

like water from its body—then went into the broad, smooth circles of a spiral, as if circling for a landing where no landing was conceivable.

She watched, not trying to explain it, not believing what she saw, waiting for the upward thrust that would throw him back on his course. But the easy, gliding circles went on dropping, toward a ground she could not see and dared not think of. Like remnants of broken jaws, strings of granite dentures stood between her ship and his; she could not tell what lay at the bottom of his spiral motion. She knew only that it did not look like, but was certain to be, the motion of a suicide.

She saw the sunlight glitter on his wings for an instant. Then, like the body of a man diving chest-first and arms outstretched, serenely abandoned to the sweep of the fall, the plane went down and vanished behind the ridges of rock.

She flew on, almost waiting for it to reappear, unable to believe that she had witnessed a horrible catastrophe taking place so simply and quietly. She flew on to where the plane had dropped. It seemed to be a valley in a ring of granite walls.

She reached the valley and looked down. There was no possible place for a landing. There was no sign of a plane.

The bottom of the valley looked like a stretch of the earth's crust mangled in the days when the earth was cooling, left irretrievable ever since. It was a stretch of rocks ground against one another, with boulders hanging in precarious formations, with long, dark crevices and a few contorted pine trees growing half-horizontally into the air. There was no level piece of soil the size of a handkerchief. There was no place for a plane to hide. There was no remnant of a plane's wreck.

She banked sharply, circling above the valley, dropping down a little. By some trick of light, which she could not explain, the floor of the valley seemed more clearly visible than the rest of the earth. She could distinguish it well enough to know that the plane was not there; yet this was not possible.

She circled, dropping down farther. She glanced around her—and for one frightening moment, she thought that it was a quiet summer morning, that she was alone, lost in a region of the Rocky Mountains which no plane should ever venture to approach, and, with the last of her fuel burning away, she was looking for a plane that had never existed, in quest of a destroyer who had vanished as he always vanished; perhaps it was only his vision that had led her here to be destroyed. In the next moment, she shook her head, pressed her mouth tighter and dropped farther.

She thought that she could not abandon an incalculable wealth such as the brain of Quentin Daniels on one of those rocks below, if he was still alive and within her reach to help. She had dropped inside the circle of the valley's walls. It was a dangerous job of flying, the space was much too tight, but she went on circling and dropping lower, her life hanging on her eyesight, and her eyesight flashing between two tasks: searching the floor of the valley and watching the granite walls that seemed about to rip her wings.

She knew the danger only as part of the job. It had no personal meaning any longer. The savage thing she felt was almost enjoyment.

It was the last rage of a lost battle. No!—she was crying in her mind, crying it to the destroyer, to the world she had left, to the years behind her, to the long progression of defeat—No! . . . No! . . . No! . . .

Her eyes swept past the instrument panel—and then she sat still but for the sound of a gasp. Her altimeter had stood at 11,000 feet the last time she remembered seeing it. Now it stood at 10,000. But the floor of the valley had not changed. It had come no closer. It remained as distant as her first glance down.

She knew that the figure 8,000 meant the level of the ground in this part of Colorado. She had not noticed the length of her descent. She had not noticed that the ground, which had seemed too clear and too close from the height, was now too dim and too far. She was looking at the same rocks from the same perspective, they had grown no larger, their shadows had not moved, and the oddly unnatural light still hung over the bottom of the valley.

She thought that her altimeter was off, and she went on circling downward. She saw the needle of her dial moving down, she saw the walls of granite moving up, she saw the ring of mountains growing higher, its peaks coming closer together in the sky—but the floor of the valley remained unchanged, as if she were dropping down a well with a bottom never to be reached. The needle moved to 9,500—to 9,300—to 9,000—to 8,700.

The flash of light that hit her had no source. It was as if the air within and beyond the plane became an explosion of blinding cold fire, sudden and soundless. The shock threw her back, her hands off the wheel and over her eyes. In the break of an instant, when she seized the wheel again, the light was gone, but her ship was spinning, her ears were bursting with silence and her propeller stood stiffly straight before her; her motor was dead.

She tried to pull for a rise, but the ship was going down—and what she saw flying at her face was not the spread of mangled boulders, but the green grass of a field where no field had been before. There was no time to see the rest. There was no time to think of explanations. There was no time to come out of the spin. The earth was a green ceiling coming down upon her, a few hundred swiftly shrinking feet away.

Flung from side to side, like a battered pendulum, clinging to the wheel, half in her seat, half on her knees, she fought to pull the ship into a glide, for an attempt to make a belly-landing, while the green ground was whirling about her, sweeping above her, then below, its spiral coils coming closer. Her arms pulling at the wheel, with no chance to know whether she could succeed, with her space and time running out—she felt, in a flash of its full, violent purity, that special sense of existence which had always been hers. In a moment's consecration to her love—to her rebellious denial of disaster, to her love of life and of the matchless value that was herself—she felt the fiercely proud certainty that she would survive.

And in answer to the earth that flew to meet her, she heard in her mind, as her mockery at fate, as her cry of defiance, the words of the sentence she hated—the words of defeat, of despair and of a plea for help:

“Oh hell! Who is John Galt?”

# PART THREE

A IS A

