest, the figure by degrees was doubled. Lulu teased him that night and I said vaguely that I never decided anything in a hurry. He gave up at last without even my promise to give an answer by the end of the week, and after he left we forgot about him for a day or two, but I heard him later on the phone to Lulu, and whatever they talked about, and I can guess that I was the subject, he made his impression. Lulu began to sweat free of the long fever; she was becoming critical of me again. By the night we left, we were tired of gambling; something had superseded it and filled its space.

On the drive home, there was a quarrel. "Naturally you don't want to think about the future," Lulu complained.

There was nothing I wanted to think about less.

"You're wishy-washy, do you know that, Sergius?"

"I don't want a stupid movie made about me."

"A stupid movie! If you really loved me, you'd want to get married instead of treating me this way. With twenty thousand dollars you'd have financial security."

"A lot of security," I said. "Twenty thousand dollars would buy your toenail polish for the year."

She was so angry she ran the car on the shoulder of the road and had to twist it back. "You don't love me," she said. "If you did, you would listen to me." We continued the quarrel dispiritedly for half the drive. Then Lulu had an inspiration. "You're right, Sergius," she said, "twenty thousand dollars isn't enough."

"Bird-feed," I said airily, cautiously.

"But I know a way you could make more."

"How?"

Her face became as hard and practical as though she were considering which dress she should wear. "Sugar, I want you to tell me all over again exactly what H.T. said to you the day he invited you to the party."

"Oh, now look!"

"Sergius, I'm serious. You tell me every word."

While I spoke, she listened with a little air of triumph, nodding her head at certain details. "Of course that's it," she announced when I was done. "I tell you, Sugar, I can see right into H.T.'s mind. What he's thinking is that you could act in your own picture. You could be the star." She put a hand on my arm as I started to mock her. "Now, be serious!" she cried. "It's obvious H.T. is behind Collie in wanting to make this picture. H.T. likes you. He thinks you have sex appeal."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. If we play our cards right, H.T. will agree to everything you want." She nodded her head affirmatively at the thought. "If you're a star, Sugar, then we each have financial independence, and we can get married."

"I don't know how to act," I said firmly.

"There's nothing to learn." And she proceeded to give me a talk. The way Lulu described it, nothing was easier than to act in a movie. A good director would draw out my qualities. "If you're wooden," Lulu said, "he'll make it seem like sincerity. If you're self-conscious, he'll know little tricks to make you seem very intense. And if you ruin a scene . . . well, you know, they always shoot protection. With the way they work, you could walk through the part."

"This is ridiculous," I told her. "I don't want to be an actor."

"Wait till Collie gets ahold of you," she said.

Lulu was not wrong. Two days after we returned to Desert D'Or, the producer flew down to see us, and slammed me into a conference. To my chagrin, for I had always assumed people found it hard to understand me, Collie wasted no time in dissecting my character. "Look, Sergius," he said in the first hour we were alone, "I know you, and I'm going to tell you something frankly. You're a sick boy. You've got many qualities of character which could amount to something, honesty, integrity, courage, desire, heart"—he rattled these off like a recipe—"but they don't mesh. You don't click. Nothing's working in you." On he progressed, touching with insight the center of my apathy. "I'm older than you, Sergius," he said, "and I can tell what's at the bottom of your refusal. You're afraid things will change. You're not happy with Lulu now and yet you hold on to her. What really scares you is that one of these days she's going to take off for the capital on her new picture and hook up with some other guy. You know something? I don't blame her. You're afraid to move back, you're afraid to move forward. You just want to sit still. Only it's not possible. How much money do you have left?"

"Three thousand," I found myself admitting.

"Three thousand. I can see you pinching it, trying to keep up with Lulu, hoping the fellow next to you will pick up the check. You can carry three thousand, maybe you can carry it ten weeks. And then what? You're broke. Do you understand that? What are you going to do next? Bum around here, take a job as a car-hop? Kiddo, don't look smug. I'll blast your smugness. Do you know what it's like to go to a new town without a cent?"

"Yes, I know what it's like," I said.

"Once you knew it, but now you've had a taste of something else. You think you're going to enjoy goosing waitresses when you've been boffing the best? Brother, I can tell you, once you've been bed-wise with high-class pussy, it makes you ill, it makes you physically ill to take less than the best. There's nothing worse," Munshin promised.

He had succeeded in making a puncture. For the first time the four thousand dollars I had lost became real to me, real as anger or pain, and I saw their loss directly as the loss of future time. Munshin had guessed well; I had been spending. I never knew how, more than two hundred dollars a week, and by his words, weeks disappeared, fifteen weeks, sixteen weeks, I was aware suddenly with a sensation close to vertigo that I had very little time left at the resort, and the decisions I had postponed and ignored and tried to forget were closer than breath itself, actually constricting my throat.

Now, Munshin changed his tactics. Like an advertising executive, he worked first with fear and then with hope. "I know how you feel about the movie industry," he said. "You think it's phony, you don't like the movies they make, the lies they hand out. Should I tell you something? It's disgusted me, too. There's hardly a day goes by I'm not disgusted to the breaking point. It disgusts every man in the industry who wants to be a part of something serious and important and progressive. These people exist, they work, they make up three quarters of the industry, four fifths, and you'd be amazed at the quality of some of the product. I tell you the industry is more than just an entree into something ridiculous and corrupt. It's a chance to fight, an opportunity to grow!" And Munshin threw out his arms like an expanding world creating space. "Sergius, you've been thinking along the lines that you'd be trading your soul for a bag of loot. You're a child," he growled at me. "This is your opportunity for maturity, kiddo, and dignity and importance. So you start as an actor. I don't like actors myself. But you can go into anything from there, production, direction, writing, culture, important people, opportunities. What the hell do I have to break my heart arguing with you for? Sergius, I know you. Get yourself in gear and you could be a full-fleshed intelligent articulate mature guy benefiting the world, that's your type if you give yourself a chance. What, do you think it's pure in any other line of work? Why, you have no idea of how we're going to show up that orphan asylum where they pushed you around."

This was the one mistake Collie made. Abruptly, without warning to myself, I lost my temper. "Show up that orphan asylum?" I cried. "Munshin, you're a damn liar."

He looked delighted at having aroused an outburst in me, and this made me even more furious. "Progressive? Important people?" I babbled at him. "Serious?"

"Cough it up, kid," Munshin said agreeably.

"It's all crap," I shouted. "War, things like that, marriage, movies, I mean take religion," I said, not even knowing how that had come into it, "suppose there's a God and imagine what *He* thinks seeing people get in the same room and get down on their hands and knees and pray away, I mean just look at the idea of sticking people in prison or an orphan asylum, did you ever think of how ridiculous that is, I mean a man and a woman for instance making legal arrangements to live together all their lives?" I must have sounded insane to him. "You're full of crap, too, Munshin."

"Oh, oh, oh, another anarchist," Munshin groaned. He stretched out his arms. "You know something?" he asked, beginning all over again, "anarchists make talented people. Maybe I feel the way you do, deep down. I know Charley Eitel does."

His easy conversational voice made me seem ridiculous and hysterical. I felt weak before him. "Have a drink, Sergius," Munshin smiled, and I realized with humiliation how common it must have been for him to witness such tantrums as mine.

After hope comes sentiment. So the world has been sold ten times over. "The only real appeal I know," Munshin said, "is to your best instincts. I think you ought to act in this picture, but there's something bigger than that. You can help a friend."

"Eitel?" I asked. I resented the way I continued the conversation as if nothing had happened.

"Exactly. He's the only man who could direct you properly. I know I could sell H.T. on that. Do you understand what it would mean to Eitel?"

"He has his own work," I said.

"Nonsense. I know Charley Eitel better than I know myself. Do you realize the talent he has? I wish you could have seen how Eitel at his best could take mediocre actors and weak scripts, and make films that had a beauty to them. His talent is rotting away now because his talent is to work with people and be loved and admired. You could put him back where he belongs."

"Does he feel this way?"

"Sure he does, even if he wouldn't admit it. I understand him better than he understands himself. Everything is closed to him now. You can't appreciate the interrelations of film-making, the finances. H.T. has influence enough to black-list him at any studio in the world, and it's only Herman Teppis who can lift that black list. You're the boy I can use to convince H.T. that he should take Eitel back."

"It wouldn't be that easy."

"Everything is easy," Munshin said. "When H.T. wants a picture, and I can make him want this picture, he'll cut off his arm before he'll be stopped. He'll even accept Eitel."

"Could you promise that in writing?"

"Did you just come out of the woods?" Collie asked. "Fifty lawyers would have a stroke. You can trust me. I want Eitel back even more than you."

"I'd like to talk to him," I said.

"Go ahead. Ruin it. Charley Eitel is all pride. You think you can go to him and ask him what he wants? You got to beg him to do your picture."

"I don't know what to say," I said finally.

"Say yes. You'd agree right now if you weren't so stubborn that you hate to contradict yourself."

Munshin had to be back in the capital by morning, and at last he quit me, shaking his head in disgust, and leaving the promise that he would call me. I can say that he kept his word. Between Lulu's emotional blackmail and Collie on the phone with daily arguments each more ingenious than the last, I had hardly a moment in which to think. They had succeeded in piercing my apathy.

I had been ready more than once to sign any papers Munshin might hand me, but it was not stubbornness alone which kept me back. There was always the Japanese K.P. with his burned twisted arm who would mock: "And I? Am I going to be in the movie? Will they show the scabs and the pus?" The closer I came to accepting the contract, the more he taunted me, and all through that evening when Munshin was most convincing, most logical, and most overbearing, my attention would desert him for the fifteen-year-old Japanese boy. "His arm is healed now," I would think, and know I had made a mistake. For if his arm were healed, the burning villages were not, and so Collie would go on, or Lulu would go on, painting my career with words, talking about the real world, the marvelous world, while I was thinking that they were wrong, and the real world was subterranean—a wilderness of caves where orphans burned orphans.

Despite what Collie had said, I ended by going to see Eitel. I had to; Munshin had succeeded in so confusing the argument for me that I no longer knew if it were more selfish, more egoistic, more wrong, to refuse him than to sell my expensive history to Supreme Pictures.

Eitel refused to talk about it at first. "You see," he said gently to me, "I promised I wouldn't mix in it."

"To Collie?" I asked in surprise.

"It doesn't matter whom," he said.

"You're my friend," I told him. "Don't you think this is more important to me, and to you, than it is to Collie?"

He sighed. "All I can do is make the alternatives a little clearer."

"Tell me. What kind of movie do you think would come out of this?"

"Sergius, let's not be naïve," he snapped. "It will be a bad picture and it will have lots of beautiful photography about airplanes shooting one another down. What kind of pictures do you think Collie makes anyway?"

"And what about the plans Collie has for you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I know those plans," Eitel said. "I've been a little tempted, I have to admit that. If this picture were actually to be made, and they wanted me for it, I wouldn't have an easy time deciding." He held a finger to his nose as though to indicate he wished to say more. "Sergius, you can't use my position in this to influence you. I want your promise you won't use me as the excuse. You see, you'll be doing me no favor." Then he stared into my face for a long time, and he seemed almost stern. "Are you sure," he said at last, "that you don't really want the money . . . and the notoriety . . . and the career?"

As he said this, I felt a touch of nausea. It was no more than a trace of discomfort in my stomach, and an instant when perhaps I felt faint, but I had one of those intimations of what violence and hunger and sheer simple greed had been stifling in me for so many years, and it was as if deep inside me two powerful hands wrestled each other forward and back, locked in some ridiculous test of strength which left room for nothing else. "You see," Eitel was saying into my ear, "it took me years to realize I wanted such things very much, and that was why I stayed in the capital."

I could hardly answer him. I sat there sick at what I had found, and enraged at myself. "You're right," I said, and I suppose my voice shook. "I guess I was trying to put it off on you."

Somehow, I had known Eitel would help me to refuse the offer. I left his house liking him more than I ever had, and on the way back, as my emotions calmed and I knew my decision was made, I discovered that I was happy. I had the satisfaction of feeling pleased with myself; it is so good to refuse something which other people covet. I knew that really my decision mattered very little; if my movie were not made then others would be made, but at least I would not be a piece of that entertainment by which life is cheated to the bone. I had an inkling then of the vanity I shared with Eitel. Each of us judged ourselves very severely for strong in us was the pain that we must be perfect. We felt that we were better than most and therefore we should act better. When we were less than we demanded of ourselves, less good, less talented, less pure, less noble, we suffered the responsibility that because we had failed, so the world and mankind had also failed. It is an enormous vanity.

By evening, my fear had returned, physical fear with a dry throat and a nervous heart. I was very scared and there was no check on fear because I knew my mind was made up, and I would not change it now. Yet with my anxiety there was also pride, for I knew as well that I could take what came; not stoutly, not courageously, but I could take it. There was that, and I was proud to feel it.

I even forced myself to tell Lulu that night. I had expected anything from her, sullenness, tantrums, quarrels, perhaps even the announcement that she would not see me any more. Instead she surprised me. She was quiet for a long while and then she said, "You really didn't want to do it, did you, Sergius? I knew, honey. I knew you were unhappy."

At that moment I was filled with emotion for her. She looked so small, so blonde, so disappointed and frightened, and yet she would not try to argue with me. Suddenly I felt that Lulu was very frail and I loved her tenderly. The animosity she had made me feel for so long was gone. She had given me her frailty and I could love her; how can there be love without frailty? All I knew was that I wanted to give her all I had, and could have cursed I had so little.

"I love you, darling," I said to her.

Tears came into Lulu's eyes. "I love you, too," she whispered. "I know that now."

"Oh, listen," I said, "listen, let's get married."

"How?" she said hopelessly.

"No, look darling, it's not that hard. Let's go away. Give it up. Give up the movies. Maybe you can act on the stage, and I'll do something, I swear I will."

Lulu began to cry. "It's not possible, Sergius," she said.

"It is. You hate the capital. You told me so."

"I don't really hate it," she murmured in a little voice.

"Then we'll live where you say. But marry me."

She tried to nod. This was exactly what she had wanted not even a month ago, but once we have wanted more, we can hardly want less. "It couldn't work, Sergius."

162

I knew it couldn't. While we sat holding one another, I knew she was right. Not even in the most enthusiastic moment could it seem possible. "What will we do?" I cried out.

"Kiss me, darling," she said.

We hugged fiercely, and she kissed my eyes and nose with those wet desperate kisses grief always chooses. "Oh, Sergius, let's just go on like this for a while and not worry, and then we'll see."

What she said gave me fear again, and it was tangible fear, as if I had only to leave her room, and the burned corpses of half the world would lie tumbled outside the door. We started to make love, and I could not think of her nor of myself nor of anything but flesh, and horrible images crowded my mind, bursting flesh, rotted flesh, flesh hung on spikes in butcher stalls, flesh burning, flesh gone to blood.

I tried to banish these pictures but it was not possible. All the while Lulu and I were caressing each other, I could think of nothing else, and although to the last I tried, I knew there could only be failure. Her body itself was frightening to me. "No, I can't, I just can't tonight," I said to her out of my panic, and she must have sensed it already for she did nothing at first except to touch my face, easily, gently, without demand.

"My poor baby," Lulu said, and held me against her breast. "What's the matter, my darling? I do love you."

I had a horror I would burst into tears at that moment and I could hardly trust myself to speak. We could not have been inches apart and yet I had the feeling I must swim to her across a great distance. "Everything's the matter," I said, and perspiration covered my body.

"Tell me, tell me, I don't care what it is."

I did tell her, or at least I tried; for half an hour, perhaps it was an hour, perhaps more, I told her down to the last detail all the things I had never told anyone else, the operations I had flown and their names, those despicable names military press agents would attach to them until they sounded like night-club acts, "Operation Castanet," and "Punchbowl," and "Shovel-down," and "Sweet Sue," and how beautiful the fires had been which our planes sowed, and how fierce was jellied gasoline; a blob on a man and the man was the fire, fire hot enough to melt the skull. So I told her what I imagined the corpses to look like for we were never encouraged to visit the front, but I could know how Oriental villages we had bombed appeared on the following day, staring their blind eye into the air like the sour black ash of a garbage dump, and all the while we flew and we would drink and there were all the geisha houses and the poker games and the excitement of being up at four in the morning ready for a flight, and the interminable conversations about parties and girls and the endless arguments about the technical performances of airplanes and which was better, and what was a career in the Air Force. I tried to tell it all to her, about the Japanese K.P. and how I came to hate the fliers I knew, until finally there had come the time when I could no longer approach the geisha girls,

163

so attentive, so feminine, because flesh was horrible, flesh was the thing one burned in the real world, and in a kind of rage at myself for memory, for delicacy, for conscience's demon, I would cry into the pressure of my brain, "I lack the cruelty to be a man." So I had been without a woman and without love until the night I met her, she had been the first in over a year, and that had meant more, it had meant so much more than anything which had happened to me . . . except that now my sickness seemed to have returned.

"Oh, my baby, oh my darling," Lulu said, "if I could only chase it away." She was a woman to me that night, and as we lay together hour after hour, my fear ebbed, I could feel her body again, I could come to smell it and to taste it and to know it was lovely until the moment when delighted by the curve of her belly, adoring the touch of her hips and so fond of the wink of her breast, I was able to take her again. It was the best night we ever had for I loved her and I think she loved me, and we needed no tricks. We flowed in tenderness into each other, and long afterward lay looking at one another and smiling. "I adore you," I kept whispering to her, and her eyes filled with tears. "I feel like a woman for the first time," she said. Yet, before I left, our mood changed still again. If I had loved her earlier in the evening, I loved her more now, I had never loved her more, and yet it was with bitter love, with a sense of loss, indulgent and very sad. For each of us knew that there was really nowhere to go together after this night.

My instinct was good. By the next day I had lost her somehow. Perhaps my stories were too strong, perhaps she remembered that I still solved nothing for her, perhaps she had never felt anything, but for whatever cause we had certainly lost what we had had. We were close no longer and the delicate sorrowful depression which hangs upon people who still feel emotion and know the emotion is without future, could rarely lift. We did what she had suggested, we went on the way we had before, we even pretended there was nothing the matter. And all the while I mourned our one fine hour.

We made the rounds, we had our little fights, we pretended, we even made love as regularly or irregularly as we had ever done, and all the while we were waiting. The date when she would have to begin work on her new picture drew closer, and as if that were the first of a whole series of dates which meant ends to different things—the day she left for the capital, the day I drew my last money from the bank, the day I would have to leave Desert D'Or—we never talked about it. Once she told me that Teddy Pope and Tony Tanner would be down soon at the resort for publicity photos with her, and she even bothered to explain the movie. The new picture would be a triangle. Teddy Pope was to get her in the end, but through the middle of the film she was to think she was in love with Tony Tanner. "I don't want you to be silly about it," she explained to me. "Naturally, I have to be seen all the time with Tony and Teddy. The studio wants a lot of advance publicity on this picture."

"I guess I won't be seeing much of you then."

"That's so ridiculous. You can be with us all the time. It's just that when they take pictures, it would be better if you sort of dropped into the background."

"I'll carry my trap door," I said bitterly.

"You're just a baby."

When Teddy and Tony arrived, our life changed. Instead of going to Dorothea's, we made a tour of the supper clubs and the night clubs, Teddy serving as escort to Lulu while Tony Tanner and I would follow behind. A week went by which seemed to consist almost entirely of night-club watered whisky, of rumba bands and dim-colored rooms and the curving walls and scalloped arches of Desert D'Or architecture. We made the most unusual quartet. Publicly, the romance between Teddy and Lulu was pronounced again, and there must have been a hundred pictures taken of them staring into one another's eyes, holding hands, or dancing together. Yet once we were seated and no photographers were present, Teddy Pope gave his attention to me and Tony Tanner would go into long conversations with Lulu. At dawn when we separated, Lulu would be alone with me for an hour or two. I had never seen her quite so happy. She was enchanted to be divided into three parts.

"I wonder which girl you like being the most," I said to her after an evening, and she answered too quickly, "The one with you, of course. What a bore that Tony is."

Tony was handsome, of course. He was tall and muscular with dark hair which ran through extravagant waves and he had a dimple in his chin. He was twenty-five but he still walked with an adolescent swagger, and he indulged the aggressive manner of most comedians with little of the humor. I was prejudiced beyond a doubt, but he irritated me. He had the most exaggerated way of speaking. "Hey, boychicks," he would say, "let's play the mouse into the next hole," which was a way of suggesting that we should move on. Lulu laughed at almost everything he said. He had picked up several kinds of jargon and he used them with the vigor of a rug beater. "Hey, Sugar-boy," he would say to me if I attempted to argue with him, "don't panic. Discussion is for squares." To a woman's nervous giggle, he would respond, "Lady, oil that libido." Perhaps it will help to characterize him if I mention that he was quite friendly when I was alone with him. The only half hour we ever spent that way, he was full of admiration I was a flier. "You guys," he said, nodding seriously, "I mean, you really had it tough. I went overseas on an entertainment junket so in my own small way I know what it is."

"Yes," I said.

"It makes me feel ashamed and like a nothing when I talk to guys like you."

"I understand you know Marion Faye," I cut him short.

"That bastard. A couple of bimbos I used to bang around started to work for him, so the word's out I pimped. That's the kind of thing that happens just when you're starting to make it big in the industry."

I hated to give anything to him in conversation. "You want to make it big, don't you?" I asked.

He looked at me as though I were a moron. "What else?" he asked. Then his mouth turned. "I never will, though. I'll never make it, laddie."

"Why?"

"I got a scandal. There was this screwball I used to live with, and she was nuts about me. I told her to hang up, and you know what? she killed herself. What a break. They say I drove her to it."

The moment Tony Tanner was not alone with a person, his manner would change. Before an audience, he was always on the attack. He and Lulu would have fancy exchanges. "You're a bland boy," she tried once on him.

"Bland? Honey, I'm mellow."

Lulu laughed. "I bet you faint on the doorstep."

"Your sweet little doorstep?" Tony fingered his hair. "Just let me in, and I'll demolish the house." He spoke so loudly that people at the neighboring tables turned around in bewilderment. Tony waved casually to them. "My audience."

"Oh, God," Teddy Pope groaned. It was his habit to sit morosely with us, unbearably bored.

"What's the matter?" said Tony, "you suffering?"

"I wish you were a success already," Pope drawled. "It would make things more relaxing."

"I have news for you," Tony said, "you know how much fan mail I got last week?"

Teddy yawned and turned away. "It's such a pity you're afraid of me," he whispered in my ear. His manner toward me went through several mutations. On the first evening he had teased me. "You're still a shy boy, I see," he would say. Then he would yawn again. "Forgive me. I forget you're in love."

Things improved a little. After a few nights he ceased to harass me and was even distantly friendly. "When you're as old as I am," he said once, "you'll understand that romantic love is only for people like me. You can't have love unless it's against the conventions of society."

In the meantime, somehow or other, Tony and Lulu were talking about Messalina. "Messalina had nothing on you, mouse," Tony was saying.

"I like you, Tony," said Lulu. "You're so crude."

"I'm lewd. Try me."

That was about the way it went. To my chagrin I discovered after several days that gossip in Desert D'Or had placed Tony in Lulu's bed, and Teddy in mine. "Now, that we're lovers," Teddy said to me with a grin one night, "let me warn you that I have a bad character." He made a play of telling me the story of his life. "My mother's a very sad person," Teddy said. "Father died when I was just a kid, and then she was always introducing me to a new uncle." He smiled. "Today, what I would like is for something to happen where I could be true to myself. A moment of dignity. You understand."

"You don't mean it," I said to him.

Teddy looked at me without affectation. "Sergius, you don't like me," he said.

"I don't feel anything one way or another."

"Yes, you do. I make you uncomfortable. I make a lot of people uncomfortable, but that's no reason for them to feel superior to me."

You're right, I said to him. I'm sorry.

"Are you really sorry?"

"Yes," I said. "Everybody has the right to make love the way they can." I meant it seriously, but it must have sounded condescending to Teddy. He exhaled smoke in my face, and said, "I hate to carp. But for some reason you bring it out in me."

"All right, kids, break it up," Tony Tanner bawled.

For a week the four of us endured each other, and then it was time for Tony and Teddy to go back to the capital. Lulu was in a bad mood the night they left. I took her afterward to one of the night clubs but she was frightfully restless. "I couldn't stand Tony," she said. "It's the reaction setting in. I hate his vulgarity, don't you, sugar? He makes me vulgar too. That's what's so disgusting."

In the following nights we returned to The Hangover. The routine was picked up again. We sat and listened to Dorothea, we played the game of Ghost, and we heard the words of Martin Pelley forever telling us how perfect was Dorothea. There was a change in Lulu, however. Her rudeness to me had increased, and she was listless in bed. A depression complete as a fog bank settled over her.

To change Lulu's mood, Dorothea hired a projectionist one night, and we were shown two of Lulu's movies. As films they were bad, and Lulu's acting was bewildering. There were a few scenes where she created the character required by the plot, there were others where she was herself, and there were many scenes where she exhibited facets new to me. Yet she created something other than the picture, and the creation was a triumph for her; she was more beautiful than she had ever seemed before. A rather extraordinary creature somewhere between girl and woman danced through the film, eminently desirable and not without magic. She implied a naïve chastity which cajoled a man to create its opposite. Her husky little voice was orchestrated through a series of private humors. I sat beside her in the den while the film was projected, and felt that she watched a vision. Little sounds were uttered from her throat, her lips opened and closed, her body swayed slowly back and forth. She studied herself with an admiration, a pain, and a kind of awe so intense she seemed still to be engrossed long after the nine-foot shadow of herself had ceased to move within the vault of the screen.

She took a drink afterward, she listened with a half-smile to the praise of Dorothea's friends, she remembered to thank them, she even managed to stay for another half hour. When we got home, she was hysterical.

87—Deer Park 10/12/24 T. R. Lining (Rinehart) No. 1144

"It's awful, it's awful," she wept.

"What's awful?" Before my eyes I could still see that silver image of Lulu, more troubling to her, more real, than any person she had ever known.

"Oh, Sergius," she cried later, "for the rest of my life I have to go downhill."

As in all hysterical moments, too much seemed to happen at once. The phone was ringing. It was Tony Tanner calling from the capital. Lulu sobbed into the mouthpiece, she hung up, she wept again. After half an hour of soothing her, of cajoling and comforting, she said in a broken voice, "Sergius, you have the right to know. I slept with Tony Tanner."

"But where? When?" I cried aloud, as if to learn that were most essential of all.

"In a telephone booth."

Saying these words, she became helpless with grief. He had humiliated her, she managed to tell me. "I'll never be anything good," she wept into the darkness for I had turned off the lights and sat beside her, smoking a cigarette by the edge of the bed.

Next day she left Desert D'Or and went to the capital. She had to be there for her picture she told me. Her picture was not scheduled to start for another ten days, but it was urgent that she leave. For a week I tried to reach her by telephone, but she never answered the messages and she was always out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One night while they were lying in bed, Eitel happened to notice that Elena's thighs were beginning to show the dimpled hollows of fatty tissue. It was the only blemish upon her skin, and yet it depressed him deeply. Afterward, he could not take his eyes away. Like a child fascinated by the deformity of a cripple, he studied the blemish whenever she was not aware of his attention, thinking with a pang that Italian women aged quickly. In a few years, Elena would no longer be young. Like so many ripe women she would spoil into middle age too soon. He had to let her go, he would tell himself. There was no future with him, and she had left only a few years of youth.

How he hated himself. He would look for comfort in the thought that no one but himself would be so scrupulous in their concern for Elena nor feel such a sense of responsibility. But, then Eitel was forced to remind himself that it was he who had begun the affair and made it what it had become and therefore he could not escape it. Lying with Elena's body next to his—the discomfort of sleeping in the same bed now chafed his nerves so acutely that she had only to turn over in her sleep and he would shift with guilty unrest—Eitel would think in the darkness, and he could almost weep. Whatever would become of her? When she loved she kept nothing with which to bargain and therefore she would always lose. There would be so many men after him, so many loves, each more impossible than the one before. If she never grew mature, there would be drink or even dope—no need to become melodramatic, he would reprove himself—and yet what else for her? a tender middle-aged woman who would look at children with tears and drudge through life as a waitress? Tears from his own eyes wet his face and with revulsion he fought his sorrow for he realized that this preview of her future was tricked into being by the end of a film he had made years ago. But, still, what would become of her? and once again he was filled with compassion and writhed because the compassion was for the image he had created of her in his mind. Toward the body sleeping beside him he felt nothing. That body merely hindered his limbs, he could not really believe in the painful existence of that body.

16-9

Always, he felt her desperation. She slept restlessly; night after night she would awake in terror from a dream and cling to him in the darkness. A robber was trying the door, she would say, or she had heard someone in the kitchen. Every account she read in the newspapers of a rape or the murder of a woman was given its reflection in her fearfulness.

"A man followed me today," she would tell him.

"Of course he did. You're an attractive woman," Eitel would say irritably.

"You didn't see the look in his face."

"I'm certain he wished to cut you into bits and stuff you in a gunny sack."

"That's what you'd like to do to me." She looked bitterly at him. "You're a good-time Charley. You only like me when I'm attractive and in a good mood."

The truth of this piqued him. "You're the good-time Charley," he told her. "When I say nice things, then you love me."

"You're so superior," Elena said. "But you don't know what goes on in my head."

After half an hour, he uncovered her latest conceit. She wished to become a nun.

"Are you crazy?" he asked her. "You'd make a hell of a nun."

"At least a nun is never alone," Elena said.

He was put in depression by her words. It was true, he thought, he ruined everything he touched. If someone lived with him and loved him, he provided them with nothing but loneliness. "Nuns always have company," Elena said in a stubborn voice.

A few days later she commenced to torture herself by wondering whether to cut her hair. She returned to the subject over and over. Would he like it? Did he think she would look well in short hair? What did he think? Should she do it? And Eitel pretending to be concerned, ended finally by being interested too. Perhaps she should cut her hair he was beginning to think, perhaps she would look more chic. Her long hair was certainly one of her best features, but in the course of an evening it became disheveled. It was so difficult for her to be neat.

"Will you still love me if I cut my hair?" Elena would ask, and then decide, "No, you won't."

"If my love depends on so little as a haircut, you might as well find out now," he would say, and wonder if she were right.

"Yes, I ought to find out," she would repeat.

Ever since the night he had come back from Bobby's house, he had known that the effort to free himself of Elena had been premature. So he would say to her over and over with a sadness that haunted him for he had no idea if he were sad for Elena or for himself, "I know that I offer you nothing," as if by saying it frequently enough, he could beg from the demon he saw judging him, one whisper of grace. "You do try," the demon might say, "you are not altogether dishonest." But if he were always telling Elena that he offered her nothing, he was obsessed by quite another idea. On those long sleepless nights, he would think that to be fair he must marry her; it was necessary that someone marry her. Otherwise, he could hear the complaint of all her future lovers: "If Munshin didn't want to, and Eitel didn't want to, then why should I?" Therefore, the only answer was that they should get married, and he would consider just how he would ask her, and how afterward he would arrange the divorce. For he would make it clear to Elena; they would get married in order to be divorced. That way she could probably find somebody else. Even as the former Mrs. Eitel, the divorced wife of an ex-director, it was better no matter how little than Miss Furelli. So he would be married a fourth time—how much did that cost him?—and she . . . she would feel at least that someone had cared enough to give her his name. How idiotic. But it would have meaning for Elena. If she could play her cards right . . . only Elena would never be able to do that, she could not play her cards at all. In a mute fury at her complete incapacity to manage for herself, he would stare at the ceiling and wonder if he would ever be able to induce Elena to see it the way he saw it. So days passed, and Eitel worked on his script, and found no satisfaction at how well it went.

On an afternoon while he was in the middle of work, there was a phone call from Lulu Meyers. Her picture was postponed for a week, and she had decided to visit Desert D'Or for a night. To celebrate, Dorothea was giving her a party. "Charles, you're the one who's absolutely got to be there," Lulu declared. "I think I came back just to talk to you."

Eitel said, "I hear you've broken up with Sergius."

"Yes. It was sort of hectic, but now I think the wounds are healed."

"I'm sure yours are," Eitel said.

"Stinker."

"Did you say the party is being given by Dorothea?"

"Charley, it's perfectly all right. Dorothea really wants you to come. I can't say more, but believe me, there are reasons."

The party was a party like many others. He was not surprised to find The Hangover decorated for the evening, nor to see fifty people jamming the den with the promise of another fifty yet to arrive. Lulu had described the party to him as intimate, but this was merely a convention of Desert D'Or.

She met Eitel and Elena in the foyer and took them directly to Dorothea who was installed on a bar stool, already drunk. "Goddamnit," said Dorothea, "every time I see Charley Eitel at a party, people introduce us."

"Once the two of you get to know each other," Lulu said, ignoring Elena, "it'll be a romance."

"It was a romance," Dorothea said and gave her heavy chuckle. She squinted at Elena and added, "Have a good time, sweetie."

For a while the evening progressed well. They wandered through the den and spent some time talking to Dorothea's husband. Martin Pelley was delighted with Elena and kept drawing Eitel aside to inform him what a wonderful girl he had. "She's a great kid," Pelley said. He called to her. "Elaine," Pelley said, "you're marvelous."

Elena flushed and looked nervously at the press of people in Dorothea's den. "It's a very nice party, I think," she said vaguely.

"You know, I've been wondering about the two of you,"

Pelley went on. "Everybody's wondering. When the hell are you going to get married?"

Elena's face was without expression. Pelley clapped Eitel on the back. "A nice restful girl like this. You ought to marry her."

"She won't have me," Eitel said easily.

"I'm going to get a drink," Elena said, and walked away. He watched her go, and knew her unhappiness. She hated for him to say such things about her, it was his way of saying he did not love her.

"This is a great night," Pelley went on, and bent over to whisper with drunken intensity, "you ought to marry Elena."

"Yes," Eitel said. Pelley annoyed him. He was like every married man who wished to impose the same disaster on everybody else.

At the party they played Ghost, they played charades, a nest of men surrounded the slot machines in the hall between the den and the living room and played them continuously, feeding their quarters underneath the sign which read: Dorothea O'Faye Retirement Fund. Eitel lost sight of Elena. With gusto, he entered a charades game and was easily the best man on his team. After an hour or two—he had lost count—he wearied of it, aware suddenly that he was very drunk. Across the room he could see Elena standing uncomfortably at the edge of a group, but he had no thought of going to her rescue. Later, he watched Marion Faye talking animatedly to her, but it did not bother him. Nothing would come of that.

A man Eitel recognized immediately came up with Dorothea and said hello. The moment he heard the voice, he had a feeling of dread. It was Congressman Bartley S. Crane of the Subversive Committee. Eitel had dreamed about Crane; often in the middle of a nightmare he would see Crane's youthful face with its gray hair and ruddy cheeks, hear the Congressman's soft genial voice. "I'll leave you two characters to discover each other," Dorothea said, and left them alone.

172

"Quite a party tonight," Crane said, "but then Dorothea always gives a good party."

In those days when she had her column, it was regular once a week to find some reference to Crane; he was a great Congressman, Dorothea would assure her readers, and add that of all her friendships there was none she treasured more.

"I'm not familiar with Dorothea's parties," Eitel said. He spoke carefully, concerned to control his emotion.

"You'd like her if you knew her," Crane said intimately. "Dottie . . . well, Dottie's an old trouper. Theater people like you always take to such a girl." A sudden caterwaul of laughter from the charades game made Crane wince humorously. "Mr. Eitel," he said, "I'd like to talk to you. Could we go upstairs?"

Eitel looked at him dumbly. When he could think of no answer to make—there were so many contradictory ones which started simultaneously—he merely nodded, his heart beating, and followed down the hall. They ended in a maid's room upstairs. There was a bottle on the table, and an unopened pack of cigarettes next to the ash tray.

The Congressman sat down on the bed and motioned Eitel to the single armchair in the room. Below them, partially muted, they could hear the eager avaricious noise of the party. "I've been wanting to talk to you for a long time," Crane said.

"So I see," Eitel answered shortly with a glance at the whisky on the table.

Crane leaned forward and looked at him thoughtfully. "Mr. Eitel," he said, "I know you don't like me, but the curious thing is that the day I questioned you, I had the feeling we could be friends under other circumstances."

"Isn't it politically dangerous for you to be seen with me?" Eitel interrupted. His pulse had calmed, but he felt determined to keep his expression grim.

"There's always danger in politics," Crane said, "but I don't believe this would be misunderstood."

"In other words the Committee knows you're seeing me."

"They know I'm interested in your case."

"Why?"

"We all feel it's a shame."

"Oh, this is really extraordinary."

"Mr. Eitel, you probably have the idea we're interested in persecuting people. It happens not to be true. I personally can say I'm concerned enormously with the safety of this country, but none of us wish to hurt people needlessly. You'd be amazed at the rehabilitation we've done with some of the witnesses. You see, it's always been my belief that there's an uplifting element to all work." Crane said this mildly, apologetically.

"At the time you appeared," he went on, "we had information that you were still a card-carrying member. Since that time we've learned otherwise."

"Then why doesn't the Committee say so?"
"Is that a reasonable demand?" Crane asked. "You said some pretty potent things."

"I don't understand why you're interested in me."

"We feel you could help us. If we were to go over some of your former associations with you, it's quite possible you'd discover you have information you're not even aware of."

"Are you offering a secret session?"

"I can't speak for the Committee, but that's part of what I see for you."

It was childish to be pointlessly rude, Eitel thought. The script he had been doing for Collie was too good to be given away on the terms Munshin had drawn. The temptation of a secret session had been in his mind. Perhaps that was why he could not bring himself to be gracious. "Crane, if I should testify," he said, "what will you do about the newspapers afterward?"

"We don't control them. You may smile, but we feel we've been badly misrepresented by them." Crane shrugged. "Perhaps you could get your lawyer or your publicity man to give them a cocktail party. I understand it's a fine way to soften up the press. Of course, I'm no expert on these matters."

Eitel did smile. "Congressman, it's hard to think of you as an amateur."

"Mr. Eitel," Crane said, "if you continue to be resentful, I don't think there's much point in going on with our talk."

"A politician must be used to a few insults," Eitel said, "particularly at the beginning of his career."

Crane chose to laugh. "Why do you resist me?" he said warmly. "I just want to help you."

"I much prefer to help myself," Eitel said, and then looked at him. "You talk to your Committee. It's possible we can make some arrangement provided the session is secret."

"We'll think about it," Crane said, "and let you know. I'm flying back to the East tomorrow, but here's my office number any time you want to phone." He smiled genially, patted Eitel on the back, and told a joke before they went down together to join the party. In the den they separated almost immediately, and Eitel worked himself into a corner and began to drink again. He hardly knew if he were in a good mood or a savage mood.

Marion Faye stopped by to talk. "You lost me a girl," he said.

"Elena?" Eitel asked.

"Bobby." Marion sipped at his cigarette. "I set up a situation with Collie Munshin when he was here last week."

"What does Collie want with her?"

Faye shrugged. "He doesn't. He just wants her as a stock girl at Supreme."

"Oh, the poor kid."

"She'll love it," Marion said. "A career." He smiled with amusement. "You know, Don Beda is here tonight."

"Isn't he supposed to be in Europe?" Eitel said.

Marion ignored this. "Don told me he digs Elena. He wants you to meet his wife and see if you dig her."

174

The other fifty people had arrived by now and the crowd in the den was so pressed together that Faye and Eitel stood breathing in each other's faces. Somewhere, somebody was trying to sing a ditty, and Eitel wondered idly how many meetings besides the one with Crane had been arranged by Dorothea tonight. He hated matchmakers, he thought dizzily, overwhelmed by the crush of people and the amount of liquor he had drunk.

"I thought Beda was divorced," he said to Faye.

"He's married again. You ought to see his chick."

Beda's marriages were famous; no one could understand them. He had the reputation of being the most fabulous satyr in New York, and several times, years ago, Eitel had gone to the parties Beda gave in his penthouse apartment. They were legend; they were parties carried to their logical conclusion; of the hard core who remained after the orchestra had gone and the curious and the college boys in for a week end, everybody who remained slept with everybody. Once, Beda had offered him his wife. Eitel had been out with a girl he hardly knew, and Beda had suggested they switch for the evening. It had been agreeable to everybody, and Eitel always remembered it as a fine time. "I don't know," he said drunkenly, "I think I'd just as soon not see Beda tonight."

That was going to be obviously impossible. Beda was working his way toward him, was shaking his hand. "Charley, so long no see," he smiled.

The odd thing about Beda was that he looked like a satyr. He was handsome and a little heavy with a small scar on his cheek, a black mustache, and eyes which protruded slightly. On the night Beda and he had exchanged women, the girl whom Eitel brought whispered to him, "That Beda's something. He's got a bedroom look." But then people were always talking about Don Beda. He was someone to meet; there was a kind of chic to saying, "I was at one of Beda's parties. Left early of course."

It was obvious Beda knew people talked about him; he carried himself that way and it was his boast that he would invite anyone to his parties. "You could never guess some of the long-shots who've accepted," he would say with a laugh. "It's my money brings them," and then everyone would roar despite the fact that Beda was very wealthy. Eitel had told Elena about him once and she had been fascinated. "What does he do?" she had asked.

"I don't know. They say he owns hotels, or maybe it's night clubs, or it could be shipping lines. He's very secretive. Nobody even knows where he comes from. I've heard him called a Frenchman, a Greek, a Hungarian, and even a Hindu. He speaks perfect English of course." Eitel had laughed. "Probably he was born on a farm in the Middle West."

"That's a lovely girl you have, Charley," Beda was saying.

Eitel nodded. "I hear you're married again." To his annoyance he saw that Marion had slipped away.

175

"There she is," Beda said, pointing to a tall redheaded woman in a red dress with chiseled features and a blank, haughty expression. "I've known them all," he smiled, "but Zenlia is insatiable. What a balling dame. I had to steal her from a certain fat king."

"God, she's beautiful," Eitel said. At the moment, drunk, close to being sick, she seemed as beautiful as any woman he had ever seen, and it was such expensive beauty.

"Well, what gives?" Beda said. More and more through the years he had come to talk this way. When Eitel had first known him, Beda had been very literary and even had a small reputation as an essayist on various esoteric subjects. Ten years ago, fifteen years ago, an evening at Beda's was likely to contain no more than a glimpse of his library, a choice from his record collection, and a bottle from the wine closet. The parties must have been more private then. But the years passed and one was always carried on to a caricature of what one had been.

"Charley, I said, 'What gives?'"

"What do you mean, 'What gives?'"

"I swear you're drunk." Beda smiled at a woman who had been staring at him curiously, and when he winked, she turned away in embarrassment. "Oh God, the tourists," he said. "They're ruining Desert D'Or. Zenlia was tired of New York and I promised her we'd find a ball or two here. 'In the sun?' she asked," and Beda began to chuckle. "Look, Charley, you know we always dig each other's taste in women. I've got a good idea of what Elena's like. It's that coarse sullen thing in her, just a touch of whoriness and lots of energy. Am I right?"

They might have been discussing a famous peasant wine. That was the trouble, Eitel thought, with being a different person for everybody one knew. To Beda he had always been the rare fellow-satyr, the brother-connoisseur, and to a fellow-satyr one cannot say, "Look, old man, I've reformed. You're speaking of the girl I try to love."

"Elena's very complicated," Eitel finally said.

"What kind of talk is that?" Beda looked around the room. "I don't know anybody who isn't complicated. Why don't we skip and go to my place for a ball?" When Eitel did not answer, Beda began to count. "There's the four of us," he said, "you, me, Zenlia and Elena, and then Marion and a couple of his brood, have you seen them here?—one of them's very nice—only Marion could bring a call girl to Dorothea's party, and then I was thinking of Lulu, and any odd jacks I could invite. I'd love to proposition Dorothea, she's gotten so respectable.

"Dorothea wouldn't go."

"How about Lulu?"

"No, Lulu would turn you down too," Eitel said to gain time.

"You positive?"

"She thinks," Eitel said, "about things like raids."

"Well, the rest of us then."

Eitel started to back out of the corner. "Not tonight, Don," he said, "really not."

"Charley!"

What sort of apology could he possibly give. "Don, you'll have to excuse," he said lamely, "but I'm under the weather tonight."

Beda looked at him carefully, eyes twinkling. "You want to make it another night for the four of us?"

There was a card Eitel kept turning over in his pocket. Whose was it, he wondered, and then remembered. It was the card of Congressman Crane. "I don't know, I don't think so," Eitel said. "If I change my mind, I'll give you a ring."

"I'll call *you*," Beda emphasized, and let him slip away. In the upstairs bathroom, all the while Eitel was throwing up he had the kind of mental clarity which comes at such times. Everything had gained its proportion and was very remote. "Do I really believe that I'll say yes to Crane?" he thought to himself and then he retched again and added almost reflectively, "Why do I always look so serious when I'm throwing up?"

Once he got downstairs he pushed his way to the bar and swallowed some water and aspirin before taking a drink. A little businessman from Chicago named Mr. Konsolidoy started to talk to him, and wanted Eitel's advice on how expensive it would be to make a documentary film about his business. It was yoghurt manufacture, Mr. Konsolidoy explained. "I want something cheap but with distinction."

"That's the way to want it," Eitel said and poured another drink. Everything was idiotic, absolutely everything. "Can you smell the vomit on my breath?" he said somberly.

There was a familiar rustle behind him, and Lulu kissed his cheek. "Charley, I've been looking for you all evening. Isn't it wonderful the way Crane took such an interest in you?" Eitel nodded and Mr. Konsolidoy saluted them. "My friend," he said to Eitel with the pride of a courtier who has learned a foreign phrase, "I'll leave you now to romance your doll."

"Who's that?" Lulu said when he had left.

"That's a man who wants me to direct a two-million-dollar epic."

"Charley, I'm glad for you. What's he offering?"

"Half a grand."

Lulu looked at him sideways and then laughed. "You had me fooled," she said with manufactured gaiety and put a hand on his shoulder. "Charley, are you in the mood to listen tonight?" Before he could answer, she had gone on, "I have the feeling that you're the only one who could understand how I feel right now."

"Why me?" he asked.

"Because, Charles, I was very much in love with you once. And you hurt me. It's the people who hurt you, I've always thought, who understand you the best."

He was drunk in a way where nothing seemed to help particularly. It hardly could matter whether he took more whisky or not; he would remain dizzy and oppressed and his stomach would be threatening.

"Yes, Lulu, it was the same for me," he lied. He could say anything, he felt.

"We were very silly, weren't we?"

"Very silly."

"You know I'm in love again."

"With Tony Tanner?"

She nodded profoundly. "I think it's really for real this time." When he did not bother to answer, she went on, "you know, everybody's against us. I'm the only one who understands a certain side of Tony."

"Lulu, what a marvelous way to describe being in love," Eitel said.

"I'm serious, Charles. I wish you'd be serious too. You see, I feel there's a lot of potentiality in Tony. Underneath, he's more sensitive than you think, and I like that combination in a man."

"What combination?"

"Why, sensitivity and brutality. Tony's a very funny mixture of the two. Once I can give him some polish, he's going to be a very interesting person."

"But when has all this happened?"

"In the last ten days," Lulu said. "Oh, we were sleeping together before that of course, but ever since I got back to the city, Tony and I have been together all the time, and you know what's funny, I didn't even like him at first."

People were pressing around them, and the noise of the party swelled and diminished against his ear. From very far away, it seemed, he was admiring a quality Lulu and he possessed in common. They were both so adept at nodding to friends in such a way that no interruptions occurred.

"And Sergius?" he asked, "did you invite him tonight?"

She nodded. "Of course I did. Wouldn't it have been rude if I didn't?" Lulu shook her head. "I don't know where he is though, the dope. He's probably sulking at home."

"You thought you were in love with him two weeks ago."

She smiled. "I didn't think you'd be mean to me," and she put a hand on his arm again. "Charley, I wish you understood that I only want the best to happen for you. Really, you're one of the nicest people I've ever known," she finished, her eyes moist.

"So you're in love with Tony?" he repeated.

"I'm practically positive I am."

"You must want me to destroy it for you."

"Oh, you're drunk."

"No, actually I'm just wondering why you didn't bring him along?"

"Because . . . I wanted to get away a little to think about him."

She was really so lovely to look at, Eitel was thinking. All the while they had been talking, Lulu had flirted with him. Those violet-blue eyes smiled at him, they smiled sexual nuance, they seemed to say, "You and I may pretend, but we also remember." He felt abruptly like a shabby middle-aged lush. Could it have been only a year ago, two years ago, that they had been married and everyone had felt he married beneath himself? Now, she was far beyond him, and new generations had come, Tony Tanners who once waited hours outside his office for a chance to say hello. "You going to Europe soon?" he asked out of a silence. But of course she would be going to Europe soon. Let there be an important enough party and she would be on her way.

"The interesting thing I've realized," Lulu said, "is I don't believe Tony is in love with me."

"That's all right. He will be if you make him respectable."

"You're no help."

The worst of it, Eitel thought, was that he wanted her so much. He wanted her more than he ever had when they were married. Across the room, he could see Don Beda talking to Elena, and with a certain numb excitement he knew that if he were to slip out of the party with Lulu, it was probable that Elena would leave with Beda and Beda's beautiful wife.

"What are you thinking?" Lulu asked sharply.

He could feel himself swaying on the tips of his toes. "I was just deciding," Eitel said, "that it's impossible to remember what an ex-wife's body looks like."

Lulu laughed intimately. "What happened to those pictures you took?"

"Oh, they're destroyed of course," he said quickly.

"I don't believe you, Charles." In a casual caress, she pinched the lobe of his ear between her fingers. "I suppose this is very perverted," she said, "but I don't mind the idea that there are pictures like that of me, just a few of course."

"Lulu, let's leave the party," Eitel said.

"What for?" she asked easily.

"You know exactly what for."

"And leave Elena behind?"

He hated her for asking that. "Yes, and leave Elena behind," he said, and felt as if he had committed a sacrilege. The sacrilege was that it had been so easy for him to say what he had said.

"Charles, I think you're very attractive tonight, but I want to remain faithful to Tony."

"Balls."

"You're very mean to ask me. I have to find some sort of stability."

"Let's get out of here," Eitel said.

Then he was aware of Elena at his shoulder. It was impossible to know if she had overheard what he had just said, but in fact it hardly mattered. He had been leaning toward Lulu in a way that would be unmistakable to Elena, and in his mind, seeing how they must have looked to her, he could feel sorry for what she must have felt.

"I want to go home now," Elena said, "but you don't have to come along. I know you want to stay." There was something in her face which told him she was close to a scene, and the thought of that at Dorothea O'Faye's was unbearable.

"No, I'll go with you," he said quietly.

Lulu was mocking them both. "Why don't you stay, Charley? *She* says it's all right."

"You don't have to go," Elena repeated. Her eyes were glittering.

Eitel wondered how to relieve the situation and said the wrong thing. "Do you want to come home with us for coffee?" he asked.

176

"I don't think so," Lulu smiled.

"Sure, come along," Elena said. "You can screw the two of us. We're looking for a third."

"Good night, Lulu," Eitel said.

They left without saying good-bye to anyone else. At the door, Dorothea intercepted them. She was very drunk. "Did it work out all right with my government friend?" she asked heavily.

"Do you expect me to thank you?" Eitel said.

"Are you going to be an arrogant stupid son of a bitch all your life?"

Staring into Dorothea's eyes, so angry, so leaden with drink, he remembered that once—for no matter how short a time—they had shared the same bed and caresses had passed between them. It gave Eitel a pang. Where, in what cemetery of the heavens, did the tender words of lovers rest when they loved no longer?

"Let's go, Elena," he said, not answering Dorothea.

"You don't deserve what anybody does for you," Dorothea shouted as they escaped down the path.

Neither he nor Elena said a word on the drive to their house. After Eitel had put the car in the garage and followed her into the living room, he mixed himself a drink.

"You're a coward," Elena said. "You wanted to stay and you didn't."

He sighed. "Oh, baby, not you, too."

"Oh, sure. Not me, too. You wanted to take Lulu somewhere and I ruined it, didn't I?"

How much like a wife she had become, he was thinking. "You didn't ruin anything," he said automatically.

"You think I need you so much?" she flared at him. "Want to know something? When I get drunk I'm a million miles away from you."

"I love you when I get drunk," he said.

"Why do you talk to me this way?" Her face was furious with the effort not to cry. "I can live without you," she said. "Tonight at the party I knew I could walk out and leave you and never miss you at all." When he said nothing, she became only more angry. "I'll tell you something," she went on, "that friend of yours, that disgusting man Don Beda asked me to go home with him and his wife, and he said things to me . . . He thinks I'm dirt. Well, maybe I like high society and the way it thinks I'm dirt. I wanted to go with him," she shrieked, "I'm the same thing he is. So don't think you owe me anything. If you want to have your fun, don't think I'm the one who's stopping you. I can have my fun, too."

It was horrible to smile at such a moment, but he could not avoid it. "My poor baby," he said.

"I hate you," Elena shouted and went into the bedroom.

Oh, he was so drunk. Poor little underdog, he thought about Elena. She would never believe that he would marry her, but he would. He sat by himself looking for the words which would present his offer most attractively. Abruptly, he began to laugh. At the moment he felt as if he knew everything. It seemed so absurd to him that less than an hour ago he had wanted more than anything to sleep with Lulu. At that moment Elena must have been equally tempted by Don Beda. She would not have called him disgusting otherwise. Like a soft breath on the ash of his excitement for Lulu, there came the thought that perhaps he might do worse than to accept Beda's invitation. There was something very disturbing and yet not unpleasant at the thought of giving Elena to such a party. With the bravery of a man who watches in an operating mirror while surgery is performed upon his body, Eitel felt as if he stared into himself. Once, how long ago? he had no more than to scratch himself, and out would run the blood of the shy, passionate, and eager adolescent which once he had been. He sighed, evolving drunken systems of philosophy where time was liquid, and liquid dried, and time was gone.

All this while, Elena was suffering, he thought. There was something comic about her; the essence of good comedy was always misplaced drama, and she took herself very seriously. He would give her drama then; this was the time for his marriage proposal. So he got up and went into the bedroom and looked at Elena lying on the coverlet. Her face was buried in her arms, the classic interpretation of grief for the mediocre actress, and it was right that Elena being sincere and comic should lie in such a way. He touched her lightly on the back and she stirred slightly. Probably, she wanted to tell him she had not meant what she said about Don Beda.

"Go away," Elena told him.

"No, darling, I want to talk to you."

"Please leave me alone."

He began to smooth her hair. "Darling," he said, "I've ruined a lot of things, but you must know that I care about you. I can't stand the thought of hurting you." It was true in a way. "I mean, I want you always to be happy." Indeed if he could have granted happiness to anyone, he would have granted it to her.

"Just words," Elena blurted from the pillow.

"I want us to be married," Eitel said.

She sat up then and turned her face to his.

"You see, there's got to be a future for you," he said. "What I thought is that we could go on like this, and whenever you felt that it wasn't good any more, well, then, before we broke up we could get married and then we could get divorced. I mean I know how much you'd like to get married because you feel that no one would want you that much, and I want to show you that I do."

Tears came into her eyes, ran down her cheek, and slowly dripped onto her hands. She sat there limply with her hands in her lap.

"What do you think, darling?"

"You have no respect for me," she said in a wooden voice.

"But I have so much respect. Can't you see?"

"Don't talk about it," she said to him.

He felt the kind of mild dismay which precedes a catastrophe. "You don't understand," he said. "You see, no matter what happens, we'll get married."

She shook her head from side to side in a slow bewildered way. "Oh, Charley," she said, "I hate myself. I've been trying to get up the courage to leave you for so many weeks, and I can't. I'm afraid."

"Then you must marry me the way I said."

"No, never. Don't you know I could never do that? Don't you realize the way you asked me?"

"But you have to marry me," he said with growing panic. The exit had been prepared, and now she was closing it. If they didn't marry, he would remain wedded to her in the most impossible situation.

"When you don't want me, I'll go," Elena said. "But I don't want to talk about it any more."

Finally, she had gained his respect, and he could never explain it to her. With numb fingers he caressed her foot. The essence of spirit he thought to himself was to choose the thing which did not better one's position but made it worse. That was why the world he knew was horrible, for it insisted morality and self-interest were identical. He was so completely of that world, and she was not. She would stay with him until he wanted her no longer, and the thought of what would happen afterward, ground his flesh with pain as real as a wound. "I'm so rotten," he said aloud, and with the desire to prove his despair, he began to cry, clutching her body to him, his fists against her back, while his chest shook from the unaccustomed effort to weep freely.

Elena was tender to him. Like a sad mother, she stroked his hair. And in a wise little voice, wiser than she had ever spoken before, she said, "Don't force yourself to cry, darling."

For that minute, and for another minute, he loved her as he had never loved anyone, loved her and knew that the life of such a love was but a minute, because all the while he loved her, he knew that in another way he did not love her at all, and he was thinking that since Elena would not marry him, he must find another way to become free.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I arrived at the party after Eitel had left, having spent most of the evening debating whether to go at all. The invitation had come from Dorothea, and I wondered if she were being kind, or whether it was Lulu who wished to see me. The more I debated, the more I knew that I would certainly go, and I found myself enjoying the fantasy that Lulu was racked by anxiety because it was after one o'clock, now after two in the morning, and still I had not arrived. I even expected my phone to ring, and was tormented by the thought of Lulu calling everywhere in town, every bar, every club where I could possibly be, never thinking to call my house because obviously I could not be there—since I had not appeared at the party, I must have something better to do. This fiction so appealed to me that I in turn began to fret that I could not end Lulu's suffering and mine by the whisper that she had only to call me at home. And so I paced about the house, desperate with my desire to see her again. It had been very difficult since she had left, but to talk about how I spent my time for those two weeks—the hours I drank, the hours I tried to write, the afternoons I spent with my bankbook as though by studying it long enough I could induce my savings to grow—would be endless and pointless and finally humiliating to me. I tried with all the strength I had to keep from going to Dorothea's party, and ended by getting into my car.

It was close to three in the morning when I drove up to The Hangover, and as I passed through the door, the pretenses I had made to myself all evening disappeared, and I was left with the hungry angry understanding that I had to see Lulu. Really, I had come very late. The summit of the party had long been passed; scattered dishes of the buffet supper were hidden here and there, a cigarette stuck like a ski pole into a knoll of potato salad, a bite of ham swimming in a highball glass, an overturned plate beneath a coffee table. Similarly, those people who were left had concentrated into some random activity whole false truths about themselves, so that the drunk at the one-armed bandit who deposited quarter after quarter in a solemn, rhythmic, and utterly mechanical fashion, seemed to have become the gambler turned inside out, showing in contrast to his sober passion that he could dominate the machine, the knowledge that now he merely fed it in an act of homage, and seemed never so surprised as when occasionally the machine returned some coins with a clatter. A young girl who made her living by entertaining wealthy men, had fallen asleep on a couch, her mouth open, her arms trailing in dead weight to the floor, her profound sleep crying the negation of that alertness, interest, and attention so necessary to the practice of her trade.

182

That way, too, did I find Martin Pelley. His chin slumped upon his chest, his breathing labored, he was not asleep but merely morose. "You take Dorothea," he said to me, "she's a great girl, she's one of the greatest, but tonight I know I've had it. Sergius, do you know what I am?"

"Yes, what are you?" I said.

"I'm a bellboy to her." Pelley sighed. "I faced it tonight. I'd get a bigger kick out of spending the evening with the boys playing some cards." Back went his chin upon his chest. I looked at him. "Get it while you're young," he whispered drowsily and a first snore issued from his nose.

In the den the party was still rowdy, in the kitchen people told jokes, in the bathroom private crises occurred, little moments from the hour of truth, forgotten even as they were washed away. I found Lulu in the pantry, her arms around the shoulders of two strange men, her voice quavering a burlesque of an old-time song. The three sang together, they searched for harmonies amidst their discord, and even as Lulu, seeing me, slipped apart from them and gave me her hand, the two men continued to sing, closing ranks upon the absence like a prize platoon which stands at attention in the sun and ignores those weaklings who faint away.

"I want to talk to you," I said to her.

"Oh, Sergius, I'm so drunk. Do I show it?"

"Where can we talk?" I asked again.

She seemed not nearly so drunk as she claimed. "We can go upstairs," she whispered.

If there were a chance I might misunderstand, she took care to set up our station in the master bedroom where the women's coats were hung, and we talked through continual small interruptions, coming at last to ignore whichever woman was fumbling for her wrap in the rosy artificial lighting of the bedroom.

"Sergius, I've been very cruel to you," Lulu began.

"No, you've been rude," I told her.

"That's what I can't stand about you," she said with anger, "you don't know how to fight back."

"How's it going with Tony?" I interrupted.

"Sergius, I think you're a darling. But I don't think when people have been intimate, they ought to discuss what's happening with them at the present. You see, I want us to be friends," she said with some emphasis.

"You don't have to worry," I said, "I'm quite indifferent to you." In half-measure it was true. At the moment I was indifferent to her. If I had spent many days of peculiar frustration not knowing whether I loved her or was enraged at her, I had nonetheless arrived for the moment at that superficial calm which may tease us that we are cured. I was to suffer her loss again; months from now I would feel an abrupt anguish at meeting her name on a cinema marquee, reading a word she was reputed to have said in a gossip column, or most tormenting of all, I would see a girl who by a gesture or a trick of speech would reproduce for me all of Lulu. I would even evoke her again while I slept in an empty bed for like most young men I was to have women but not affairs during what was to seem an endless time. All this is gratuitous; what sufficed for the moment was that I was indifferent toward Lulu, I believed she could no longer hurt me. Thus I could be generous to myself, I could say, "I'm quite indifferent," and feel the confidence of the man who has lived through a landslide—"Look, the mountain is still there, the birds have come back"—when what is never to be appreciated at such a moment is that the catastrophe may have ended but suffering is merely begun.

"Tony really hates me," Lulu said out of a silence.

"That's the way I should have acted."

"Sergius, you're so dramatic." She pinched my cheek. "Tony doesn't really hate me. Do you think I could live with a man who hated me?"

I knew the answer, I was so close to saying, "You always have," but instead I tried to hurt her by a most staggering misconception, for I never learned it was impossible to hurt Lulu, that the barb was lost in silk, disorder, flight, succession, and extravagance. One might as well seek to chase oneself about a circle, or attack the miser by granting his bargain. She was, when all was said, a miser, Lulu.

"You'd be a nice girl," I tried, "if only you had a decent opinion of yourself."

She laughed. "You're such a boob when you try to be a psychologist. Sergius, don't talk like that. Be friendly. I think you're honestly more attractive tonight than I've ever seen you."

From the way she said it, I had the unhappy awareness that I had now become someone who was never particularly attractive to her.

"Lulu," I asked, startled to hear myself capitulate, "is it really all over?"

"Sergius, I think you're sweet and good and I'll never forget you," she said with her rudimentary desire to be kind, having indeed forgotten me already.

I looked at her. "Come on, let's go to bed now."

"No, I'm drunk, and . . . I don't want to hurt you."

"Try," I dared her.

"Sergius, sweetie, I don't want to talk about it. You see with us, it wasn't always very perfectly physical, I mean it wasn't a physical-type affair. I think that's always due to chemistry, don't you?"

"What about the games?" I whispered, but even in saying the words, the toys were dusted into powder. Gone was the charm of the iceman and the housewife, the call girl and her client, the bobby-soxer and the young buck, the photographer and his model, the queen and the slave. They were stock characters again, lost to me now that they were lost to her, and I knew for the moment, as I was to forget many times in the months which followed, that no longer was it possible to invoke the memory of whatever she had felt because, simply, it no longer existed for her. Her memory was blunted, if indeed she had a memory at all, and therefore her latest affair would always seem automatically more entrancing, more sensuous, more delicious, more dirty, than anything which had gone before, and in much the same way she had once remarked that Eitel was impossible as a lover, I would be catalogued in my turn. Where there is no blood there must always be triumph, and with bitter feeling I envied Lulu her inevitable ascension from lover to superior lover. I could know with a humility I was not to find again so quickly that I had succeeded no more than the millions of men who merely coveted Lulu and never possessed her, that indeed it was not possible for a man to possess her, no more than she could couple with her unrequited love—that image of herself upon the screen.

It is easier to know than to submit. "What about the time . . . ?" I asked, and went on as if affection willy-nilly should be leashed to fact, telling her what she had worn, what we had done, hammering at her with every detail of what she had said and how she had said it, and Lulu listened with a cinema smile, the young girl, eager and sympathetic, sorry for the nice featured actor she does not love.

"Oh, Sergius, I'm terrible," she said. "I must have been drunk."

"You weren't drunk."

"Well, it was always very nice with you."

By an effort, admitting I was done, I said, "Do you expect to see Tony a lot?"

"Maybe I will, Sergius. He's full of laughs."

A drunk blundered by us, searching the upstairs hall for an empty toilet, and she drew against my arm. "I'm worried, dear," she said in a voice which indicated that we were finally and indeed old friends. "Herman Teppis told me to see him the day after tomorrow. I tried to get advice from Eitel but he was too difficult."

"Why are you worried?"

"Cause I know Teppis." She shivered from some sudden intensity, fear quite likely. "Don't tell a soul about Tony," she whispered.

Downstairs, guests were still leaving. "Sergius, drive me to the Yacht Club," she said. "I won't be a minute. Just wait for me to powder my nose."

With her indifference to concealing herself, she did her make-up by the bedroom mirror, studying with professional care the shape, the spread, and the emphasis of the powder and shadow she painted upon herself. There was a moment when I thought she studied her features too long and the face in the glass became more alive than the person who looked, and I felt how she was bothered, the disquiet no more than a muted wind of that cry which says, "That is you, that is really you. It is yourself you are looking at, and you can never quit that face," for as we went down the stairs she was silent, she was worried, she was looking for the person who existed only in the imaginary interior of a silvered glass or upon the surface of a cinema screen.

The party was breaking up as we went out. Dorothea kissed Lulu. "You be happy, honey-bun, you hear," she said, and we pushed through the door. On the street beyond the gate of Dorothea's, there were adolescents gathered, a dozen of them, waiting in the false dawn of four o'clock in Desert D'Or.

"That's her, that's her," several of them cried as we came out.

"My God, I recognize one of them," Lulu said. "She's from the city."

"Miss Meyers, we're on an autograph party," the leader said formally. "Will you please sign our books?"

"Lulu, sign mine first," another begged.

I stood beside Lulu while she decorated her name into album after album. "Thank you very much," she wrote, "my very best . . . hello, again . . . best in the world . . . a million thanks . . ." So it went. When we were free at last and I was driving her on the familiar road to the Yacht Club, driving the car myself for this last time, she lay back against the seat and fluffed her hair. I caught a glimpse of her face and the bewilderment was gone. "Oh, Sergius," she said with the glow of adulation still warm, "isn't this a wonderful life?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

This is the way it must have happened:

Two days later, a half hour before he was to see Lulu, Herman Teppis was waiting for Teddy Pope. From time to time it was Teppis' habit, as Eitel had explained, to have a big chat, or so he called it, with some of his stars, and the institution, familiar to the public through a series of magazine articles written by publicity men, had been described as the secret of good family relations at Supreme Pictures. A big chat as opposed to those little talks Teppis was forever giving at his home, his country club, or the studio commissary, took place always in his office, the doors closed, and the principals face to face.

Teppis' office was painted in one of those subsidiaries of a cream color—rose-cream, chartreuse-cream, or beige-cream—imposed upon all the executive compartments at Supreme Pictures. It was an enormous room with a proportionately enormous picture window, and the dominant piece of furniture was the desk, a gargantuan Italian antique which had endured from the Middle Ages, and was rumored to have been purchased directly from the Vatican. Yet, like an old house which is renovated so completely that only the shell remains, the interior of Teppis' desk was devoted to a recording machine, a private filing cabinet, a refrigerator, and a small revolving bar. The rest of the room contained deep leather chairs and a coffee-colored carpet. He had only three framed pictures in all that volume; an Impressionist painting of a mother and child was set in a massive gold frame, and two hand-worked silver cadres contained photos of Teppis' wife and of his mother, the last retouched and hand-colored so that her silver hair was crowned in an aureole.

The afternoon Teddy Pope came to see Mr. Teppis, he was greeted warmly. Teppis shook his hand and clapped him on the back. "Teddy, it's a pleasure you could manage to get here," he said in his hoarse thin voice.

"I'm always happy when you want to talk to me, Mr. T.," Teddy said.

Teppis coughed. "You want a cigar?"

"No, sir, I don't smoke them."

"It's a vice, cigars. My only vice, I say." He cleared his throat with a short harsh sound as though he were commanding an animal to appear. "Now, I know what's going on in your mind," he said genially. "You want to know why I want to see you."

"Well, Mr. T.," said Teddy, "I was sort of wondering."

"It's simple. I'll give you the answer in a phrase. The answer is I would like to spend the kind of time I ought to with all you young people, all you young stars I've seen growing up right on this studio lot. That's a lack in my life, but it don't mean my personal interest is at long distance. I think about you an awful lot, Teddy."

"Hope you think nice things, Mr. T.," Teddy said with a laugh.

"Now, what are you nervous for? Have I ever hurt you?" Both Teddy and Teppis shook their heads. "Of course not, I got a real affection for you, you know that. I'm an old man now."

"You don't look old, H.T.," Teddy observed.

"Don't contradict me, it's true. Sometimes I think of all the years I been sitting in this room, the stars that came, the stars that fell. You know I think of all the stars I made, and then all these up and coming starlets. They're going to be heard from in a couple of years, but they'll never push you out, you can depend on that, Teddy, you can say H.T. said to me, 'You can depend on that almost as a promise' because what I want to say is that I feel the very real affection which all of my stars and starlets feel for me, I can tell when we have these chats, they think I got a large warm heart, I can never remember a single one leaving this office without their saying, 'God bless you, H.T. I'm a warm. individual. It's why I've been a success in the industry. What do you need to be successful here?'"

"Heart," said Teddy.

"That's right, heart. The American public has a large heart and you got to meet it, you got to go halfway up to it. I'll give you an example. I'm the father of a grown woman, you know my daughter, Lottie, I love her, and I hear from her every single day. At ten o'clock in the morning the call comes through and my secretary, she clears the switchboard for me. If I can't be punctual to my daughter, how can I expect her to be punctual to me? You see, Teddy," he said, reaching forward to pat Pope's knee, "it don't matter the love I got for my daughter, there's a lot left over for my other family, the big family right here at Supreme Pictures."

"We feel the same way about you, H.T.," Teddy said.

"I hope so, sincerely I hope so. It would break my heart if all the young people here didn't reciprocate. You don't know how much I think about all of you, about your problems, your heartaches, and your successes. I follow your careers. You know, Teddy, you'd be surprised how much I know about the personal lives of all of you. I even follow to see how religious you are, because I believe in religion, Teddy. I've changed my religion and a man don't change his religion like he takes a drink of water. I can tell you I've found great consolation in my new faith, there's a great man in New York, a great religious man, I'm proud to call him one of my dearest friends, and he made things so you and me can go through the same church door."

189

"I guess I haven't been going to church enough lately," Teddy said.

"I hate to hear that. I'd give you a lecture if there wasn't something else I want to talk about."

Teppis held up his arms. "Look, what am I showing you? Two hands. Two hands make a body. That's like me. You see, I feel as if I come from two faiths, the one I was born with, and the one I changed to. I think I've inherited the wealth of the tradition from two great faiths. Am I confusing you?"

"No, sir."

"You take my first faith. One of the most heart-warming customs of the people I was born in, it was the concern the parents of the family took in all the doings of their children, the engagements, the weddings, the births of young people. I could tell you stories make you cry. You know the poorest house, the dirt-poor people, they would take the same interest in arranging the marriage of their children as for a royal marriage. Now, this is a democratic country, we can thank God for that, we don't approve of royal marriages, I don't approve of it myself, I would never dream of doing such a thing, but there's a lot to be said on both sides. I was talking to the Shah Omi Kin Bek on this very subject, and you know what he said to me, he said, 'H.T., we don't arrange marriages the way the American public tends to think, we just encourage them, and then it's up to the kids.' That's a first-rate article, genuine royalty. I'll say to any man I'm proud to have the Shah for a friend."

"I think it's wrong for people to look down on royalty," Teddy said.

"Sure, it's wrong. You know why they do it? Envy." Teppis held up his handkerchief and spit into it. "People are envious of the people at the top."

"My idea," said Teddy tentatively, "is that royalty is like everybody else."

"You're wrong," Teppis interrupted. "Royalty pays a terrible price. Let me tell you a story. What is it about public men that makes them different? It's that they're in the eye of the public. They got to lead a life as clean as a dog's teeth, privately, not only public. You know what scandal is to a public figure? It's a bomb ten times bigger than the atom. They got to do certain things, it breaks their heart to do them, and why? the public responsibility demands it. That's true for royalty and it's true for movie stars, and fellows like me, people like you and me, that's who it applies for. Those are the laws, try and break them. We're talking like equals now, aren't we, Teddy?"

"Yessir."

"You look at that picture I have," said Teppis pointing to the Impressionist painting. "I would hate to tell you how much I had to pay for it, but the moment I looked at that picture with that beautiful mother and her beautiful child, I said to myself, 'H.T., it don't matter if you got to work ten years to pay for it, you got to buy that picture.' You know why I said that to myself? Because that picture is life, it's by a great painter. I look at it, and I think, 'Motherhood, that's what you're looking at.' When I think of you, Teddy, and I know what goes on in your heart, I think that you think about settling down with a beautiful bride and children that come out to greet you when you come home from work. I never had anything like that, Teddy, cause when I was your age, I worked long hours, very long hours, hours that would break your heart to tell you about them, and when I'm alone, I sometimes think to myself, and I say then, 'You know, H.T., you missed the fruits of life.' I would hate for a fellow like you, Teddy, to have to say the same thing. And you don't have to. You know with all that's due respect to my wife, may she rest in peace, she had to work very hard herself, only for those early years, but she never complained once, not a peep." Tears filled Teppis' small flat eyes, and he wiped them away with a clean handkerchief he kept in his breast pocket, the aroma of his toilet water passing across the room. "Take any girl you would marry," Teppis went on, "you wouldn't have such problems, you could give her all the financial security, you know why, she'd make you settle down. I'd even sit down with you and your business agent and we'd have a talk how to straighten you out financially so you wouldn't have to borrow from us ahead of your salary." Teppis frowned at him. "It's a shame, Teddy. People will think we don't pay you nothing the way you got to borrow money."

"I'd like to talk to you about that, Mr. T.," said Teddy quickly.

"We'll talk about that, we'll go all into it, but now's not the time. You just remember, Teddy, that you're an idol of the American public, and an idol never needs to worry about money so long as he's clean with his public."

Teppis poured himself a glass of water, and drank it slowly as if he would savor the taste. "I know a young fellow like you with the world at his feet," he went on, "there's a lot of times he don't want to get married. 'Why should I get married?' he says to himself, 'What's in it for me?' Teddy, I'll tell you, there's a lot in it for you. Just think. The whole world is in a strait jacket so it says, 'You, over there, you get in a strait jacket, too.' Know why? The world hates a bachelor, he's not popular. People try to drag him down. The stories you hear, ninety-nine per cent of the time unfounded, but I'd be ashamed, I couldn't look you in the eye to tell you the kind of stories I have to listen to. It's enough to revolt your stomach. I hear a story like that, I let them have it. 'Don't tell me that kind of filth about Teddy,' I say, 'I don't want to hear it. If the boy don't want to get married, it got nothing to do with all those dirty rotten stories you tell me, period.' That's how definite I am. People know me, they say, 'H.T. is on record as being against slander.'"

Abruptly, Teppis pounded his desk. "A rumor about a fellow like you, it spreads like hot cakes. We get letters from your fan clubs all over the place. Kokoshkosh, towns like that. Small-town America. Two-Bits, Kansas. You see what I mean? What do you want? You know what those letters say, they say that the members of the Teddy Pope fan club are brokenhearted cause they heard the most terrible stories about Teddy. Their loyalty is shaken. Listen, Teddy, I go to your defense, you know why? It isn't because of business reasons, or because I know you for a long time, or even because I like you, although I do. It's because I know deep down that you're going to prove I'm right, and I wouldn't go to bat for a person even if they meant a million dollars to me if I didn't think they would prove that H.T. is right in the long run. That's confidence. Should I put that confidence in you?" Teppis held up a finger. "Don't answer, you don't even have to answer, I know I can put confidence in you." He got up and walked to the window.

"You know something, I've had my confidence rewarded already. I took a look in the papers. That picture of you and Lulu where you're holding hands in Desert D'Or. It's one of the most beautiful, impressive, and touching things I've ever seen. Young love, that's what it said. It made me wish that same famous painter on my wall was still alive so I could hire him to paint the photograph of the young love of you and Lulu."

"Mr. Teppis," Teddy said in his firmest voice, "that was just a publicity picture."

"Publicity! Listen, do you know how many of the most successful marriages in this industry started with just publicity? I'll tell you. The answer is ninety-nine per cent of the most successful marriages began just that way. I know you, Teddy; you're a clean-cut boy. I've seen a lot of those photographs. I don't believe that you and Lulu can look at each other like two love-doves and be fakers. Don't try to tell me Lulu isn't crazy about you. That girl is wearing her heart on her sleeve. Teddy, I'll tell you, Lulu is one of the finest girls I know. She's a real fine American-type girl of real American stock. Such a woman is a gift of God. When I look at my mother's picture on this very desk, you know what I get? Inspiration. I carry her picture next to my heart. You should be able to do the same."

Teddy was perspiring. He leaned forward to say something, and could utter no more than, "Mr. Teppis . . ."

"Stop!" said Teppis, "I don't want to hear your ideas. You're a stubborn boy. Why are you so stubborn when you know what's in your heart? You want to agree with me. But you're confused. You need a man like myself to set you straight. Isn't that right?"

In a quiet voice, Teddy said, "Mr. Teppis, you know very well I'm a homosexual."

"I didn't hear it, I didn't hear it," Teppis screamed.

"That's the way I am," Teddy muttered. "There's nothing to be done about it. What is, is."

"Philosophy?" Teppis shouted. "You listen to me. If a man sits in . . . SHIT, he don't know enough to get out of it?"

"It's not possible, Mr. Teppis."

192

"You're the most ungrateful boy I ever knew. You keep me up nights. What do you think, sex it's the whole world? I forget what you said, do you understand? I wouldn't want it on my conscience. You watch. I'll drive you right out of the movie business."

"Let me try to say . . ."

"Lulu, that's what you got to say. I know what goes on. You got a chip against society. You should love society with all it's done for you. I love society. I respect it. Teddy, you're a sick boy, but you and me can lick this thing together." Teppis held up a fist. "I don't want to persecute you, but I never heard of anything so perverted in my whole life."

The buzzer sounded. "All right, all right," Teppis said into the interoffice phone. "you tell the party in question to wait. I'll be with that individual in a minute."

"Mr. Teppis," Teddy said, "I'm sorry, but I've never once had relations with a woman."

Teppis clicked the switch back to its 'off' position, and stared for many seconds at Teddy Pope. "Teddy, we've talked a lot," he said. "What I want is that you promise me you won't make up your mind ahead of time that you personally aren't able to boff a beautiful sexy girl like Lulu. I'm telling you, you can. That's all I ask of you, Teddy, don't make up your mind. Sleep on it. Is that a bargain?"

Pope nodded unhappily.

"That's the boy. That's Teddy Pope talking." Teppis walked him to the door. "Now, Teddy, nobody is forcing you into anything. If you said yes this very minute, I would still say to you, 'Teddy, sleep on it.' Now, could anybody claim I was trying to push you into a single thing?"

"No, sir."

"You're right. I don't force people. Never. I talk things over with them. Someday, Teddy, you're going to say, 'God bless you, H.T.'"

Once Teddy was out the door, Teppis flipped the buzzer again. "All right, send Lulu in," he said. He waited by the door to greet her and held Lulu at arm's length while he looked at her with shining eyes. "I wish I could tell you the kind of pleasure it is to have you lightening up this office," he said to her. "Sweetie, you take a load off all my worries, and on that desk are sitting one thousand worries." Now, he held her hands. "I love a girl like you who brings sunshine into this room."

Probably Lulu had contrived to look no more than seventeen. "I love you, too, Mr. T." she said in her husky little voice.

"I know you do. Every one of my stars, they tell me that. But with you, I know it's sincere." He guided her to the chair in which Teddy Pope had been sitting, and from a compartment in the enormous Italian desk, he took out a bottle of whisky and dropped some ice cubes into a glass.

"Oh, Mr. T., I'm not drinking these days," said Lulu.

"Nonsense. I know you. Sweetie, you got no respect for me. You think you can twist me around your little finger," he said cordially. "Well, I got news for you. There's no man in the world you can't twist around your finger. But I understand you, sweetie, I'm crazy about you. I don't want you thinking you got to take a drink behind my back."

"I think you're the only man who understands me, H.T." Lulu said.

"You're wrong. Nobody can understand you. Know why? You're a great woman. You're not only a great actress but there's greatness in you as a person—fire, spirit, charm—those are the sort of things you have. I wouldn't want this to get around, but I don't care if you take a drink. You've earned the right to do anything you want."

"Except when I disagree with you, H.T.," Lulu said coquettishly.

"I love you. What a tongue. You got impetuosity. I say to myself, 'H.T., what is there about Lulu that's smash box office?' and I don't even have to ask myself the answer. It's in a word. Life," Teppis said, pointing a finger at her, "that's what Lulu's got."

He poured himself a small drink and sipped it politely, inquiringly, like a chemist seeking to determine the taste and properties of a new compound. "You're wondering why I asked you up here?" he said after a pause. "I'll tell you. I've been thinking about you. Know my personal opinion of Lulu Meyers? She's the greatest actress in this country, and this country's got the greatest actors in the whole world."

"You're the greatest actor in the world, Mr. T.," Lulu said.

"I take it as a compliment. But you're wrong, Lulu, I can't act. You know why? I'm too sincere. I feel things too deeply which I can't express. There're nights when I stay awake worrying about you. You know what eats my heart out? It's that I'm not the American public. If I was the American public, I'd make you Number One on the Bimmler Ratings. You know what you are now?"

"Seventeen, isn't it, Mr. T.?"

"Seventeen. Can you believe it? There are sixteen actors in this country the American public buys ahead of you. I don't understand it. If I was the public I'd buy Lulu Meyers all the way."

"Why can't there be ten million people like you, H.T.?" Lulu said. She had finished her drink, and after a little pause, poured herself another.

"Lulu, do you know your Bimmler last year? It was twelve. This year you should have gone up, not down. Up to ten, to eight. Three, number one, that's the way it should have gone."

"Mr. Teppis, maybe I'm a has-been," Lulu said easily.

Teppis held up his hand. "Lulu, for a remark like that, I ought to take you over my knee and spank you."

"Oh, Mr. T., what a construction I could put on that."

"Ha, ha. Ha, ha. I'm crazy about you. Lulu, listen to me. The trouble is you're weak, publicity-wise."

"I've got the best press agent in the country," she said quickly.

"You think you can buy publicity? Good publicity is a gift of God. The time is past, Lulu, when any sort of girl, you'll see I'm speaking frankly, the kind of girl who's so-called friends with this man and friends with that man until she's notorious. The public wants what's respectable today. You know why? Life ain't respectable any more. Think they want to be reminded of that? Let me show you psychology. Ten years ago, a woman she was faithful to her husband, she wanted excitement, she wanted to dream she was having a love affair with a star—Lulu, I wouldn't talk so frankly to any other person on earth. Today, you know what, that same woman she has affairs all over the place, with the man who fixes the television set, people like that. You think she wants to see somebody just like herself on the screen, somebody just as nuts as she is? She don't. She's ashamed of herself. She wants to see a woman she can respect, a married woman, a royal couple, the number one married lovers of America. That's true psychology."

Lulu shifted in her seat. "H.T., you should have been a marriage broker."

"You tell me that all the time; I'll tell you something. If you could be married to the right kind of boy, let me give you an example, to a star let's say with a Seven Bimmmler, a Nine Bimmmler, you know what? You think you'd come out with a Bimmmler the average between the two of you, you wouldn't, you'd end up with the two highest Bimmmlers in the country. Know why? Two plus two don't make four. It makes five, and five makes ten. That's compound interest. You think about it. The right kind of marriage is better than compound interest. Lulu Meyers and anybody, Joe McGoe, I don't care what the man's name is just so he has a high Bimmmler, and then you have the Number One royal couple of America, and America is the world, that's where you'd be."

Teppis blew a kiss at Lulu. "You're my darling, do you know that? You're my A-1 darling."

"I hope so, H.T."

"You take this young fellow of yours, what's his name, this Shamus Sugar-boy fellow."

"You mean Sergius."

"I've looked into him. He's a nice boy. I like him. I'd hire him. Not for acting you understand, but some sort of work, office work, a clerk, a bookkeeper, he's the kind of boy who'd be good for that, sincere, honest maybe, but I think about him with you, and you know what I decide? Lulu, that boy is not for you. He's insignificant. He would drag you down. I don't care how many planes he says he shot, he's a doorman, that's the sort of person he is."

"Oh, you don't have to disparage Sergius, Mr. T.," said Lulu, "he's very sweet."

"Sweet boys, a dime a dozen. He's a child. You're a woman. That's the difference. I think we understand each other. What I want to say is something I got in mind that's going to stun you. Want to know who I think you should marry?"

"I have no idea, Mr. Teppis."

"Guess. Go ahead, guess."

"Tony Tanner," Lulu said.

"Tony Tanner? Lulu, I'm ashamed of you. I looked up his Bimmler myself. One hundred and eighty-nine, that's what a nobody he is. It's a disgrace for a woman not to value herself. I got somebody better to think about. I don't want you to say a word, I want you to sleep on it. Teddy Pope, what do you say?"

Lulu came to her feet. She made a small demonstration of opening and closing her mouth in amazement. "I'm shocked, Mr. T.," she said at last.

"Sit down. I'll tell you something. Maybe you don't know it. I got no desire to hide it from you. Teddy Pope is a homosexual. It makes you wonder, don't it? Can H.T. be the kind of man who gets down on his hands and knees to beg a beautiful girl like you to marry a faggola?"

"You could never be that kind of man," Lulu said. "You're too decent."

"Let's not get off the sidetrack. I want you to answer me one question as honest as you can. Do you admit, paying no attention for the moment to your personal life, that to be married to Teddy Pope, wouldn't that be the biggest benefit you could bestow on yourself, publicity-wise? The Number One couple of America. Say I'm right."

"I can't say you're right, Mr. Teppis." Lulu rattled the ice cubes in her glass, and in a voice which mimicked him, she added, "I think you're being selfish."

"Nobody else in the whole world could say that to me."

"I ought to cry," Lulu said. "I've told everybody you're like a father."

"Don't hurt my feelings, Lulu."

"H.T., I feel as if things can never be the same between us."

"To talk like that," Teppis exclaimed. "It's disgraceful. After all I've done for you."

Lulu began to weep. "I don't like Teddy," she said in a little girl's voice.

"Like him! You stop crying. I know you, Lulu, and I'll tell you something. Teddy Pope is the only man you could ever be in love with. You think I'm crazy. You're wrong. Just cause he's a homo, you think it's an insult to you. But I'm an old man, I know people. You and Teddy can hit it off. He's been hurt, he's got a delicate heart, get him to tell you sometime about his childhood. Lulu, you're the only woman I know who could straighten him out, and then he'd worship the ground you walk on."

Lulu put a handkerchief to her eyes. "I hate you, H.T.," she sobbed.

"You hate me! You love me, that's why you hate to listen to me. But I'll let you know something. You're a coward. A girl with your looks, your appeal, should rise to a challenge. You're the most attractive girl I ever saw in my life. It don't mean nothing if you get a young healthy nobody excited about the kind of woman you are. That's beneath you. It's like a home-run player doing ping-pong. That's the sort of ridiculous thing it is. But think of the respect people would have if you could make a man out of Teddy Pone."

196

"And what if I couldn't?" Lulu said.

"You're defeated before you start. I'm disappointed."

"Mr. Teppis, I'll quote you: 'Look around before you take a step. There could have been dogs in the grass.' That's what you said, H.T. I have witnesses."

"You make me miserable. I thought you were a gambler like me."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "H.T., I want to get married," she said in a tremulous voice. "I want to love just one man and have a beautiful mature relationship and have beautiful children."

"That's the ticket, Lulu."

"But if I marry Teddy, it won't work, and I'll become promiscuous. You'll see. Will you be sorry when I'm like that?"

"Lulu, you could never be promiscuous. You're too fine. Suppose at the very worst, there should be a fellow or two that you would like and admire and diddle around with, while still being married to Teddy. I don't advise it, but it happens all the time, and you know what? The world don't stop moving."

"H.T., that's an immoral proposal. I'm ashamed of you."

"You're ashamed of me?" Teppis said, his face turning dark.

"You just said the wrong thing right then. I sit up nights trying to figure out how to save your career, and this is the thanks you give me. You're wild, that's what you are. Know what a star is? She's like delicious perishable fruit. You got to take her a long distance to market, and when she's there, you got to sell her. If you don't, she rots. She's rotten. Lulu, I'm speaking like a man to a woman. There are a lot of high executives in this studio who are fed up with you. Have you got any idea of the number of times I got to argue in your behalf? 'Lulu needs discipline,' they tell me, 'Lulu's too hard to handle. She gives us more heartaches than she's worth.' Believe me, Lulu, as God is looking into this room, you've made enemies, hundreds of enemies on this very studio lot. If you don't start to co-operate, they'll get into the process of tearing your flesh and picking your bones." His voice had risen to a crescendo. "That's exactly the sort of situation it is," he now said quietly. "I don't want to depress you, but Lulu your Bimmmler has got to show improvement this coming year. Otherwise, there's only one way for you." He pointed to the floor. "The way is down. You'll go down and down. You'll get older, you won't look so good, you won't get work so easy, you won't have a studio behind you. Know what a studio means? It's like a battleship. Look at Eitel. You'll become so ashamed you'll change your name. And that's how you'll end up, a dance-hall cutie, that's the sort of girl. I could cut my throat I'm so aggravated."

"I'm amazed you should stoop to intimidate me," Lulu declared.

"You don't fool me." Teppis said, "you're scared stiff. Because you know what I think of people who let me down." He reached forward and squeezed her shoulder companionably. "Lulu, be my witness, don't even answer me right away, this is the only favor I ever asked you. Would you turn H.T. down?"

Lulu burst into tears again. "Oh, Mr. Teppis, I love you," she cried.

"Then do something for me."

"I'll do anything for you."

"Would you marry Teddy Pope?"

"I'd even marry Teddy Pope. I want to marry Teddy after the way you explained it, Mr. Teppis."

"I don't want to talk you into it."

"I'd marry Teddy in a minute now," said Lulu sobbing fiercely, "but I can't marry Teddy Pope."

"Of course you can," Teppis said quickly. "Why not?"

"Cause I married Tony Tanner this morning."

"....."

"Mr. Teppis, please don't be angry."

"God, how could YOU do this to me?" Teppis bellowed.

"It isn't that terrible, Mr. Teppis," said Lulu from her handkerchief.

"You're lying," said Teppis pointing a finger at her. "I would have heard about it."

"I'm not lying. We were secretly married."

"You broke your promise. You told me you'd tell me if you wanted to get married."

"That was to Sergius."

"I could spit. It's not worth it being alive."

"Do you want a glass of water, Mr. Teppis?"

"No," he shouted. He smashed his fist into his palm. "I'll annul the marriage."

"You couldn't. Tony would fight it."

"Of course he'd fight it. He's a schemer." Teppis stared down at her. "Would you fight it, too?"

"Mr. T., a wife's duty is to her husband you always say."

"I could rip my brains out. Lulu, you got married to spite me."

"H.T., I'll prove you're wrong by spending the rest of my life making it up to you."

"I'm sick."

"You must forgive me, H.T."

"I don't want to see you. You leave this room."

"H.T., punish me, but don't hurt Tony."

"Don't hurt Tony! You disgust me. You're a tramp. Lulu, you ain't capable of thinking of nobody but yourself. I'm not saying another thing. You could drop dead, I wouldn't even look at your grave." His arms upraised, he started to advance on her.

Lulu prepared to flee the room. "Come back here," Teppis said. "I don't want you to leave like this."

"I worship you, H.T."

"You're a common whoor."

"H.T., I don't care what you do. I'll always say, 'God bless you.'"

"You've shortened my life." He pointed to the door, his mouth quivering.

"H.T., please listen to me."

"Get out of here."

When she was gone, Teppis began to tremble all over his body. He stood in the center of the room, shaking visibly. "It's a wonder I don't pop a blood vessel," he said aloud. The sound of his voice must have calmed him a little, for he went to the interoffice phone, pressed the buzzer, and said hoarsely, "You send Collie up here right away."

A few minutes later Munshin was in the office. "How'd it come out?" he said as soon as he came in.

"You know what you are, Collie, you're a dummy," Teppis bawled at him. "You're an A-1 stupid moron."

"H.T.! What's up?"

"Lulu got married to Tony Tanner this morning."

"Oh, Jesus," said Collie.

"That Teddy Pope. I had him twisted into a pretzel."

"I'll bet you did, H.T."

"You shut up. This whole thing was your idea. I wash my hands of it."

"You're right, H.T."

"Don't you even know what's happening in front of you? A fact accompli is what Lulu gives me. I could cut her up."

"It's what that twot deserves."

"I'm nauseous. A dime-a-dozen comedian, a coarse person like Tony Tanner. I hate coarse people. Isn't there any class left in the world?"

"You're the class, H.T.," said Collie.

"Shut up." Teppis wandered around the room like an animal with a wound in its flank, and collapsed in a chair. "I made you, Collie," he stated, "and I can break you. I hate to think of what you were when I first knew you, a two-bit agent, a no-good."

"It wasn't as bad as that, I hope."

"Don't contradict me. I let you marry my only daughter, I made you my executive assistant, I let you produce your own pictures. I know you, Collie, I know your tricks, you'll cut my throat someday. But you won't because I'll break you first. Do you hear me? What's your ideas?"

Through the tirade Collie had stood calmly, almost placidly. "H.T., I'll be frank," he said with enthusiasm, "it's my fault about Tony. I admit it."

"You better admit it. I don't know what's the matter with you lately, Collie. You can't do nothing right these days. That Air Force boy. I'm sick every time I think of that movie we can't make all because you're such a miserable failure."

"H.T., I've learned everything from you," Collie said, "and I'm not worried. I know you can turn this into something tremendous. I even remember you saying that that's what failures were for, to give ideas." Collie extended his arms vigorously. "H.T., in my book, and I copy your book, you can do more with Tony than you ever could with Teddy. A lot of work, yes, but one thing I learned from ou, H.T., Teddy is through. You'll pick up the paper someday and he'll be in the can for scrounging around a character on the vice squad."

"You got a disgusting imagination," Teppis said hoarsely. "I'm a realist. So are you, H.T. I know there's not another studio in this town that could make a nickel handling Tony. But you can."

"My digestion is upset," Teppis said.

"I glimpse the kind of campaign you see for Tony. Tell me if I'm right. We'll make Lulu keep this marriage quiet, until we're done shooting her film. Then, we can make the announcement. Maybe even work out a big wedding party. The potential it gives us for building up Tony is tremendous. Tony Tanner," Munshin announced, "the kid who stole Lulu Meyers right from under a big lover-type like Teddy Pope. People will say, 'You've done it again, H.T.' And they'll be right."

Teppis failed to respond. "Don't give me compliments," he said, "I'm too upset. Do you know how my stomach feels?"

Munshin lit a cigarette and smoked in silence for some seconds. "The doctor told me you ought to lower your nervous tension," he said significantly.

"You're my son-in-law, and you're a pimp," Teppis burst out. He gave Collie a blank look. "Did you hear what Charley Eitel said to me once? He said, 'Mr. Teppis, we all got our peculiarities.' I didn't like the sound of it. Carlyle, there's word getting around."

"H.T., believe me. It isn't what you do or what you don't do, people will still talk about you."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"That's right."

"I haven't slept with a woman in ten years."

"It's the truth, H.T."

Teppis looked at the ceiling. "What kind of girl do you have in mind?"

"A sweet kid, H.T."

"I suppose you put her on the payroll."

"To tell the truth, I did. A friend of mine introduced me to her in Desert D'Or. Chief, it's better this way, believe me. The kid'll keep her mouth shut because who knows, she might have a career here. She's a cute little stock girl."

"That's what you always say, Collie."

"I had a talk with her. She'll button her lip tight as a virgin's bun."

"You're a foul-mouthed individual," Teppis informed him.

"She's really safe."

"If it weren't for Lottie, I'd fire you."

"A genius like you needs relaxation," Collie said. "It's wrong, H.T., to miss the fruits of life."

Teppis tapped one hand against the other. "All right, I want you to send her up."

"I'll have her here in five minutes."

"You get the hell out, Collie. You think a man can break the laws of society? Those laws are there for a purpose. Every time you send up a girl, I don't even want to see her again. I refuse to sleep with her."

"Nobody can work the way you do, H.T.," said Collie going out the door.

200

After a short interval, a girl in her early twenties with newly dyed honey-colored hair came in unannounced through a separate door to Teppis' office. She was wearing a gray tailored suit and very high heels, and her hair was caught in a snood. Her mouth was painted in a broad sensual stereotype of bowed lips which concealed the thin demure mouth beneath the lipstick.

"Sit down, doll, sit down right here," said Teppis pointing to a place on the couch beside him.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Teppis," said the girl.

"You can call me Herman."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"I like you, you're a nice-looking girl, you got class. Just tell me your first name because I don't remember last names."

"It's Bobby, Mr. Teppis."

He put a fatherly hand on her thigh. "You work here, Collie tells me."

"I'm an actress, Mr. Teppis. I'm a good actress."

"Sweetie, there's so many good actresses, it's a shame."

"Gee, I'm really good, Mr. Teppis," Bobby said.

"Then you'll get a chance. In this studio there's opportunity for real talent-types. Talent is in its infancy. There's a future for it."

"I'm glad you think so, Mr. Teppis."

"You married? You got a husband and kids."

"I'm divorced. It didn't work out. But I have two little girls."

"That's nice," Teppis said. "You got to plan for their future. I want you to try to send them to college."

"Mr. Teppis, they're still babies."

"You should always plan. I've given to charity all my life."

Teppis nodded. "I hope you got a career here, sweetie. You been here how long?"

"Just a couple of weeks."

"An actress got to have patience. That's my motto. I like you. You got problems. You're a human girl."

"Thank you, sir."

"Sweetie, move over, sit on my lap."

Bobby sat on his lap. Neither spoke for a minute.

"You listen to me," Teppis said in his hoarse thin voice, "what did Collie say to you?"

"He said I should do what you wanted, Mr. Teppis."

"You're not a blabbermouth?"

"No, Mr. Teppis."

"You're a good girl. You know there's nobody you can trust. Everybody tells everybody about everything. I can't trust you. You'll tell somebody. There's no trust left in the world."

"Mr. Teppis, you can trust me."

"I'm the wrong man to cross."

"Oh, I wouldn't cross a swell man like you. Am I too heavy on your lap, Mr. Teppis?"

"You're just right, sweetie." Teppis' breathing became more heavy. "What did you say," he asked, "when Collie said you should do what I wanted?"

"I said I would, Mr. Teppis."

"That's a smart girl."

Tentatively, she reached out a hand to caress his hair, and at that moment Herman Teppis opened his legs and let Bobby slip to the floor. At the expression of surprise on her face, he began to laugh. "Just like this, sweetie," he said, and down he looked at that-frightened female mouth, facsimile of all those smiling lips he had seen, so ready to be nourished at the fount of power, and with a shudder, he started to talk. "That's a good girlie, that's a good girlie, that's a good girlie," he said in a mild lost little voice, "you're just an angel darling, and I like you, and you understand, you're my darling darling, oh that's the ticket," said Teppis.

Not two minutes later, he showed Bobby genially to the door.

"I'll call you when to see me again, sweetheart," he said.

Alone in his office, he lit a cigar, and pressed the buzzer. "What time is the conference on *Song Of The Heart*?" he asked.

"In half an hour, sir."

"Tell Nevins I want to see his rushes before then. I'll be right down."

"Yessir."

Teppis ground out the cigar. "There's a monster in the human heart," he said aloud to the empty room, and to himself he whispered, "H.T., you're going to ruin yourself yet."

PART 5 | CHAPTER TWENTY

For the rest of the time I stayed in Desert D'Or, I quit the house I had had for so many months and took a furnished room at one of the few cheap places in the resort which rented by the week. Then I got a job. As if I wished to make a prophet of Collie Munshin, the job was for washing dishes. It was in an expensive restaurant where I had eaten often enough with Lulu in the past, and as a job it had the merit of paying the considerable wage of fifty-five dollars a week.

I could have had other jobs. I could have been a car-hop as Munshin had warned, or a parking-lot attendant, or I could have gotten work of some sort in one hotel or another, but I chose to wash dishes as though my eight-hour stint in the steam and the grease and the heat, with my fingers burned by plates which came too hot from the machine and my eyes reddened by sweat, was a sort of poor man's Turkish bath for me, the better to melt down three months of moral fat. And when I was done for the day, I would grab a meal in a drugstore, an expensive drugstore, but it was the cheapest I could find, for it would have been easier to come upon a yacht than a hashhouse in that part of the desert, and the restaurant where I worked did not feed the help, except for what help I could get from an occasional friendly waitress—the last of Munshin's predictions—who would slip me a Caesar salad or a peach melba which I would eat with water-puckered fingers, hardly missing a beat on the plates as they emerged from that gargyle of a machine which threw its shadow over me, while the most simple lesson of class, the lament of the dishwasher, steamed furiously in my mind: did those gluttons out there, those rich gluttons, have to eat on so many plates?

At the other end of the machine, feeding me the gravy-rimmed crockery and the egg-incrusted forks, was a fifty-year-old dishwasher with gray hair and lean shoulders, who did not say a hundred words in all the weeks we worked together. He worked in order to drink, and drank in order to die, and like all drunks persisted in living, his hangovers strung like morning wash under the pale sunlight of the neon tubes in the kitchen, so that he retched for the first four hours of work and nibbled remnants for the rest of his shift, a choice bit of filet here, a pure string bean there, the perfect sparrow choosing golden grains from a horse-ball feast, but nervously, waiting for the evening rain puddle when he could satisfy the thirst for which hunger was only a substitute. Watching his hands claw the occasional prize into his mouth and wipe the rest down the slophole of his work table, I came to envy him more than I had envied anyone in Desert D'Or. His work had such advantages over mine. I did not begrudge him the food, but it was

202

sore to know that his end of the machine was ten degrees cooler, and his plates were cold when he scraped and stacked them into the racking boxes while they erupted at my end of the tunnel in boiling water, half-live lobsters making one last gasp to scratch their way out of the pot. I learned again the great envy of working at the bottom where the thought that one does not own a Cadillac is as unimportant as the infantryman's knowledge that he will never have a General's star, but what galls is that the man on the next cot in the endless barracks at the bottom has the soft job, is on permanent latrine duty let us say, and therefore is granted the benefit of missing morning inspection.

I had found the orphanage again and I was home, I might just as well never have left home. After work, after my meal in the expensive drugstore, I would go back to my furnished room and I would bathe—what luxuries have the poor—and lie naked and powdered on my bed, covered with heat rash, reading the newspaper until I fell asleep. That way I passed three or four weeks, my mind stupefied by pointless calculations. I would spend an hour going over my budget, deciding on any particular night that I could reduce my expenses to no less than thirty-four dollars a week, which meant after all deductions were taken from my pay, that I could never bank more than fifty dollars a month. So it would be six hundred dollars saved in a year, and after six years and eight months of dodging lobsters, I would recover what I had lost in twelve days with Lulu; and this thought would give me a sort of melancholy glee, enabling me to relish like a saint counting his sores, how hard the work would be tomorrow.

It was all quite arbitrary. I still had most of my three thousand dollars and I did not have to work, but with Lulu gone, there was really no other choice than to sit down and begin the apprenticeship I had delayed so long of learning to be a writer. Feeling the fear this ambition gave to me, I was ready to fly anywhere, to Africa if necessary, but one can always find Africa, and I did not have to take a step from Desert D'Or. Waiting for me was the stinkhole and the furnace at the back of my modern restaurant, and I buried myself for a week, and another week, and five weeks after that, mortifying my energy, whipping my spirit, preparing myself for that other work I looked on with religious awe, while all the time, romance being the hardest of the weeds which grow in a home for orphans, I never could rid myself of the sweet idea that one day Lulu would come to the restaurant, she would blunder back to the kitchen, she would see me in my dishwasher's apron and begin to weep, she would love me as she never had before, and the essence of magic would be tasted; one dropped to the bottom only to gain momentum for the leap to the top.

It could not go on forever. My fairy tales began to dissolve in the gossip columns, and each night I titillated my prickly heat by forcing myself to read the film news from the capital. There were many reports of Lulu's marriage, and columnists were fond of calling it "The Love Match of the Year." Those fan magazines which had not been embarrassed by signed articles, "Why I Dream About Teddy Pope And Me—by Lulu Meyers," could afford to give space to the fabulous piggy bank of Tony and Lulu Tanner. The story, gelded by the memorable prose of those magazines to the use of the word 'kiss,' declared that every time Tony 'kissed' Lulu, or Lulu 'kissed' Tony, the winner of the bonanza would drop a coin in their piggy bank. "It fills up so quickly," Lulu said or her press agent said, "that Tony and I are always running short of small change."

How true it all was, or at least how partially true, I could not tell, for once I had taken the job, I buried myself and never went to see Eitel or Faye or Dorothea or anyone I knew in the resort. The result was that I believed the gossip columns and the paradox was that it cured me of magic; I even came to the point where I began to think of quitting my job and starting to write, and finally one evening I went to see Eitel.

I had supposed that everything would be the same. Nothing had happened to me, and so I could not conceive that anything had happened to anyone else. At most, when I thought of Eitel and Elena I imagined them eating at a quiet table in my restaurant, or Dorothea and Pelley on a loud carouse, or Marion making a contact. More than that had happened, however. The night I visited Eitel, he was beginning the job of moving his belongings from Desert D'Or to the capital. He had broken up with Elena, he told me, and she was living now with Marion Faye.

In the hours we sat together drinking, I got the story from him and I hated to hear what he told me. There was finally nothing left of himself nor anyone else, and I heard details which were very painful. It was all his fault, he began by saying. After Dorothea's party, he knew that he would have to make up his mind about the offer from Crane. He could not postpone a decision much longer and there were only two choices. He could remain in Desert D'Or and continue to be the black-market thoroughbred of Munshin's secret stable, or he could go back to the capital. But to go back with Elena did not seem plausible; she was hardly the mate for a commercial man. So his thoughts without any hint of something new chased themselves around the old circle, and after the night Eitel had wept in her arms, he lived in constant distrust of the tenderness he felt for her until the day he recognized it was the sad grudging concern one feels for a person it is necessary to hurt.

That he knew the morning he picked up the phone, heard Beda's voice, and realized how careful he had been until this instant to forget the conversation they had had the night of Dorothea's party. But it was hardly possible to forget it now. Into his ear came Beda's voice. "Look, baby, I'm putting it to you. *Sans façons*, will you and Elena come over tonight?"

"Who else will be there?" asked Eitel.

Sans façons, I said. Zenlia is beginning to give me a headache talking about the lush virtues of Elena." Beda pronounced the word "lush" as if it were completely droll.

Eitel was quite agitated. "Look, I'll call you back," he said. "I want to talk it over with Elena."

Her reaction surprised him. He had expected, he realized, that she would refuse the invitation out of hand, but instead she acted kittenish and yet was very far away from him. "What do you think will happen here?" she giggled and added just a trifle seriously, "What are we supposed to do?"

"You're not signing a contract to do anything."

"I feel funny, Charley."

"So do I." He shrugged casually. "Let's not go," he said and felt a certain tension to prepare himself against disappointment if she should agree.

Elena merely looked thoughtful. "Do you think that wife of his is attractive?"

"Well, she's certainly handsome," Eitel said, "but I can't say she's my type."

"What a liar you are." Elena's face was cheerful. "I think Don Beda is very attractive," she said, thereby startling him. "But of course not as much as you."

"Of course not."

"You're angry and I was just warning you," she teased.

"I'm not angry," he insisted.

"If you want to go, I'll go," Elena said. "But I think we're crazy."

He made a call to Beda, and for the rest of the day found himself in a state of curious excitement. From the past came a memory he had not recalled in years. When he was thirteen or fourteen he had kissed a girl for the first time, and before he said good night he begged a promise from the girl to see her the next evening. All that following day he had walked the streets troubled and excited, feeling that life itself was there before him like a banquet of mysterious surprises. He had been in a torment of impatience for evening to come.

Now, he could feel the echoes of that emotion, and the day passed with a kind of pleasure, a feeling that he was young again. It was marred only by Elena's silence. What a depressing woman she was, he told himself angrily. Certain enough, that evening just as they were getting into his car, she turned to him, a wifely hand on his arm, and said, "Charley, maybe this is a mistake."

"What a time to decide," he groaned.

"You want to go very much, don't you?"

"Let's call them up. It doesn't mean all that to me."

She looked unhappy. "I'm not being a prude," she said. "It's just that it would be better if it didn't feel so planned, I mean if it just happened."

"You told me you used to do things like this to make your psychoanalyst think you were more interesting. What's more planned than that?"

"I was immature then," Elena said. "Besides I didn't really enjoy it, not really. It's only with you; I can." She kissed him softly on the cheek. "Charley, I want you to promise tonight won't make any difference between us."

"We don't even know that something is going to happen." With that, he kicked the starter of his car and they were off.

For a while that evening at Beda's, it looked indeed as if nothing would happen. During several hours they merely sat around and drank, and it was not pleasant drinking. Zenlia was sullen. She would smoke a cigarette out of a long holder, she would blow smoke into the air, and smile distantly at something clever that Eitel or Beda might say.

But as Elena got drunk, she turned merry. Beda was giving her compliments, and under the praise she grew more sure of herself, she began to make silly little remarks which were charming. Her green eyes had light in them, her lips were moist and separated, and her skin glowed against her dark dress. Eitel contributed a word from time to time and tried to catch Zenlia's eye. She seemed indifferent to him; for that matter she seemed indifferent to everyone. One of the few times Zenlia spoke, it was to say in her clear precise voice, "You act like a cousin of mine, Elena."

"She must be a dope," Elena answered.

"No, she's a virgin," Zenlia said with a bored proud look.

"You women look like the Graces," Beda said.

"The disgraces," Elena giggled, and when everyone laughed, Eitel could feel her blossom.

After that, the atmosphere changed. Beda began to dance with Zenlia, then with Elena. Another round of drinks, and Beda said, "Everybody's in a balling mood, thank God," putting a period to the preliminaries.

Eitel wore the horns that night. After a while the party moved completely away from him, and he gave up the pretense and sat in a chair alone, smoking a cigarette, sipping a drink, trying neither to look at Elena nor to ignore her completely.

Eventually it came to an end. Elena saw him sitting by himself, and she walked over and asked, "Do you want to go home?"

"No, not until you do."

"Well, I do now."

They said good-by at the door as formally as if they had been playing bridge for the evening, but before they drove away Eitel could hear the sound of laughter behind the fence which enclosed the patio of Beda's house.

On the ride he was silent, and when Elena put a tentative hand on his leg he remained absolutely immobile, neither giving himself to her by so much as the width of a hair, nor drawing away. It was the same when they went to bed. He lay on his back, his eyes staring at the ceiling with such concentration that he felt at last as if he could see in the dark. Elena stirred restlessly. She sighed once or twice. He could sense how she hesitated to speak, formed words, and then was silent. When her hand touched his, and her fingers tried to squeeze his palm, he stiffened all over his body.

"Don't touch me," he said to her in the darkness.

"Charley . . ." she began.

"I'm trying to sleep." He turned his back to her.

"You wanted to go," she said mildly, carefully.

It was too much. "I didn't know what a stinking stupid animal you are," he heard himself whispering to her.

"Charley, I love you," she said.

"Love me? You love everything," he said. "A dog, an ape, a four-eyed horse." But he had only begun. "You love me," he repeated again, "yes, you certainly do when you can give your yelps and yowls to any passing stranger." He was trembling with fury.

"Charley, it wasn't the same," she said in a small voice. "I don't love them. I despise them. It's just a cockeyed part of me." She was beginning to cry. "I love you, Charley," she said still again, "Don't talk to me like this. Please."

"Love, Elena?" he said. "Love is just a big noise."

What he could not bear was the thought that she did not love him utterly, without thought or interest in anything else alive.

She wept then. He could hear her struggle to control her grief, and in the darkness each small sound she made, for she never wept loudly, became magnified in his ear. He heard her slip out of bed, grope her way to the bathroom, felt like a whip against his closed eyes the momentary glare of the bathroom light before she closed the door, and then he was alone, left with nothing but his rage, his cold animosity toward her, and the knowledge that Elena was crying in all her loneliness, her poor chilled feet standing against the stone of the bathroom floor. Eitel tried to shut her from his mind, and all the while his own feet chilled, his body shuddered from moist cold perspiration. "I'll never touch her again," he swore to himself, and even as he was swearing it, he knew he could not leave her alone in the bathroom crying into the hard polished face of the mirror, the tile, and the chromium. "It's really my fault," he thought, and he got out of bed and went to her. She trembled in his arms, her body was ice, and for minutes while he soothed her and tried to calm her weeping, his anger buried in the tenderness he felt obliged to offer, he could do no more than say, "It's all right, baby, it's all right."

She seemed almost not to know that he was there. "Oh, Charley, you must forgive me," she wept at last. "I kept thinking you would never talk to me any more, and you see, there's nothing, there just isn't anything when I begin to think . . . I mean, without you. Oh, Charley, forgive me. I swear I'll make it up to you, I'll spend the rest of my life." She was babbling now. In another moment she would be hysterical. But as if it were too important to bury herself in hysteria, to leave one thing she must say unsaid, he could feel her clutching him like a broken hearted child. "You see," she hiccupped, her sobbing uncontrollable, "I acted that way because, oh Charley . . . I was the center of attention."

Then he hugged her to him, led her back to the bedroom, and exhausted she fell asleep in his arms while he whispered to her, "It's all right, baby, do you hear, it's all right," whispering it even after she had fallen asleep, whispering it into the darkness while the chorus of what she had said, "I was the center of attention . . . I was the center . . ." revolved its sad record into his sleep and into his dreams. He felt almost happy. He had learned how he valued her.

All next day he felt the vulnerability of his body as though he had been whipped with the rung of a chair. It was only after quarrels or crises that he could feel love for Elena the way he wished. Yet at the edge of this emotion he was surprised at himself. Was the memory to be cured so easily?

Eitel learned. Everything was all right until they tried to make love again. Then the difficulties began. Elena was stiff to his touch, she was constrained, she was far away, and it was no better for him. In the embrace, he hated her. It was impossible not to remember how she had given herself to the others, and each of the sounds she made now was only the repetition of the night at Beda's, so that whatever expression might cross her face became deformed to him and infected the past until he saw beyond Beda the legion of her numberless lovers to whom she had always given herself in exactly this way. Thus, losing the pride that it was he who gave her everything, that there was finally something worth while about himself, Eitel was stripped; he had never felt so worthless.

Elena sensed it of course. She was shy and difficult in his embrace and her attempts to stir herself merely offended him. For all the minutes they made love he could hear nothing in his brain but, "Love, love is a big noise," and he felt it spreading from him like a poison fog which must corrode the atmosphere, turn bone to rubber, and spirit to glue, so that he not only hated her and hated himself but the life of everything. What seemed most odious to him was that they had been tender to each other, they had forgiven one another, they had wept, and yet he did not love her, she did not love him, no one ever loved anyone. These things he would think through their embrace and afterward would lie beside her, even caress her with a cold cunning which asked no more than that she not make a scene. And each night, or almost every night for a week, Elena would encourage him to love her and then would lie stiffly, while he knew she was thinking of all he had said in his rage. He would even tell himself with grudging respect that she had developed since he had known her; in their first weeks together she could not have gone a day like this, and now she had managed a week.

During that time, he finished his script. Through all of the new draft with its tricks, its devices, its false sentiment, and its easy satire, he had been dreading to do the scene where Freddie returned to the seminary and the story was finally wrapped in the chorus of angels' voices. Eitel had had no conceit that he was writing his original story; he knew too well how clever was the new script, how effective, how brilliant of its professional sort, but there was the problem: it was so well done in its own way that the end could not be completely artificial; as a commercial script it demanded its own kind of false sincerity, and he had not been able to imagine how he would provide it. But the last scene turned out perfectly; it was a marvel of duplicity, he admired the way he wrote so well about things he did not believe at all. Eitel almost felt powerful.

208

The script, he had decided, was much too good to give to Munshin on the terms they had made, and therefore it was time to alter the contract. Sitting at his desk, working for Collie's profit, his mind would come back to Crane, and like a salesman with his samples at the door, he would tell himself all the familiar arguments: for a man who had been indifferent to politics these ten years it was a meaningless crusade to be stubborn. The names he hated to give were the names of men who had slandered his own name; in the last months he had learned if nothing else that he was not an artist, and what was a commercial man without his trade? The arguments knocked at the door, they tipped their hat and came inside to leave a sample, departing with the promise they would be back again.

Eitel wrote a cautious letter to Crane, explaining that soon he might be ready, and when one of the regular phone calls came from Munshin, Eitel told him it would be weeks before he could finish the script.

"What's the delay?" Munshin asked.

"Stop worrying. You'll make a fortune on this," Eitel said easily, and began to consider his case with the coldest logic. He left Elena for a day and flew up to the capital to see his lawyer and visit his business agent. There was developing in him the complete confidence that he could tear himself free of Elena.

The end came more easily than he had expected. As she had been promising for so long, she had her hair cut one morning and it turned out badly. To his indifferent eye she looked like a clipped rabbit. He would stare at her from time to time, not quite able to believe that she was anything more to him than some kitchen drudge he hired by the day. While he sat in a dumb reverie one morning watching her work, he could recognize how hopeless she became the moment his eyes were on her. She was sweeping with a broom, but so absent-mindedly, so despondently, that three times he watched her move the refuse from one corner to the other and then back again. Eitel had had a telegram from Crane the night before. There would be committee hearings in two weeks, and Crane was delighted that he would co-operate. When Elena asked him what the telegram contained, he told her.

"I guess it means you'll be making pictures again," she said.

"I guess it does."

"Well . . ." She could think of nothing to say because actually there was only one question she wished to ask and she hardly dared.

"When are you going?" she said a little later, waiting he knew for the promise that she would go with him. That was all it meant to her, he thought bitterly.

"Couple of weeks I think," he answered, and they did not talk about it again.

She had finished sweeping finally and was sitting at the dining table, staring through the picture window at the yucca tree, stoically, like a peasant, much as her parents must once have stared

with stony eyes out the dirty window of their candy store. He came up behind her, touched her shoulder, and said, "You know, I really like your hair this way."

"You hate it," she said.

"No, I wouldn't say that."

Tears forced themselves out of her eyes and she looked furious at how they betrayed her for she must have sworn she would not weep. He moved across the table from her and watched Elena's fingers tear at her nails. From his sure distance he felt a kind of sweet sorrow that neither he nor she had been able to make what they should have made. Invariably he felt such sentiments when an affair ended, and if he were ashamed afterward of how spurious his emotions were, it encouraged him now to feel he could finish their affair today.

"Elena," he said, "there's something I want to talk about."

"You want me to go away," she said. "All right, I will."

"It isn't that exactly . . ." he started to say.

"You're done," she said. "All right, then, you're done."

"No, now wait . . ."

"I knew it would end," Elena said.

"It's my fault," Eitel said quickly. "I'm no good for anybody."

"Who cares whose fault it is? You're . . . you're terrible," she said and began to cry.

"Now, don't be an idiot. Look, little monkey," he said; trying to caress her shoulder.

She threw off his hand. "I hate you."

"I don't blame you," said Eitel.

"You're so good with words. I really hate you. You . . . you stink," Elena said crudely, hopeless, while he winced for her.

"You're right," he said, "I stink."

Her fingers tapped on the table in a monotonous irritating rhythm which had nothing to do with the emotions she felt. "I'm getting out of here," she said, "I'm going to pack my stuff. Thank you for a lovely time." How pitiful was her talent for sarcasm, Eitel was thinking.

"Why don't I leave?" he asked. "You can stay here. It's your place too."

"It isn't my place. It never was."

"Elena, don't say that."

"Oh, shut up," she said, "it isn't my place," and she began to cry again.

"Elena, we can still get married," he said, and knew the moment he uttered the words that he did not mean them so insincerely as he had thought.

She didn't answer. She merely fled the room. In a moment he could hear her slamming drawers, and it was not difficult to picture how she heaped things from one bag into another, trying not to show her tears, and therefore sobbing uncontrollably. At last he was out of it. He had only to wait until she was gone.

But it became more difficult than he had expected. He did not like to hear her weeping in the bedroom; it shivered the calm he had settled over himself and opened a question in his mind.

What was she going to do? He held on to himself as if it were necessary to support a heavy weight for five minutes, for five minutes more, and then another five. It was absolutely necessary not to weaken; every bad marriage which lasted beyond its time had continued because it took so long to pack a bag. He even considered going out for a walk, but he could not do that. He would have to call her a taxi, see her into it, close the door, even wave good-by with the sad sheepish grin of the man who knows he has not done well and wishes he could do better. Abruptly it occurred to him that he would probably look to her at that moment as Collie Munshin must have looked when he left her in Desert D'Or. Something turned over in Eitel. This was *Elena*! She should not be treated so badly.

He could hear her phoning for a cab, hear her voice stumble as she gave their address, and the sound of the phone being dropped back upon its cradle. Then her bag was snapped shut, then the other bag, Eitel was ready to weep at the thought that all she had accumulated in her life could be crammed into the space of two pieces of luggage.

When she came out of the bedroom, he was ready to capitulate. She could have done anything; she could have taken a step toward him, or said a tender word, or merely have looked helpless, and he would have had to do something; possible he would even have promised to take her with him to the capital.

But she did not do any of these things. In a dry bitter voice, Elena muttered, "I thought you might be interested to know where I'm going."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm going to Marion Faye's house."

It brought back all of his hatred. "Do you think you really ought to?" he said in a cold voice.

"Do you care?" asked Elena.

He resented enormously that she should use this trick to make him unable to let her go. "I suppose I don't care," he said. "I'm just curious. When did you arrange it all?" His throat felt sore as though very soon it would be an effort to speak.

"I called him yesterday. Does that surprise you? Did you think you'd have to kick me out? All right." She cleared her throat. "Maybe I'll become a prostitute. Don't worry. I'm not trying to make you feel sorry. You think I'm a prostitute anyway, so how could you feel sorry?" Her eyes were dull. This was one time he knew she would not burst into tears. "In fact you always thought of me as a prostitute," Elena said, "but you don't know what I think of you. You think I can't live without you. Maybe I know better."

There was the sound of the taxi coming up the drive. Eitel started to get out of his chair, but Elena picked up her suitcase. Like an actress she turned around to make a last speech. "At least for once I'm giving somebody the gate," she said, and was out the door. Eitel remained standing until the taxi had driven away, and then he sat down and began to wait for her telephone call. It seemed absolutely certain to him that she would phone, but an hour went by, and then the afternoon, and much of the night. He sat drinking, too weary even to pry an ice cube from the tray, and as it got dark, he sighed to himself, not knowing if he were relieved that he was free, or if he were more miserable than he had ever been.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Eitel had finished telling the story, we continued to sit in the living room amid the litter of a dozen half-filled cartons and several pieces of luggage. "Do you want me to help you pack?" I said at last.

He shook his head. "No, somehow, I enjoy doing it by myself. I'm afraid it's the last opportunity I'll have to be alone for quite some time."

I guessed what he meant. "Everything's been arranged for you to testify?"

Eitel shrugged. "You may as well know. It's certain you'll be reading about it in the newspapers soon enough."

"What will I read?"

He did not answer the question directly. "You see, after Elena left," he said, "I couldn't bear to stay here. Not for the first few days. I drove into the capital early that morning, and I went to see my lawyer. There's no use giving you all the bits and pieces. I must have spoken to a dozen people. The amazing thing is how complicated it is."

"Then you're going to have your secret session?" I prodded.

"No." Eitel looked away while he lit a cigarette. "I'm afraid I can't say that. They're not letting me off that easy. You see, in their own way those people are artists. If you admit that you're ready for a secret session, they know that you'll testify in public session, too. It's as simple as that." Eitel smiled at himself. "Oh, I gave them a bit of trouble. I walked out of a conference when they told me the session would have to be public, and I went to my lawyer's office, and I raved, and I ranted, but all the time I knew I was going to give them what they wanted." He took a careful swallow on his drink. "If I had had something to return to in Desert D'Or . . . well, in that case, I don't know, I won't look for excuses. The fact is I didn't have anything. All I could do is recognize how clever they are. They know that one wins an empire by demanding an acre at a time. After we'd agreed on a public session, there came the business of the names." He gave a little mirthless laugh. "Oh, the names. You have no idea how many names there are. Of course I never belonged to *that* political party, and so it was obvious right along that I could never be the sort of witness who qualifies for Man Of The Year, but still they knew ways to use me. I had several conferences with two detectives Crane uses for his investigations. They looked like All-American guard and tackle posing for a photograph, or perhaps they looked like two robust priests. I wouldn't know particularly. I didn't have time. They knew so much more about me than I knew about them.

I never realized how many political causes a man could put his name to in ten years. Who had asked me, they wanted to know, to sign the petition against the exploitation of the Jukes family in the salt mines of Alabama? That sort of thing. A hundred, two hundred, four hundred signatures. I could just as well have been on a couch expectorating my childhood. A little word at this cocktail party with that dangerous political operator—some poor fool of a writer, mind you, who liked to think of himself as a liberal with muscles—he had given me a paper to sign." Eitel felt his bald spot as though to ascertain how many hairs he had lost in the process. "I found it very confusing for a while. There were certain people they wanted me to accuse of being active and dangerous, and there were others, particularly a couple of movie stars I know at Supreme and Magnum whom they were absolutely disinterested in. When I finally began to understand what sort of arrangement existed between the Committee and the studios we began to make progress. You see they had a list of fifty people prepared for me in advance. Seven of those people I could swear I never met in my life but it seems I'm wrong. There were so many big parties after all, and my two football players knew all about them. "You were both in the same room on such and such a night at so-and-so's party" they would announce, and finally I would produce the sort of political conversation that one might have had. Toward the end, they even got friendly. One of them took the trouble to tell me he liked a picture I had made. Finally, it seemed to me as if I liked my detectives just as much as some of the people whose names I'm going to give. For that matter, half the names on my list have repulsive personalities." Eitel smiled wearily. "The interrogation took two days. Then Crane was back and I went to see him. He was very pleased with my co-operation, but it seems there were still more things demanded of me. I hadn't done enough."

"Not enough?" I said.

"Not nearly enough. There were still a few acres to be picked. Crane called my lawyer in, and they both took the trouble to tell me that I had to have a statement to release to the newspapers after I testified. Crane had written it already for me. Of course I was free to use different wording, but he had thought, he said, to show me the sort of thing which was probably best. Later my lawyer gave another suggestion. Everybody seemed to think it would be very practical to take out a paid advertisement in the trade papers explaining how proud I was to have testified, and how I hoped that others in my position would do their duty in the same way. Would you care to see the statement I'm giving to the newspapers after I testify next week?"

"I'd like to see it," I said.
I glanced over a few lines:

It has taken me a year of wasted and misplaced effort to recognize the useful and patriotic function of the Committee, and I testify today without duress, proud to be able to contribute my share to the defense of this country against all infiltration and subversion. With a firm knowledge of the democratic heritage we share, I can only add that it is the duty of every citizen to aid the Committee in its work with whatever knowledge he may possess.

"It seems about par for the course," I said.

Eitel, however, was off on other subjects. "You ought to know," he remarked, "that Crane keeps his word. While I was in his office he called up people at different studios, and said a word or two for me. It was the one part of the process I found surprising. My mind's too subtle. I didn't expect he would pick up the phone in front of me."

"What about your script?" I asked. I had a headache.

"That's the funny part, Sergius. You know when I started to feel ashamed? It was at the idea of double-crossing Collie Munshin. I felt I was obliged to see him first, and I told Collie that I intended to sell the script as my own. He didn't even get angry. I think he was expecting it and had made his plans. Collie just said he was glad I would be back, and he talked me into staying with him. Do you know I realized that he likes me and I was very moved by that. We worked out a new contract. Collie and I will split evenly provided he's able to talk Teppis into letting me direct the film. Tomorrow, when I get in, everything will be settled. All I have to do is approve the galley-sheet on my advertisement."

"But how do you feel?" I asked.

"Nothing so extraordinary, Sergius. You'd be amazed," he said. "I'm going to work now, that's all. At least I've been honest with myself about my part in all this. In the end that's the only kind of self-respect you have left. To be able to say to yourself that you're rather disgusting." He put his cigarette into his mouth and took it out again. "By the way," he murmured, and he looked a trifle apologetic, "I've been thinking that perhaps it was a trifle presumptuous for me to tell you to turn down that offer from Supreme."

"I don't regret it," I said not altogether truthfully.

"Are you sure?" He rotated his glass in his fingers. "Sergius, I've been entertaining the idea of inviting you to be my assistant."

Suddenly I was angry. "Did they put you up to it?" I asked. "Are they still thinking of making my movie?"

He was hurt. "You go too far, Sergius."

"Maybe I do," I said. "But what if I hadn't come over to-night? Would you have thought of making your offer then?"

"No," Eitel said, "I have to admit I didn't think of it until this moment. But that shouldn't matter so much. You can't keep polishing knives and forks all your life."

"Let's forget it," I said, and looked at my watch. As I got up to go, I said abruptly, "Do you want me to keep an eye on Elcna?"

214

There was something almost forlorn about Eitel in the middle of his packing cases. "Elena?" he asked, "well, I don't know. Suppose you do what you want to do."

"Have you heard from her?"

He seemed about to say no, and then nodded. "I got a letter from her. Quite a long letter. It was forwarded to me while I was in the city."

"Are you going to answer her?" I persisted.

"No, I just wouldn't know how to do that," he said.

Eitel came to the door to say good-by. As I was walking down the drive he called to wait, and came out his door. "I'll mail you her letter," he said. "I don't want to keep it, and I don't want to tear it up."

"Should I write to you after I read it?"

This, too, he considered. "I don't think so," he said carefully.

"You see, I get the feeling that if I allowed myself, I would miss her very much."

"Well, good-by."

For a moment he gave his charming smile. "Please forgive me, Sergius, for that offer as my assistant."

"I guess you meant it well," I said.

He clapped me on the shoulder and turned back to his house.

I did not receive the letter until the end of the week, and in fact I only saw Eitel one more time. Before the letter came, I went out to see Elena and Marion, but it was a difficult evening and she was shy with me and Marion was unpleasant so I gave it up. In the meantime I had the opportunity to hear more than enough about Eitel; each night in my furnished room I would read some item about his fortunes. For the week after he testified the gossip columnists wrote about him as if he were the hero of a sermon, and when that had worn itself down I saw only a few more items. There was an announcement by Supreme Pictures that they had bought an original screenplay entitled *Saints And Lovers*, written by Charles Francis Eitel and Carlyle Munshin, to be directed by Eitel and produced by Munshin. If anyone had occasion to wonder how Munshin could have collaborated with Eitel, it was explained in most of the gossip columns that Munshin and Teppis had convinced Eitel to testify before the Committee. It was the sort of story which could not be probed too carefully, but indeed it never was, and Eitel slipped out of the news for a while. He was busy casting his picture I would see by a line in the papers every now and again.

Long before this he had sent me Elena's letter, and I read it through, stumbling through page after page of almost illegible handwriting. She wrote with blots and smudges, crossing out words, writing uphill and downhill, adding notes and parentheses and arrows in the margins, and her letter seemed a curious distance from the conversation I had had with Eitel in his living room.

Dear Charley,

I can just see you smile when you read this. What a stupid girl she is you're going to think, but there's nothing new in that because we both know I'm stupid and I'm crude, and besides I remember what you once said to me, "Elena, don't use all that psychoanalytical talk, and think that that's going to make you cultured." Well, you were right, and that's what I was hoping people would think until you punctured that idea. But you couldn't begin to imagine how scared I still am to write a letter to you, you're such a critic, but in high school I got my best marks in English, it's true whether you care to believe it or not, I even got A's, I didn't tell you, but then you wouldn't have believed it no matter what I said. I hate to write this way Charley because I know I sound like a fishwife as you took the trouble to tell me one time, but the important thing for me is that I'm even able to write you a letter.

But I'm not saying what I want to say at all. I started to write this to thank you because in your own way you were very good to me, and you're a much kinder man than you think about yourself, and I could cry for you Charley when I think about you, except I can't yet, why should I lie? I still feel bitter to you, but what I hope is that five years from now or I don't know when, some years in the future, I'll really be mature enough to be able to think about you and be grateful because even though you were a snob and what a snob you are Charley, you hated being that way just as I hate being the way I am, and I mean it.

I don't like being abusive to you and yet every time I start to say something that's the way it ends up. Because you see I had a different motive to writing this letter. I wanted to tell you not to worry. I know the kind of man you are and once or twice I started thinking that I ought to tell you certain things I never told you before so that maybe you wouldn't be so full of guilt, and I wish for your sake Charley you were rid of it because it makes you do something very stupid and you don't know how mad it gets a woman. Charley get rid of your guilt, easy for me to say isn't it, but don't show it to a woman, don't let her know. It's so insulting and degrading. How do you think I felt knowing you were ashamed of me and that you really loved being in such a situation because that way you were paying off your guilt. *Is it my fault you felt guilty?* That's why you changed your story to a priest. I haven't been to confession in twelve years, and I'll never go again, but I know that much about you. You might just as well be religious because you're a hypocrite like all the supposedly religious people I knew when I was a kid.

216

You see I started this letter for one reason only. I wanted to tell you not to feel guilty because it's ridiculous. You don't owe me anything and I owe you a lot. Something very disturbing has happened since I've been with Marion Faye, as a matter of fact it happened before that, the night we were with your friend D.B. and his wife Z, and we ended up getting exactly what we deserved, and I hate the memory of that night,—except I don't know because probably we wouldn't have gotten anywhere anyway. But if I'm really going to tell you the truth, it happened much much earlier than that, even before I met you, the night before as a matter of fact, and you know what the truth is? I don't think I ever loved anybody in my whole life. Not even myself. I don't know what love is. I thought I did with you, but I don't. Because you see I know I don't love Marion, and yet, I'm not saying this to hurt you Charley, but sexually, and Marion's very unhealthy, I don't want to give the particulars but there's one way he's like you, he thinks if he's doing something dirty that's going to change the world or something of the sort. Anyway there is something about him so that in certain ways sexually it's just as good as it was with you. I know what you're going to think. You're going to say of course it's always been like that with her but it isn't true, and the first time I slept with Marion, that time when you and I were getting started, I didn't want it to be good with him that night and it wasn't because I wanted to believe I was in love with you. I even lied to you afterward and said I knew Marion when I was a kid but it's not true. I met him in a bar right here in town, and I let him pick me up one afternoon and I knew he was a pimp, I knew his reputation, and even if I hadn't he made no bones about it. Now, I know that I can't fool myself any longer, and that I'm no good, I'm no good Charley, I'm a phony like everybody else which I never thought about myself. My mother always used to say I was no good, and she's a stupid jealous woman as I told you, but all of a sudden yesterday I thought to myself what if she's right, and that's frightening Charley. I don't know how to express it but what if all the stupid jealous people are right?

Anyway what is much more to the point is something I never told you about at all. And that is that the day I left you, I had a funny little moment when I wanted to laugh because you know what popped into my head?—"Well, girls, here we go again." That's what I thought, and the reason is that I said the same thing to Collie, that for once I was giving a man the gate. My doctor used to tell me that I had the idea I was a queen and an empress and a man-eating tiger and of course he was right. I'm very conceited at bottom. I want to give you the best example of how stupid I am about myself. When Collie went out the door and he and I were through, do you know what I did? *I tried to commit suicide.* I was always too ashamed to tell you but it's the truth and the funny thing is that I told Marion about it the first afternoon I knew him about how after Collie left I just sat in the hotel room Collie had rented for me, a horrible hotel room cause Collie was always so cautious, and the terrible thing about it was that I thought I loved him for so many years and then toward the end I thought I hated him but the fact of the matter was that I wasn't feeling anything.

517

And then I started to drink by myself which I almost never do and I just felt alone and just a little bit scared, but the trouble was I started to get dizzy and I got so terribly dizzy that the room would wouldn't stand still and the weird thing about it was that this seemed worse to me than anything else, I had the feeling I was going to die if the room didn't stop moving, and so I don't know how I got to that point but I had the feeling I had to kill myself or otherwise I was going to die—isn't that fantastic? Anyway I had a package of sleeping tablets in my room and I took all of them, there must have been five or six, and after I took them I was worried I was going to throw them up but it didn't happen that way, I just got dizzier, and then there was a thought that kept coming into my mind. I kept thinking of what Collie would always say to me in the old days when we were having a fight. He'd always say, "Don't talk about it now, honey. We'll work something out, but right now I'm clearing up a problem in my analysis." He always used to say that and so while I was sitting in that hotel room drunker than a dog I just kept saying to myself as if I were the voice of Collie Munshin or something, "Don't worry, Elena, we'll work something out," and I kept answering him, "Collie, we sure will cause I'll haunt you." And then I kept saying to myself that I couldn't die because if I did I would haunt Collie and this began to bother me so much that I had the feeling I had to call him up and tell him not to worry, that I wouldn't do anything to bother him, and I was going to make it a nice quiet sophisticated little call but the moment I heard his voice on the phone I became absolutely terrified, I thought I was talking to my doctor or to St. Peter, I don't know what I thought, but I started screaming at him that I was going to die and I'd taken poison, and I remember Charley that I couldn't stop crying after I hung up the phone and I was feeling so sick and dopey and the room still wouldn't stop moving until I was ready to get down on my hands and knees and pray for it to stay still. And when Collie came over he was very business-like at first and slapped me a couple of times because I guess I was in hysterics and then he asked about the poison and I pointed to the tube and I remember him saying, "Thank God, you idiot," and then he began to laugh from relief and I felt worse than I ever did before or since because I knew I couldn't do anything right, I couldn't even kill myself, and I found out later that all I'd taken were sedatives and not even sleeping pills, and he made me throw them up and had the hotel send up coffee and he kept pouring it down into me so that it wasn't even necessary to bring a doctor into it. Why do I tell you all this? I don't even know, except that a couple of hours later by night-time when I wasn't sick any more, just terribly nervous, and I didn't care that I was losing Collie, I just felt that I liked him as a friend and he even seemed a stranger to me, I began to get excited at the way he had made me throw up and the way he had seen me throwing up, and I don't have to tell you how weird that is for me because you know how I hated for you to see me even without makeup and I've always liked some kind of personal privacy, so much so that even now I feel ashamed writing about this thing of getting excited because Collie had seen me throw up but somehow that seemed very very exciting and I went to bed with Collie. This is what I wanted to tell you. It was never very exciting with Collie before. In the beginning I used to

be proud that so important a man saw something in me and then when I got to know him very well I used to be a little ashamed of how fat he was, and sometimes I was just as glad people never saw us together, but the particular night I'm telling you about, I was excited with Collie, I was very excited, it was that night before I met you and we went to the party together, and suddenly with Collie I had the feeling that I was free. I don't know how to put it but it just seemed as if the whole world was dirty and you could find something exciting no matter where you went, and the funny thing was that Collie and I had a long talk afterward and we decided that he would see me just for a night every now and again, and he would pay me, pay me just like a call-girl. I think we arranged it should be fifty dollars, and when he left I guess he wanted to make it clear to me that we weren't living together any more, not in any way except for a quick hour in bed once in awhile, and so he told me that for the following day he was sending you over and what you have to realize Charley is that first day we were together, all that evening at the party and then later in your house, I kept thinking that you were going to be a customer I suppose the word would be and I was fantastically excited. I don't mean to say that I was acting because I wasn't, I was fantastically aroused but you see I didn't know then and I don't know now if it was because of you as a person or because of the situation, and the next day when I began to realize that of course you hadn't thought of me as a whore, and Collie had never said a word that way, I was very depressed and very happy and I didn't know what I felt. You were so good to me and so decent that I began to get very confused, and that's when I made my mistake cause I should have had the sense to clear out then, but all I could think of was that little hotel room I had, and I was afraid I would go nuts in there, and I didn't want to go back to the city, and so of course I just drifted into things with you and before I knew it there I was in a love affair again, and I didn't believe it, I didn't want to believe it, because you see it made me confused again, and that last time I made love to Collie I realized that in a way you could eat up the whole world if you wanted to, if only you didn't fall for all the middle class things and you were making me fall for them. I hate the kind of thing that happens to women where they go out with someone maybe two or three times and immediately they're forced to start thinking about marriage. That's how my mother got married and a lot of my sisters and what a drudgery sort of life they have, everybody's so afraid to live. I am, too, and it's silly. Once I remember I had a girl friend and she had a steady boy friend and I used to fall into a thing with the two of them on a Saturday night when Collie was off at one of his big movie parties, and I know you won't believe it, I don't want to remind you of Don Beda, but it was very different with those friends because I would feel fine the next day and the three of us liked each other like good friends and I almost never felt low-down about it. I mean as an example it used to be almost as much fun

eating breakfast on Sunday as it was the night before, but that's because we kept it uncomplicated and the girl liked me very much and nobody was asking anybody else to solve their whole life for them. But that's what you were asking me and what I was asking you *and I resented it just as much as you did*. That was why I slept with Marion Faye the first week I knew you, but I was a coward, I had to keep telling myself that you were wonderful and that I was in love, that life was marvelous and love was marvelous and Charley I've been such a phony cause I've been scared and hanging on to you, and the time Collie came to visit us I didn't want to look at him, he seemed repulsive to me, and the reason he seemed so fat and repulsive was because I kept thinking that I had enjoyed myself with him too, at least one night anyway, and I wanted to believe that I was in love with only you.

I'm so neurotic and maybe I ought to write letters more because I never could talk to you and now I can, I suppose probably because we're through, but there're certain things you really ought to know cause you never could see them through my eyes like the sort of thing that happens with taxicab drivers. I don't know why they always feel it about me but they know they don't have to talk to me politely, and even the day I left your place and put in my suitcases and gave him Marion's address, we hadn't been driving two minutes and I was trying to think how I felt because I was drunk all over again when the taxicab driver said to me, "Know this Faye character long, baby?" and he said it with a leer, just the same kind of tough guy leer my father always would have when he talked to a woman, and I got so angry I started screaming at him to keep his dirty mouth shut, right in the middle of the drive. And when I got to Marion's and got inside the door I was ready for anything, I was hoping he would send me out as a call girl right away. Did you ever have to put up with those kind of humiliations?

Anyway, Marion didn't send me out. He just got me drunker and drunker, not that I needed much help, I don't know if you knew it or not, but I was drunk when I walked out the door on you, early that morning I'd called up Marion and told him I was coming over, and then I got so scared I filled a highball glass with whisky, and every time I went into the kitchen I would take a sip on it, and so I was looped when I got to his house, and he gave me more and then we went to bed and I don't even remember it, all I can remember is that I kept thinking, "How Collie is going to suffer, good for him!!" and that makes me wonder Charley if maybe in a certain kind of way maybe I loved Collie more than you since I remember thinking about him and haven't thought about you much, not until I started writing this letter. And maybe in a certain way I love Marion more than either of you, I don't know, I don't even care, but for example sexually with him it's very erratic but when it's good it seems to me that it's just as good as it ever was with you, I don't know maybe I'm shallow, maybe I'm nothing, so-what? I guess you were right when you used to tell me all I could think about was myself. But this I do know, at least there's something doing with Marion, he's not tied up in

knots like you, I don't even know what he sees in me, but then that's nothing new because I never could understand what any man saw in me, but do you want to know the kind of stupid argument I have with Marion. I keep asking him to make me a call-girl and he says no, he says he wants to marry me and then I can become a call-girl. I suppose he wants to be a champion pimp. It's impossible to marry him, he makes it a joke, and I don't want to get married, I'm sick of the whole idea, I've been such a weakling all my life that I've just been obsessed with the thought—you see the kind of child I am, but I can finally admit it, and Marion does the sort of thing where he begs me to marry him, it's the truth Charley, and when I ask him why, he says that he likes the idea of me joining his mother's coffee-clotch (how do you spell that?) or some remark like that, and he insists we stay drunk all the time although frankly I don't mind that part of it, not for right now. And Marion curses you. I think somewhere along the line you must have hurt him somehow. It's all cockeyed. I don't know where we're going and it's weird, I don't want to hurt you if I say that he insisted on seeing Zenlia and Don Beda but you must have heard about that anyway, and I could tell you other things he does but it isn't important, what I think is so rotten is that I'm writing about him as if he's a stranger, and I've done something worse, I've talked to him about you the way I used to talk to you about Collie, very critically that is, and I feel ashamed every time, and the truth of the matter is that I'm a pig and I never have grown up and you were right to call me a pig, and I want you to believe that because Charley you're such an unhappy and miserable man and it isn't fair, I don't know why I say it isn't fair but I just wish you had some sort of break, some sort of luck, although what would be lucky for you would take a genius to say, but I suppose I have to confess that I'm as sick as you are to discover that I didn't love you the way I wanted to, and I apologize for the things I've said against you. How could I have done that? Charley, you deserve something good. It isn't fair.

There was a blot of ink, the beginning of a new paragraph which she had scratched out, and then apparently having decided to end the letter she had signed her name. Looking at the scratched-out line, the blot, and the signature, I wondered how long she had sat there, thinking to add something else as if the reason for writing the letter had eluded her, and drunk, her mind must have wandered over the grab bag of her life until she had decided to grab no more, had put her name down, sealed the envelope, and sent it off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

What can one say about it? Faye knew as if it were his own flesh how enormous was the loneliness in Elena. It awaited her like the heavy water behind a dike; let a breach be made and she would be carried away over all the flooded land of the past. So he knew that she was the material out of which suicides are made.

He had worked it out. For months now he had been tormented by the thought that his life had ceased its purpose, and in those hours of sleeplessness before each dawn when he would lie in his bed lacerated with the terror he felt because of his unlocked door, often convinced that the sounds he heard in the street outside were finally, finally, the assassins he expected, there would be another torment larger than the first because it consisted of humiliation alone. "I'm just a pimp. I never made it any further," he would think to himself and know with the pain of the frustrated explorer whose wanderings are limited from bar to night club and back again, that all he needed was a point of the compass, any point, and he could follow it some black heroic journey.

But the journey had never been made. A year had gone by, two years had gone by, and Faye seemed established in business forever; he knew that nobody thought of him any longer as a rich boy with a hobby. Faye was in trade and he knew it. Already, through the inexorable logic of commerce he kept two sets of books, he had a lawyer, he gave away percentages, he had even caught himself fawning over one of the executives who ran the syndicate from the capital to the desert. Worse; a week before Elena came to live with him, he had been beaten up by a hoodlum who had taken a girl and refused to pay. He had not said anything after the beating, he had not complained about the hoodlum to his protection; they would have taken care of it but that too was humiliating. He hated to admit he had become so respectable that hoodlums respected him no longer. "I'm a goddamn storekeeper," Faye had thought after the beating and for the first time his rage seemed ludicrous to him.

He was brooding again about the concerns of his adolescence. There had been a period when he was fifteen and sixteen and seventeen when he had thought almost constantly of the man who was his real father. For some reason which he could never understand he thought he hated Dorothea's boast that the man was European royalty; often enough he preferred to believe that his father had been a brilliant and dissolute priest. Today he would flinch when he recalled how he had tried to explain the idea to the priest in the confessional box and had merely been scolded; week after week he had been scolded. That was the period when he had been religious, had suffered fasts, thought of entering a monastery, and to Dorothea's bewilderment and uncertain pride had spent a week on a retreat. That week had almost driven him mad; with a razor he had sliced a tiny piece off the corner of the altar cloth and had left in a panic.

What had happened to that kind of passion he would wonder now, a passion which had driven him through all the classics of pornography, serious and obscene, through whatever old documents on the trials of witches and the practice of the Black Mass he had been able to buy or able to borrow. He had gone through it all, through church intrigues and poisons and love-cakes baked upon the loins of languishing women and the needles of the lady abbess who probed the bodies of the nuns to learn if they were witches and Satan had entered. He would feel in his adolescence as if he contained within himself the concentrated history of a thousand years, and it sent him further through all the apparatus of the Cabbala, and Tarot, and astrology, and numerology, and Yoga, and back again, always back to the black robes of the priest who could have been his father. That had passed; he had been eighteen and nineteen and out on the world, his pride that no one should guess how much he had read and what he had thought.

Since Elena had come to live with him, there were nightmares returning. He could not rid himself of the idea that she was his nun and he the tormented confessor who would transmute her into a witch, and like a pure spirit of the Middle Ages he would have given his life in an instant to assume the torments of the sacrilegious priest. He made up stories in his mind, novels, volumes, drawing upon himself the anguish of the priest who begs God to let the devils enter him in order that he alone be burned in Hell so that the others, the nuns, the parish, the castle, the country, indeed the world might be spared. Father Marion has been praying for this, he would think, and all the while he prays, what does he do? It is so little and yet he is so damned for he has traduced the choirboys and rendered pregnant half the rich wives of the village, driven nuns to insanity by whipping them with the staff of the Devil in their cloistered beds, giving to 'suck at such religious breasts the broom of the Witch, and depriving from the most devoted Sister, the purest, the most spiritual, her devotion itself, so that she loves not God but Father Marion, carnally, insanely, and even this is good he will tell her for the body and soul are separate, and to be pure one must seek out sin itself, mire the body in offal so the soul may be elevated. Yet it is never enough to make the Sister a Witch; she must be denounced as well, and yet never too soon, for too soon and she is a martyr, too late and she is dead, and therefore ever so subtly, ever so carefully, the priest who accepts the Devil to save the world must use the Devil to destroy it, and for that the saintly Sister he has perverted into Witch must first engulf the others, all of the others, the nunnery,

the church, the castle and the world, denouncing and accusing unto the point where the others burned, she burns herself and releases a scream from the stake, "Oh, God, have mercy on Father Marion for he is a saint in Hell." And he is pure when it is done, when they are all burned and he is left only to his prayers and pleads, "Oh, my God, I have labored in Your cause, and have found wanting the souls I have tested and they are not worthy of You." Yet all the while he prays, he prays in the terror of nightmare, for He, He will punish him, will pursue him into Hell and to the Devil, and not for something so trivial as the seductions and the sodomy, the pious minds of the nuns he has whipped to epilepsy, the burnings he has fired, the accusations, the destructions, but instead a sin so far greater, so terrible and enormous that God Himself must blanch before it. "Oh, My Lord," prays Father Marion in a cloister of Marion Faye's brain, "I have sinned and fallen from Grace for I wish damnation upon you."

Closed in his bed with Elena beside him, enduring the venial mortification of having his skin itch at the thought of her presence, his nostrils be repelled by the odor of her body which Eitel had savored so much, Faye would wander by marijuana through the jungles of his imagination and out along the cold stone floor of the nunnery to where Sister Elena would burn, her body on fire, her feet of ice, until the moment when Faye was certain his head would burst, that no skull could be immured against the furies and the temptations which came ever more close until he could only open his eyes and grind his teeth and mutter to the foot of the bed, to the spirit dancing upon his toes, "It's bullshit, it's all bullshit. Cut the bullshit. Cut it dead," as if indeed his thoughts had become needles to probe for the Sorcerer in him, and when the dot of his brain was found where the needle entered without pain, then he was damned, he was discovered. Or was he freed? For beyond, in the far beyond, was the heresy that God was the Devil and the One they called the Devil was God-in-banishment like a noble prince deprived of true Heaven, and God who was the Devil had conquered except for the few who saw the cheat that God was not God at all. So it went, on and on, up and down, until in the fever of these thoughts, he would run a hand toward Elena, wake her, and whisper huskily in her ear, "Come on, Elena, let's knock it around." Sex was a fire to him since she had come, the ashes of the forest generated new growth only to be burned again. And as he made love, repelled by what she gave him, her sounds, her joys, her pretenses, he whipped himself, a priest in horror, his mind stimulated by images of mailed men on horse and obscenities under black robes, the monk naked beneath his cassock, punishing the dirty lewd Sister who betrayed the Faith. When they were done, some last fleeting image of damnation riding him over the vitiated moment, he would turn from her and try to sleep while his mind picked savagely at the center of his terror: he must convince Elena to kill herself.

After she came to live with him, he found himself acting in ways he found incomprehensible as though he rode too quickly in directions he could not see, until to his horror and to his pride he came to understand himself at a moment his body was curled next to hers, seeking warmth on the chill of his limbs. A thought had come into his brain, a frequent thought, "She'll kill herself one of these days," and before he had even done considering this, his mind like an iron monarch inflicting an alien will added cruelly, "You have to make her do it." Faye had protested as he had protested against his decision to leave the door unlocked; he had pleaded with himself, he had begged, "No, that's too much," only to hear the taunt with which he had always been lashed another step, "You have to do it or you're like all the others," and he had shuddered in the dark. His command seemed more awful and more valuable than if he had ordered himself to murder Elena. Murder was nothing. Men murdered one another by the million. To make Elena kill herself, however, would be truly murder and so he shuddered at his fascination and knew he was tormented by it.

But how to succeed? He doubted himself, disbelieved that he was serious, while for all this time his mind ticked forward like the clock of a bomb, implacable, dumb, set beyond his own control. Faye had the feeling so deep within himself that this was finally the situation where he could push beyond anything he had ever done, push to the end as he had promised me so many nights ago, and come out—he did not know where, but there was experience beyond experience, there was something. Of that, he was convinced.

Therefore, Elena had been in his house not even an hour when he had asked her to marry him, not knowing at the moment why he had done this. "We might as well," he had said, "You want to, and it's all the same to me."

Even though she was drunk, she had laughed carefully. "Life is screwy," she had said.

"Sure it is."

"I went with Collie three years and he never took me to a party."

"And Eitel never asked you to marry him."

When she did not answer, merely swallowing her drink, he had continued to stare at her, and had murmured, "What do you say, Elena, marry me."

"Marion, I feel funny being here."

He had laughed then. "I'll ask you tomorrow."

They had begun the few weeks of their life together in that way. It was a period during which Elena and he passed days where they were never sober, never completely, and yet they were not drunk either, at least not Faye. He would watch Elena with disgust for she had no capacity to drink, and so she passed in movements so predictable they set his teeth, from gaiety to high excitement to illness to depression and back to the liquor again. Most of the time she was animated and talked a lot and laughed with his friends and told Faye afterward how she felt free with him and full of confidence and how with Eitel she had always felt ignored.

But occasionally she would be in panic, and several afternoons and evenings when he had left her alone and gone out to arrange some date, she seemed to have a terror of being alone. "Do you have to go out?" she would ask.

"That business won't run by itself."

Elena would sulk. "I might as well be one of your whores. I'd see more of you."

"Maybe you would at that."

"Marion, I want to be a prostitute," she would declare out of her drunkenness.

"Not yet."

Her eyes would narrow in a clumsy effort to give dramatic effect. "Just what do you mean by that?" she would say. "Are you calling me a whore?"

"I'll call you anything I please," he would snap at her.

Before he would be out the door, Elena would be clinging to him. "Marion, come back soon," she would beg. When he would return several hours later, she would say as if she had thought the thing for the first time, "You think I love you?" She would laugh a little hysterically. "I want to be a prostitute."

"You're drunk, baby."

"Get wise to yourself, Marion," Elena would shout at him. "Why do you think I'm living with you? It's cause I'm too lazy to live alone. What do you think of that?"

"Everybody's scared," he would say.

"Except you. You're so high and mighty. Well, I don't think you're extraordinary."

These spells would pass and she would weep and be contrite, ask him to forgive her, tell him she had not meant what she said, and that perhaps she did love him, she didn't know, and he would say, "Let's stop kicking it around and get married."

Elena would always shake her head. "I want to be a prostitute," she would say.

"You're not the kind who could make it," he would tell her. "Let's get married first and then we'll see."

He had no idea actually of how he felt about her. He thought he despised her, he considered Elena as being worth no more than a test for his nerves, and in their embrace he loathed her; indeed if it were not for the pleasure of studying this loathing, of noticing from the acid center of his brain how completely he was incapable of losing himself for even an instant, and how utterly she was determined to lose herself, seeming to want nothing more than to cast away her identity with the passion of a child begging for lollipops, it would have been difficult for him, deprived of loathing to embrace her at all. He felt impelled to push her past the few limits she had managed to find, and with a kind of insistence she could not oppose, he led her through a series of parties, at Don Beda's, at his own home, with some of his girls, with strange men, with the hoodlums, the gangsters, with Jay-Jay, with anyone upon whom his whim might seize.

She enjoyed it, she was morose, she was gay, and he led her moods like a circus master tapping the whip, relishing the thought that she was indeed a trained animal and he could wipe his fingers in her hair. There seemed an endless source of energy in the thought, and he would swear vows to himself that he was serious, sensing how each new excess rendered the old one banal, until he would exhaust even her pleasure itself and she would be left with nothing. Thus the monk would separate the soul from the body by teaching the body that it may never attain the soul, and the greatest sin is to believe the two may live together.

She tried to call a halt. One morning after they had spent a night at Beda's and Marion had asked her again to marry him, she had shaken her head angrily and said, "I'm getting out of here soon."

"And where are you going?" he asked.

She did not answer him directly. "You think you hate me," she said to him. "If I really believed that, I wouldn't stay with you."

"I love you," he said, "why do you think I ask you to marry me?"

"Cause you think it's a wonderful joke."

He had laughed at that. "There's a lot of contradictions in me," he said, his face seeming boyish for the instant he smiled.

Yet, one night unable to sleep he had gotten up and walked around the bed, looking at her, mourning her as if she were already dead, and from some unwilling pocket of his mind there came the thought, "She's just like Paco. She yells abuse and slides on her belly." He was feeling compassion for her; despite himself it had worked free, a pure lump of painful compassion wrenched from him as reluctantly as miscarried flesh, alive but not alive, its pain severe.

She had come to accept the idea she could marry him, and he could even grieve for her since she did not realize how much she depended upon his promise. He thought it humorous that the only part of their life which was symbolic of marriage was the way she spoiled his house. She was always strewing her clothing through his rooms, spilling food in the kitchen, dropping glasses, burning cigarette holes in the furniture, and forever apologizing for her errors or flying into a rage when he would tell her to tidy a room. He had lived in absolute order before she arrived with her two pieces of luggage, but once she was there and had spilled the nervous disarray of her belongings over his home, he lived in a state of mortal exasperation, his will hardened in its purpose by the constant irritation she caused him. They had a maid, a middle-aged Mexican woman with a stolid face who came in for two hours each morning and restored the place just long enough for Elena to scatter it again. About the maid they had fights. Elena insisted the woman hated her. "I heard her call me a *puta* under her breath," she told him.

"She was probably praying."

"Marion, I'm going or she's going."

"Then get out of here," he would tell her. More and more often he would say this, confident that Elena could not leave, and he would taunt her with the fact. "Who are you fooling?" he would say. "Where do you think you'll go?"

It was Faye, however, who told the Mexican servant not to come back. Elena had begun to make friends with her. In the late morning, he could hear the two women chatting, and occasionally one of them would laugh. Elena began to remark that she had misjudged the woman. "She has a wonderful sense of humor," Elena told him. He had watched with amusement at first, convinced that this was only a passing enthusiasm. She could never be friends he thought with a Mexican peasant who would remind her that she too was a peasant. Still, it went too far. The day that the servant brought Elena a present of a wooden napkin-ring and Elena kissed her, Faye gave the woman a week's salary and told Elena to clean the house herself. After that they lived in disorder and had quarrels about Elena's visits to the Mexican woman. "Dirt always looks for dirt," he told her and that was finally successful. Elena stayed home.

After a time, Don Beda and Zenlia left Desert D'Or for the East and the parties came to an end. Elena preferred to stay home and he left her alone for hours at a time. When he would return, she would be helpless with jealousy. He chose one of those occasions to tell Elena that he could not help it, but he found her less exciting. "This is temporary, of course," he said. "I'm getting too much outside." Two days later he moved into the other bedroom and all the hours he lay awake he could hear her stirring restlessly. Once he listened to her weeping, his body moist with the effort to ignore her.

They had one last ball. He invited a gambler he knew to visit them, and when they were all drunk, he waited for Elena to say in a sullen voice, "I dig this man."

"Honey, I dig you," the gambler said.

Elena had looked at Faye. "I want a party," she said defiantly.

"Leave me out of it tonight," Faye had answered.

"Then stay out of it," she had said to him, and Faye sat in the living room while Elena and the gambler were in the other end of the house, Faye sipping at his stick of marijuana while he repeated to himself the thought which he found endlessly humorous, "I got a young face and an old organ."

The friend had come out at last, leaving Elena behind, and had combed his hair while he talked to Marion. "Your girl is on the edge," the gambler said.

"She's just a little high."

"Marty, don't ride her so hard. She's a sweet kid."

"Everybody is a sweet kid," said Faye.

When the man was gone he walked into the bedroom and looked at Elena. She had covered herself and was lying on her back, staring directly past him. "I should have gone home with that man," she said stonily.

"He would have kept you for a day."

Elena turned on the bed. "You don't say anything about marrying me any more," she said bitterly.

"Do you love me?"

"I don't now." She looked at the wall. "Who could love you?" she said.

He laughed aloud. "I don't understand it. So many chicks think I'm the jack."

Elena let her breath out. "I feel very rotten. I feel sick."

He was angry suddenly. "You're like everybody else. Do what you damn well feel like doing, and then you think because you feel rotten that it wasn't really you who was doing it."

"So what if you're right?" she said.

Faye had to explain it to her. He had to explain it to everybody. "Take the bullshit of the whole world," he said. "That's love. Bullshit mountain."

"You're not so happy," Elena said.

"That's my fault. If an idea won't work for me, that doesn't mean it isn't true." He lit another stick of marijuana and blew tea fumes down upon her. "Elena, you thought you wanted to marry Eitel. You loved him, you say. Do you still love him?"

"I don't know," she said, "I haven't thought about him."

He wanted to shake her. "You don't love anybody. You're the same as everyone else. Only you don't have the brains of a slob to get married and hide under a stone. You just don't have it, Elena."

"I told you to make me a call girl," she said dully.

"I don't think you can make it as a call girl," Marion said dispassionately. "You lack class."

She winced as if he had struck her. "Then make me a prostitute," she jeered at him.

"Let's get married," said Marion, sipping at his stick.

"I'd never marry you."

"Proud, aren't you? What would you say, dearest, if I told you I'd never marry you?"

"I want to be a prostitute," Elena repeated.

"I don't handle prostitutes," Marion said. His head hurt him from the marijuana. "I could send you to a friend though. He has a job where you could work sort of half in a whorehouse."

"What does half-in-a-whorehouse mean?"

"It means in a whorehouse," Marion said.

Elena looked frightened for an instant. Fear showed through her apathy and then lapsed again. "I won't do that, Marion," she said.

"Are you a snob?"

"Marion, you can't make me do that."

"I can't make you do anything," he said. "Only, look, Elena, I'm sick of you. I'm extremely sick of you. Maybe you better get out of this house."

"I'm getting out," she said, but her voice lacked determination.

"Then get out."

"I'll go," she said.

"Go ahead."

Elena lay on her back and stared at the ceiling again. "I wish I were dead," she muttered. "I'd like to kill myself."

"You haven't got the guts."

"Don't taunt me."

He left the room for an instant, felt his fingers trembling among tubes of medicine and hair pomades and plastic bandages in the cabinet, and then he came back with a small bottle which contained two pills. "I've been saving this for myself," he said. "They work like sleeping pills." He set it on the bedside table. "Do you want some water?"

"You think I won't take them?" Elena demanded. She seemed a great distance from him.

"I don't think you'll do anything."

"Get out of here. Leave me alone."

He returned to the living room and sat there listening to his heart beat. The sound seemed to fill his body and he felt it with a kind of anxiety. "It can't go on like this," he thought, and his heart gave another jump when he heard Elena get up from her bed and go to the bathroom. He could hear the water running and then there was silence and then she turned the water on again. It was the bathtub this time. With a kind of surprise at himself, he was wondering, "Can I really go this far?"

The water had stopped running in the tub. He no longer had any idea of what the sounds meant, and he sat immobile, determined not to move, not for an hour at least. Curiously, he conceived it as his duty to Elena for he suffered terribly remaining in his chair. If only he could have walked around the room or even lit a cigarette he might have felt some relief, but he kept repeating to himself that he must match her anguish, that he must bring himself to comprehend what she was feeling. And convinced she was dead, he mourned her bitterly. "She's better than the others," he thought once to himself.

For all that hour he sat with his eyes on the clock, and when the time was up, he went to the bathroom door. Elena had unlocked it and he rattled the knob helplessly, he called to her, "Elena? . . . Elena?" There was no answer and he thought almost stupidly that if he waited the door would be unlocked. He rattled it again, he drummed against it with the palm of his hand, and then he began to sob a little. A childhood panic had come upon him as though it were he who was locked inside, and furious at his panic, he was preparing himself to force the door until he remembered there was a utility key among the collection in his pocket. By an effort he managed to keep his fingers steady while he turned the lock, and there before his eyes was Elena sitting beside the water-filled tub with a robe over her body and the bottle of pills squeezed fiercely in her fist so that she sat like a statue with all her force concentrated into the bones of her fingers, that hand projecting forward over her knees in a mute emphasis so nearly permanent she might have been of stone. Down her cheeks ran tears she could never have felt, and her eyes stared at him as if she had to cling to something, no matter what, even him.

230

Faye reached forward and pried the bottle from her hand. It still contained the two pills, and he made a sound of pain as if he had been scalded, for he knew what he felt at that instant was relief, and hatred for Elena followed his relief, hatred so intense he could have struck her to the floor.

Elena looked up from her tears and managed to whisper, "Oh, Marty, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I didn't want to do it, I don't want to . . . stop," and as though her hour in the bathroom had been a journey through a wilderness she would never dare visit again, she began to weep a little, softly, out of fatigue. "I'll get out of here in a day or two. I swear I will."

Faye had known he was defeated. He had put her to bed and lay beside her through the night, not sleeping, not even thinking, his body aching from exhaustion. The next day she was depressed, and the following day she was depressed, but he had lost the energy to force her to do anything and lived instead in his own despair, more complete than any he had known before.

When she began to pack her bags he made no objection, and when she told him she was leaving he merely nodded. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm going to get a job in the city."

He nodded. "Let me drive you back."

"I don't want to ride with you." She shook her head.

"Then I'll give you a lift to the airport."

"I don't have money for a plane."

"I'll buy your ticket."

"No, you can't do that."

"You have to let me," he begged, and the sound in his voice made her look at him. "Please," he said again.

"I don't understand you," Elena said.

"I don't either, but let me buy your ticket."

So she agreed, and he called a travel agency, made the reservation, and put her luggage into the rack of his foreign car.

On the way to the airport, he passed a car around the only curve in all that reach of desert highway, passed it with the knowledge another car was coming from the opposite direction for he could see its lights. Too late, he discovered it was a truck. As he raced to reach his own lane there was a passing instant of mild disbelief when he realized that he would never succeed, and then he heard a shriek from Elena, and he felt an impact which struck him with surprising force as the side of the truck collided with his rear and the wheel twisted out of his hand. Then he felt as if parts of his body were being torn in all directions, and through the bewilderment of his sensations he knew that they had rolled to a stop and his head was pinioned against his arm and he was in pain. He tried to clear his mind, he felt there was one thing he had to remember, and listening to Elena sobbing beside him, he wanted to tell it to her. There was the gun in his glove compartment and if he could only collect himself to speak, he would tell her to throw it into the ditch for they would use that against him, and he had always known that the way he would go to prison would be for something ridiculous like possessing a gun without a permit. "It's all right," he thought, holding on to consciousness as if it were an object he gripped with his battered mouth, "it's all right. To make it, maybe I need a year like that. More education," he tried to say, but a spasm of pain was carrying him into unconsciousness.

The truck had stopped, the car behind them had stopped; in one minute a crowd of a dozen people had collected about Faye's car. They lifted Elena out first and she was conscious. Her nose bled and she moaned when someone touched her arm for it was broken. Yet she had strength enough to push to her feet when they had taken her clear of the car, and one arm supporting the other, blood spilling from her nose to her mouth, she took a step and then another before they caught her and set her down, and in her mind she believed at that instant that she was running from them into the darkness as a child flees from a night-haunted bed, and through the blood she whispered—although to her own ears it sounded like a scream—"Oh, Charley, forgive me. Oh Charley, forgive."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I was working late that night and I heard about the accident as I came off my shift. At the hospital they would not admit anyone to see Elena until morning, and after arguing with the floor nurse for a frustrated ten minutes, I decided to make a phone call to Eitel in the capital. His number was unregistered and so was Munshin's, but I remembered the name of Eitel's agent and succeeded in placing a call to him.

From the way the agent spoke I had the impression of a nervous man in a bathrobe with a cigar in the corner of his mouth, but for all I know he could have looked like a bank president.

"Well, who are you?" the agent was saying.

"It doesn't matter who I am. I'm a friend of his from Desert D'Or."

"I don't even want to hear of that place. Look, you leave my baby Charley alone."

"Will you give me his number?"

"What do you want it for?"

"It doesn't matter what I want it for," I said. "Believe me, it's urgent."

"Kiddo, you leave Charley Eitel alone. Everybody persecutes Eitel with their troubles."

"A very dear friend of his may be dying now," I exaggerated.

"A woman?"

"Yes, a woman."

"Look, Charley Eitel don't have to get out of bed for any woman. He's a busy man now, thank God, so stop persecuting him."

"Listen, if he doesn't get this message tonight," I shouted into the receiver, "he'll persecute *you* in the morning."

Thus, with half an hour of perspiring in a telephone booth and three dollars in change and a missed connection, I succeeded finally in reaching Eitel. I was so irritated by then and so agitated that I must have babbled a little. "What kind of stupid agent do you have anyway?" I asked him with my first words.

"Sergius, are you drunk?" Eitel said into the phone.

I told him then, and I could hear nothing but silence for twenty seconds. Perhaps I was imagining it, but I had the feeling that the news had put him in a rage. When he answered however it was to say, "Oh, Lord. Is she all right?"

"I think so," I said, and gave what details I had.

"Do you suppose I ought to come down?" he asked, and added apologetically when I remained stubbornly silent, "tomorrow we're busy casting."

"Want me to answer for you?" I said shortly.

"All right, I'll arrange something," he said into my ear. "Tell Elena I'm taking the plane and I'll see her in the morning."

"You'll be able to tell her yourself. They won't allow visitors tonight."

"It must be serious," he said half-helplessly, and I had a moment of sympathy for him.

In the morning Eitel arrived at the hospital before me, and I met him on the steps as he was coming out from his visit to Elena. "I'm going to marry her," was the first thing he said to me.

There had not been much choice. She was sitting in a hospital bed the hour he visited, her arm in a sling, and her nose covered by medical tape which sat like a sign of shame upon her face as though she were trying to hide herself. Elena's eyes looked away from him until he touched her shoulder. "Oh, Charley," she said simply.

They could think of nothing to talk about at first. She had looked at him shyly, almost formally, and whispered, "I hear you're working again."

He nodded.

"It must have been hard for you to get away."

"Not that hard," he said with a touch of his charm.

"Do you feel happy working?" she asked politely.

"It's not so bad. Most of the people at the studio have been very decent. I even get compliments about my last testimony."

"Oh, that's nice," she said lamely.

They tried to smile at one another. "I guess you have your career back?" Elena went on.

"Part of it. There's a lot of mending to do."

"But you're going to make a good picture."

"I'll certainly try."

"I know you'll make a good picture." This time she nodded as if he were a stranger. "It'll be the same for you again, Charley."

"Not exactly the same," said Eitel.

There was a tone in his voice which made her turn the least bit toward him, and in a careful cautious whisper, she said, "Charley, did you miss me at all?"

"Very much," he said flatly.

"No, Charley, I mean the truth. Did you miss me?"

"I did, Elena."

She began to weep silently. "No, Charley, you were glad to be rid of me, and I don't blame you."

"It's not true," he said. "You know the way I am. I haven't let myself think about anything. But I did miss you a lot.

"You're nice to me. I'm glad you came."

The moment he said the next few words he knew he had made a mistake. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "I mean, the accident must have been terrible."

It was as if he had set a mirror to all the time which had gone by since she had left him, and he could feel her carried away from him on the tide of her misery until he was no longer present at all, but she was alone on a hospital bed, her past scattered, her future unmade, and the bed and the walls and the instruments of her aseptic room surrounding Elena in a cold white sea. "It wasn't so bad," she said, and she began to cry again. "Oh, Charley, you better go now. I know you hate hospitals."

"No, I want to take care of you," he said dully, the words forced from him against his will.

"Marry me," Elena blurted suddenly, "oh, Charley, please marry me."

And he nodded, his heart numb, his will sick, thinking there must be some escape, and knowing there was nothing. For on the instant she uttered these words he heard the other words she had said the night he gave his qualified proposal of marriage. "You have no respect for me," she had said then, and like a beggar to the loss of his own pride, he knew that now he could never refuse her. All the while he held Elena he felt cold as stone, but he knew that he would marry her, that indeed he could not give her up for there was that law of life so cruel and so just which insisted that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same. So it had never been possible for him to go back to the capital exactly as he had left it, he must carry more of a burden for the second trip, and as though he saw a map of his future, he understood that there had never been even the possibility that he could live without Elena or someone like Elena, for without her he was worse than dead and not even suffering could he feel. So he continued to caress her shoulder and asked gentle questions about her injuries and talked about their marriage, certain all the while that no matter what he felt toward her, they were mates, the wound of one's flesh soothed by the wound of the other, and that was better than nothing. Perhaps in a year he could get a divorce.

They were married a week later on the day she was discharged from the hospital, and I read about it in the newspapers. He took Elena to a town on the border of Mexico, and they had the ceremony there with Collie Munshin for the best man—which on reflection did not surprise me too greatly. In the following month a letter was forwarded from Eitel inviting me to accompany them, and I wrote back and explained my absence. I had left Desert D'Or and was working on a book in the furnished room of a house in an industrial city two thousand miles away. Thereafter, what little I heard, followed me like the wavelets of a pebble which has already sunk to the bottom. There was a little

234

scandal and a little kindness in what I read about their marriage, and if certain newspapers featured photographs of Marion Faye, the gossip columnists were moderate. What was said in the capital I never knew, but it was easy to guess. Then, months later, after his trial, I had a post card forwarded from Marion, and it showed a picture of a clean, well-lit, sanitary cell block in his prison. "Re: our conversations," the card read, "I have the feeling I'm just getting on to it. Your con friend, Marty."

A year later I went to see *Saints And Lovers* when it opened in the city where I was living. Its reviews were excellent and the theater was almost filled. On a sour fancy I bought some popcorn and chewed it through the film. It was not a bad picture as pictures go, and it was well made, and it did not have too many scenes which were embarrassing, but it was nothing magnificent either, and the teen-age girl next to me petted with her date and laughed at clever dialogue and yawned once or twice. Afterward I thought of writing Eitel a letter but I could not decide exactly what to say and the impulse passed.

I felt that I had advanced my distance and it would have been cruel or self-righteous to tell him so. For in my last weeks at Desert D'Or I had managed finally to make a beginning at that work of writing which had terrified me so long. It was only a beginning but it was enough for me to know that a long trip had begun, and therefore I started on the voyage of odd jobs and furnished rooms and loneliness and study and occasional adventure, joining my generation which was born to wander in a strange land, and all the while I wrote, guarding the remains of the Japanese poker game with a month at one kind of work or another, and then I would quit and write some more, learning as I labored the rudiments of something which seemed always beyond me, my ability never closer than a breath to my ambition and often as distant as the moon. But I survived, I became stronger, I learned there was magic at times in my life for I could retain in some half-permanent form those parts of myself which were better than me, and like the light of a buoy which is never wholly obscured, I could find in my loneliness itself the comfort that I belonged to that privileged world of orphans where art is found.

It was not often so miraculous as that, and I lived months of desperation and weeks when I sat in my room and could do no work at all, but I had changed since I had come to Desert D'Or, and so I could not write to Eitel. But I could always imagine him, and I could see his life, and Elena's life, and the life of the capital, until at times with the virtue of that imagination which illumines all the corners the writer will never inhabit, their life became more real to me than anything of my own, and I could see them on the round of their days. . . .

Therefore . . . Eitel on a particular night, a period of years after he returned to the capital. It was evening, and he had been busy since eight in the morning on his latest film. Now, as the cameramen were storing their equipment for the following day, and the electricians were wheeling the floor lamps into position on the set which would be used tomorrow, and the few actors who were left were quitting their portable dressing rooms and nodding good night to him, Eitel felt the gentle melancholy which always came over him when work was ended and the giant sound stage began to close down, almost as if he were recapturing some mood from his childhood when he was hurrying back from school on a winter afternoon and a gray wind carried him in its path, blowing him home before the approaching night. One of his assistants was holding a scratchboard at his elbow with some mimeographed requisition that he was required to sign, and the wardrobe man was beckoning to him from a yard away, expressing an odd frustration in the little dance he made, as though for weeks he had been trying to get a word with Eitel. Actually, they had had a five-minute conference at lunch, but the wardrobe man was predictably changeable, and whatever they had decided was probably to be altered again.

"No, that's all, that's all," Eitel shouted, "we'll work everything out in the morning," and then with a wide wave of his hand which included the scenery and the equipment and the cave of the sound stage as much as any of the film crew who still were left, he pulled away from the ten minor decisions which nipped at his attention, clapped another of his assistants cheerfully on the back, and pushed through one of the sound-proofed doors out on the studio street. In their Cadillac convertibles, studio executives were moving by at ten miles an hour, and the stenographers and secretaries were coming through the wide marble exit of the administration building, while along one of the alleys, quitting still another sound stage, a covey of lascars and pirates with their make-up unnaturally vivid in the twilight came brawling toward him, talking with loud voices, their bright rags of costumes soon to be shucked in one of the studio's storage rooms. A dozen or more said hello to him. Like a politician, Eitel accepted their greetings, nodding to one, smiling to another, catching a confused and tired view of bloodstained handkerchiefs wound about their heads, and crimson shirts, and full bloused pants with cinematic patches.

When he got to his office in one of the private bungalows reserved for directors he told his secretary to get Collie Munshin on the phone, and then Eitel poured himself a drink and began to shave.

Before he was done, the call came through. "How'd it go today, lover?" said the producer in his high-pitched voice.

"It was all right, I think," Eitel said. "We're still on schedule."

"I'll be down tomorrow on the set. I saw H.T. today, and he said this picture has got to be good."

"Everybody's aware of that, Collie."

"I know, I know, baby. But this has got to be good."

"They all have to be good," Eitel said irritably. As he spoke, he continued to have himself with his free hand. "Look, Collie," he said in a somewhat different tone, "I called Elena at lunchtime and told her you wanted a story conference with me tonight. I don't believe she'll call you, but if she does, will you run interference?"

He could feel Munshin's hesitation. This was the third time in a month he had asked such a favor. "Charley, I'll do whatever you want," Munshin said slowly, "but don't forget that tomorrow's important too."

"Stop being a bully," Eitel said sharply. "Why do you think I'm going out tonight?"

Munshin sighed. "Give the lady my regards."

By the time Eitel reached the executive parking lot and stepped into his car, it was already dark. He maneuvered through the few streets of heavy traffic which circulated about the studio, and then accelerated his automobile onto one of the wide boulevards which led to the ocean. In her beach house, Lulu would be waiting for him, and undoubtedly she would be annoyed that he was late.

He had been conducting a casual affair with her for half a year, and they would see each other sometimes as often as once a week. As an affair it was not particularly important to Eitel, and he judged that it was only slightly more important to Lulu, but they enjoyed each other in a mild way, and he would not have liked to give it up. Indeed, the greatest problem was to find a place to meet. Lulu's home which was in one of the suburbs of the capital had proved impractical; during early evening, the most convenient time, there were always friends coming in for a drink, and therefore they had been obliged to settle for the beach house. Since it was winter, the weather was often rainy, and most of the film colony who lived at the beach had moved back to the city. This left the cabin more or less secluded, yet it was not impossible that someone he knew would see him enter, and often Eitel would park his car a distance away and walk up on foot in the darkness. By another month, spring would come, and they would probably have to arrange some other meeting place.

On the drive, Eitel tried not to think about the movie he was making. It was the fourth picture he had directed since *Saints and Lovers*, and it was nothing remarkable. A comedy about two people who find themselves married by accident, there was very little which was not cliché, but the film had a large budget, the largest of any picture which had been assigned to him since he had returned to the capital and two of the biggest stars at Supreme were acting in it. His future career depended to a great extent on this comedy for the partial success of *Saints and Lovers* and the indifferent returns on his other three pictures had not hurt him, but equally they had not helped him. Given the situation, there was more than enough pressure. So, as he rode to Lulu's house, Eitel brooded over the problems he must face in the next few days, worrying about the animosity which was developing between the female star and a young actress who was giving an excellent supporting performance, too excellent—it could overshadow the star—thinking that over the week end he would have to work with the writer on the dialogue of a climactic scene, it was just not comic enough, and all the while Eitel was wondering with a dull anxiety if the pace were too fast or too slow. That was the question one could never answer until one was done, but if his instinct were not serving him right, he could only hope it would be possible to patch the picture. Eitel sighed. He had come within sight of the beach house, and still had not rid himself of the day's work.

Lulu was waiting impatiently. "I thought you'd never get here," she said. This was one of the conceits of their affair and he tolerated it; she always pretended to want him greatly, and out of consideration he would pretend the same. After they kissed, he held her by the shoulders and looked into her face. She was showing the very first signs of age; her eyes were forming wrinkles and lines of tension had begun to appear on her forehead, around her mouth, and in the artful column of her throat. Nonetheless, she was still quite beautiful. "It was an awful day," Eitel said. "You don't know how much I was looking forward to this."

Lulu did not react properly. She merely looked agitated. "Charley," she said, "would you be very angry if we let things go for tonight? I'm sort of upset."

He controlled his resentment. He had gone to considerable trouble to arrange these few hours and she should recognize that. However, he merely smiled. "We'll do whatever you want," Eitel said.

"Charley, you know I have a tremendous physical feeling for you. My God, you're the only man I have outside of Tony, and I don't have to tell you what that's like."

Eitel gave his tender smile again. He was certain she was having two other affairs concurrent with his, but it was hardly important to him.

Lulu had begun to walk up and down the living room, picking her way through the arrangement of rustic furniture. "I need your advice," she said abruptly. "Charley, there's a crisis on."

"A crisis?" Eitel was on guard. Could Lulu be about to make demands of him?

"Tony's in trouble." Quietly, Lulu began to cry. "I could kill him," she said.

"What happened?"

"My press agent, Monroney, was on the phone for half an hour just now. He says I've got to release a statement to the papers, but the boob doesn't know what I should say. Charley, I don't either, and I have to give that statement in the next ten minutes."

"But what is it?"

"Tony beat up a waitress in a restaurant in Pittsburgh."

Eitel clicked his tongue. "That is a mess."

"It's terrible," Lulu said. "I knew Tony would get in trouble on his tour. Why does the studio send him out on personal appearances? They ought to keep him locked in a cage. He's been drunk for two days, Monroney said."

"Well, what do you think you ought to do?"

"I don't know. If I make the wrong move, this could finish my career."

"More probably, it'll finish Tony."

She shook her head. "Not with his luck. He's the biggest thing in town. The studio has to save him. But I can't afford this." Lulu cried out in anger, "Why does Tony have to do these things?"

"Don't you think you ought to get in touch with the publicity department at Supreme?"

"No," she said, "Charley, you're not thinking. Don't you see it's Tony they're going to protect. They haven't even tried to call me. That's the proof. They're going to spread the story that I drove Tony to it because I'm a bad wife."

"Supreme can't afford to sacrifice you," Eitel said encouragingly.

"The hell they can't. Tony's Bimmler is higher than mine."

"That's only temporary."

"Charley, stop giving me a sermon," Lulu shrieked at him.

"Don't scream at me, Lulu."

By an effort she calmed herself. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"What does Monroney say?"

Lulu put her drink down. "He's an idiot. I'm going to fire him when this is over. He thinks I should make a statement that I wash my hands of Tony, and that Tony's brutal, and that I know exactly what that waitress went through, and so forth."

"People won't like it," Eitel commented.

"Of course they won't. But Monroney says that's the best I can do. His theory is that I have to attack before Supreme attacks me." She threw her arms out widely. "Charley, I can't think straight."

"Lulu, baby," Eitel said, "let me fill your glass. It's not as bad as you believe."

"I'm so wound up, Charley. Please help me."

He nodded. "I'm no expert on public relations but I have picked up a little bit." Eitel smiled. "Offhand, I'd say it's a mistake to try to fight Supreme's publicity department. They're too strong for you."

"I know they are," she shouted in exasperation.

"But you don't have to oppose their strength. You can use it." Eitel paused significantly. "They don't want to lose you unless they have to. If you make it possible, Supreme will be happy to save both you and Tony."

"Charley, be specific."

"Well, you know, people love certain kinds of confessions," Eitel said. "What I would suggest is to take all the blame on yourself for what Tony did, but do it in such a way that everybody feels sympathy for you."

"I think I see what you mean," Lulu said excitedly. "Only Monroney won't know how to exploit it."

"Have you got a typewriter?" Eitel asked. "I can work it out in five minutes."

She sat him down at a desk in her den, and he lit a cigarette, took a swallow of his drink, and began to write:

Reached at her home, Miss Meyers who was busy entertaining some children from the Bonny-Kare Society for Underprivileged Children, said today, "It's all my fault. Tony must not be blamed. I feel terrible about that poor waitress, and I know Tony feels even worse. But the emotional and psychological difficulties which led Tony to commit such an act are all of my making. Deep down, Tony has a wonderful character, but I've failed to give him the love and unselfishness he needs, although in my own cockeyed childish way I love him very much. Perhaps, out of this trouble, which is my responsibility more than Tony's, I will achieve the maturity and humility I've been looking for so long. I'm flying to Pittsburgh right away to be with Tony, and I hope that out of all this something good may come for Tony even more than me."

"Charley, you're a great man," Lulu said and hugged him again. "I'll call Monroney right away." The phone in her hand, however, she hesitated. "What about this Bonny-Kare thing?" she asked.

"I know Gustafson very well. It's one of the charity drives he manages. Send him a check for five hundred, and you won't have any trouble there. He'll even release his own statement. 'One of the most charitable and kindhearted actresses in this town.'" Eitel grinned. "Only have Monroney call him right away. While you're at it, tell him to get the airplane reservation also."

When the phone calls were finished, Lulu came and sat on Eitel's lap. "I don't have to be at the airport for two hours," she said, "but I ought to call my maid to pack a bag and meet me there."

"Let it wait."

"Oh, Charley, you're really a man," Lulu said. "Monroney thinks it's so good that he tried to tell me he was working on the same angle himself. He's going to send a copy to Supreme as soon as the wire services release it."

"If the newspapers take it on, and I'm sure they will," Eitel said, "you'll be publicity for a week at least."

"I'll never be able to thank you enough. Why did I know it was you who could do it?" she asked fondly.

"Because we're just old thieves," he smiled.

"Charley, let's make love," Lulu said. "Right now you look good enough to eat."

They spent a pleasant half hour, more pleasant than he was accustomed to find with her, and when they were done, Lulu gave him three quick kisses on his bald spot. "You're the youngest man I know," she said.

He felt comfortable. It was warm in the room and warm next to her body and the tension of the day's work had passed from him. He held Lulu fondly and smiled when she began to meow like a kitten against his chest. Let her have this rest, he thought, for she would be busy enough the next ten days.

Lulu stirred in his arms and he sighed for her. Now her mind was active again and she would start to fret. "Charley," she said slowly, "there's one trouble."

"Only one?" he asked gently.

"Well, you know I was planning to divorce Tony, and now I won't be able to, not for a year at least."

"Would you really have divorced him so soon?"

"I don't know. I don't know really. Maybe I do love him."

"Maybe you do." Was her heart already racing to overtake her publicity, he thought?

"It's just I hate the idea how he used me. I never should have let you go," she declared.

"We were meant to be friends," Eitel said. "It's better this way."

"Sometimes I'm scared, Charley. I never used to be scared."

"It comes and it goes."

She propped herself up and lit a cigarette. "I saw Teddy Pope yesterday," she said. "It's funny. I never liked him but now I feel awful sorry for him."

"What is he doing?" Eitel asked.

"He's still looking for work. It's pathetic. He told me he thought he had a job in an independent production. I told him to go East and he said he would, but he won't. He's too afraid of the theater."

"I wish I could do something for him," Eitel said.

"Teddy's really loyal in his own way," Lulu remarked, and blew cigarette smoke toward her belly. "Right in the middle of all his troubles with Teppis, it took courage for him to visit Marion in jail. Only he was a fool to give that crazy statement. He didn't have to throw it in everybody's face that he thought Marion was his best friend." She touched Eitel's arm. "I'm sorry, Charley."

"Whatever for?" He resented her malice, however.

"Well, I'd forgotten about Marion and Elena."

"It's all right. Everybody has forgotten." Eitel shrugged.

"Elena's a good girl," Lulu said.

"Yes."

Lulu looked sad. "After I left Teddy, I kept thinking that H.T. was right. Maybe I should have married Teddy. We might have worked out, and we'd both be better off today." Lulu began to cry. "Oh, Charley, I'm depressed. I wish I hadn't seen Teddy."

Eitel comforted her. For a while they chatted, and then he looked at his watch. "You better get dressed if you're going to make that plane."

"I almost forgot," she said. "I wish I didn't have to go."

She talked to him while she was in the shower. "Good luck on your picture while I'm gone," Lulu called out.

"Thank you."

"When I'm in Pittsburgh can I phone your house if I need advice?"

"I guess so. Under the circumstances I can find some explanation for Elena."

"She's very jealous, isn't she?" Lulu asked.

"Sometimes."

"Charley, I hope you have luck with this picture. Lord knows you're due. I thought *Saints And Lovers* was one of the greatest pictures I ever saw, and so did everybody else in town. You should have gotten a Hercules for it."

"Well, I didn't."

There was silence while she powdered her feet. "Charles, are you happy with Elena?" Lulu asked.

"I'm not unhappy," he said.

"Elena's improved a lot."

"I suppose her analyst helped her."

"Don't believe it," Lulu said. "I've been going to my stupid head-shrinker for five years and he's never done a thing for me. It's you. You've been good for Elena. You're good for everyone."

"That's a novel role for me," Eitel said.

"You're always too hard on yourself."

"Maybe I'm too easy now."

Lulu opened the bathroom door and stuck out her tongue at him. "Nonsense. You just remember that." She made a point of leaving the door open while she twisted into an undergarment. "Charley, tell me about Victor. I was going to send him a present the other day but I forgot to."

"Vickie," Eitel said, "ah, I love Vickie."

"I never could have thought of you as a father."

"Neither could I, but I love that baby."

Did he love him? he wondered, feeling a fleeting desire to hold the child in his arms. Victor resembled Elena; not Elena as she was now, he thought, but Elena as he had first known her. Yet, what was the truth? There were times when he did not think of Victor for a week at a time.

"How do you know you love him?" Lulu asked curiously.

Eitel was about to answer, "Because I want him to be better than me," but instead he smiled.

"Maybe I ought to have children," Lulu continued in a self-absorbed voice. "I wonder if that's the answer for me."

"Better call your maid and tell her to meet you at the airport."

242

When Lulu had finished dressing, he drove her car out of the garage and opened the door for her. "Just keep your head, and everything will be all right," Eitel said.

"Want to follow me to the airport in your car?"

"Do you think we ought to be seen together?"

"I guess not." Lulu reached out and hugged him again. "Oh, Charley, I love you an awful lot. It's so wonderful to have a true friend."

He kissed her softly on the cheek and watched her drive away. In his ear he became aware of the sound of the surf, and he wandered down to the beach and watched the Pacific waters ride gently, steadily, onto the shore. It was early yet, he did not have to hurry home, and shivering a little, he sat down and stirred his finger in the sand, remembering from what seemed out of another life, the time he had watched the girl with the surfboard and had tried to make her interested in what he said. It came over him with the force of forgotten pain how he had lusted for her that day, as if she were the entrance to a life he had never quite known, enthusiastic for its future.

Eitel was sad, but it was pleasant sadness. He was looking forward to going home; after days of indifference he felt tender toward Elena now, as indeed he invariably felt tender after he had been unfaithful. Before they went to sleep he would lie next to her and tell her that he loved her. She did not need these words as much as once she had needed them, but still she would be happy, and Eitel thinking back over the few years they had been married was thankful they were passed. The first year had been bad; there had been gossip and ugly memories and for many months it had been difficult to embrace her. But that too had passed, and if with the loss of his jealousy he had also lost an emotion he once had felt from their bodies, they still had physical love and it was better than most.

The last serious trouble had come when Elena discovered herself pregnant. She had been terrified of abortion and he had felt manacled for life. But the child had come and now he loved it or at least he did his best to love it, and as Lulu said, Elena had improved. She could keep house, she could run the servants, she could even entertain. In those ways she had grown and there were many people who envied his marriage. Eitel sighed. Truthfully, he cared for her. Sometimes she bored him a little, but she was warm.

He got into his car and drove home at a tired pace and climbed the drive in low gear which led up to the house they had bought in the hills of the capital, and then he parked in his garage, waited a moment to compose himself for Elena, and went to join her in the living room. She looked up from the book she was reading and he saw at a glance that she was moody. But then she often seemed moody on nights when he had been unfaithful, and he wondered if she knew or if it were merely his uneasiness, and he marvelled at how little he understood now of what went on in her mind.

"How is Victor?" he asked as he came in.

Elena smiled drowsily. "He was very cute today," she said. "I have a story to tell you about what he did."

"Fine," Eitel said, "I want to hear it. But first I need a drink." Alcohol would wash his mouth of Lulu and prepare him for Elena. As he kissed her on the cheek, he tried to be just a touch remote so that she would expect nothing of him when they went to sleep.

"Was the conference all right?" Elena asked.

"It was fair."

"Why can't Collie make up his mind?" she said crossly. "He's so changeable."

"He is," Eitel agreed, and sat down beside her.

"I missed you tonight," Elena said. "I was disappointed when you called at lunchtime."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

"Oh, baby, I'm tired," he said softly. "Don't scold me."

"I wonder when we'll have an evening together," Elena said in a dispirited voice.

"Over the week end. I promise you. Maybe Friday night."

"I have my dance group Friday afternoon. I'll be tired then," she said. In the last year she had begun to take dancing lessons again, more to keep her figure than from any deep ambition, but she was very good, and once or twice when they had company, she consented to perform for them.

"No, we'll make time over the week end, sweetheart," Eitel said. He pushed himself further back into the sofa, took a comfortable sip on his drink, and rubbed his eyes. "How did you spend today?" he asked.

"I played bridge this afternoon."

"Fine."

"I hate bridge," Elena said.

She was clearly not in a good mood, and as fatigued as though he had actually undergone a conference with Collie, Eitel sat up and stroked her arm. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I saw my analyst this morning."

"Well, you still see him twice a week," Eitel said.

"Yes, I know, Charley, but I had a fight with him this morning."

244

It was worth thirty-five dollars an hour that she should ngnt with someone else. "What caused it?" Eitel said tentatively.

"I don't want to talk about my analysis."

"All right, then."

"It's just that we always talk about the same things."

He made a point of saying, "Do you mean your analyst or me?"

"Oh, darling, you know I mean the analyst. He's very smart, but I don't know if I need him any more."

"Then quit."

"I think I will . . . Except . . ."

"Except what?"

"It was a stupid fight," Elena said, not answering him directly. "I told him about the new house we're thinking of buying if your picture is a success, and we discussed it all, and it came out . . . well, Charley, what came out was that I don't want to buy the new house."

"You don't?" She had seemed so excited the day they looked at it.

"Well, I do and I don't. We uncovered some ambivalencies I have."

"Yes, yes."

"Now, don't get angry. I won't use those words any more than I have to, but what we discovered is that I feel the house is too big and that we'll just be too rich."

"All right, I can understand feeling that way."

"The analyst didn't like what I said. He told me I was regressing and being childish, and that it was my attitude toward money and toward you and a sign of weak ego." As Elena spoke, he listened critically to her voice. She was more articulate these days, and her speech had lost most of its coarseness, but there were ugly tones returning now.

She touched his hand. "I don't know what happened, Charley, but I started screaming at him, and I told him he was a fine one to talk with his twenty-room house, and that he was a smug fat slob, and I couldn't stand the way he was so satisfied with himself, and if he didn't like the way I talked, well nobody was asking him to take my money and . . ." She lapsed into silence. "It was just awful."

"That kind of thing has happened before."

"Yes, but Charley, this time I meant it. That's what I do think of him, and I don't trust him any more, and next time I won't make a scene when I tell him, I'll just tell him quietly. Because you see I don't want the same kind of life for me that he thinks I should have."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's true I owe him a lot, but he doesn't understand me. He really doesn't."

"I don't follow."

"Charley, I know how you feel about that new house. You want it more than you think you do, and I suppose we'll get it because we always end up doing what you want."

"Is that fair?"

"Maybe it isn't, but what I'm trying to say is I mean we have the baby, and we'll probably have another baby, and I have good relations with the servants and I do love the dancing classes, and Charley I love you, I can tell because I still get scared at the thought of losing you, but Charley listen to me, I don't know if you understand how much I love Vickie, I keep worrying that I won't be a good enough mother to him, but is that enough? Is Vickie enough? I mean where do I go? I don't want to complain, but what am I going to do with my life?"

Eitel caressed her. "Sweetheart," he said, and his voice throbbed with a little genuine emotion, "you've grown more than anyone in the time I've known you, and I won't be worried about you, I can't be worried about you, because I just know that whatever you do, you're going to get better and more good all your life."

There were tears in her eyes. He had spent the evening watching women cry. "No, Charley," Elena said, "you see, that doesn't answer it. I can't talk to you any more unless you'll understand this. What am I going to do with my life?"

He held her to him, and fondled her hair, feeling a sense of protection which bid her to stop here, and ask no more, for of all the distance she had come, and he had helped her to move, and there were times like this when he felt the substance of his pride to depend upon exactly that improvement as if she were finally the only important creation in which he had taken part, he still knew that he could help her no longer, nor could anyone else, for she had entered now into that domain where her problems were everyone's problems and there were no answers and no doctors and no parents and no pleasures, but only that high plateau where philosophy exists and despair. He felt a portent in himself that she would grow away from him, and in years to come, many years to be sure, it might be that he would need her, and would she be forced to stay out of kindness and loyalty and boredom too?

"I'm sorry, Charley," she said. "You're tired and it's not fair to bother you."

Yet, on this particular night, it was Elena who fell asleep first, and long after he had failed to be lulled by the quiet rhythms of her breathing, Eitel got up and visited Victor's room, and looked at his child sleeping, but there was nothing he could feel, and so putting on an overcoat, he stepped out on the balcony of their house and looked down across the hills to the checkerwork of houses and streets which filled the valley of the capital, and beyond, far into the distance, was the ocean and the lights of automobiles on the highway which bordered it. He had come along that road tonight on the drive back to his house, and he remembered how at a stoplight, just before the neon signs and the hamburger stands and the tourists camps which threw up their shoddy skirts to the capital, he had stared out across the water and seen a freighter with its hold-lights and its mast-lamps moving away to the horizon. It was off on a voyage and the men who sailed it would look for adventure. Almost idly, for the first time in many months, Eitel had thought of me then, and wondered, "Is Sergius possibly on that boat?"

Then the light had changed to green and he raced his motor and rode away and forgot the freighter, but now, standing on the balcony of his house in the hills of the capital, Eitel set out on another voyage in his mind and made the nostalgic journey back to Desert D'Or, thinking wistfully of how once he had adored Elena's body in that unhappy time which marked—could he say it so?—the end of his overextended youth. It was gone now, gone as the miles on the boulevard past that intersection where he had watched the ship descend the horizon, and with a pang for opportunity lost forever, he remembered the knowledge he wanted to communicate to me, suffering the sad frustration of his new middle age, since experience when it is not communicated to another must wither within and be worse than lost.

"One cannot search for pleasure, Sergius," he whispered silently to me, thinking of how I first had come to Desert D'Or, "since pleasure must end as love or cruelty"—and almost as an afterthought he added—"or obligation." In that way Eitel thought of me, and with a kindly sadness he wondered if I possessed the knowledge of what was love, even if love could be described only by what it was not. "Sergius, what does one ever do with one's life?" he thought in the easy friendship of memory. "Are you one of those who know?"

And I, in another place, laboring in those pages at which I worked so hard, answered him across the miles in the fervor of my imagination, saying to him that he had lost the final desire of the artist, that cry which tells us that when all else is lost, when love is lost, and adventure, self-satisfaction and tears, when perhaps is lost even one's passion for justice and hope for mankind, there still remains that world we may create, more real to ourselves, more real to others, than the mummery of what happens, passes, and is gone. So I left him in his new-found middle age, the member of the community, and struck out on my own into that other world, the real world, where orphans burn orphans, and nothing is more difficult to discover than a simple fact. And with the pride of the artist for whatever time it can last, I would blow against the walls of every power that exists, the small trumpet of my defiance.

THE END

