

THE THREAD OF FLAME

I took out my watch, though unable to read the time even when I looked at it.

"I'm so sorry, but I'm afraid—"

"Oh no, you're not." There was a repetition of the catch in the tone that suggested a sob.

"Billy, aren't we—aren't we going to be friends?"

I couldn't soften toward her. I felt no springs of forgiveness.

"Why should you want to be friends with me?"

"Because I can't help it, for one thing," she cried; "and for another—" Turning away wearily she began to move toward the door.

"Of course if you don't want to, I can't urge it, and so must learn to get along by myself."

Something in the last phrase prompted me to say:

"Is there anything specially wrong?"

"No; only everything specially wrong. If you had come back to the hotel with me I could have told you."

"Can't you tell me now? Is it about—about Stroud?"

"Oh no, Billy. Can't you forget about that? I have. He's dropped out of my existence. That was all a mistake, like the other things."

"What other things?"

"All the other things." She pointed to the big word "PEACE" staring at us from a chair to which I had thrown the newspaper. "Look at that. Doesn't it make all the last five years seem unreal, like a nightmare after you've got up?"