

"I'll answer for it."

She was back at her work before the door had closed on James Taggart.

When she finished, pushed the papers aside and glanced up, the sky was black beyond the window, and the city had become a glowing spread of lighted glass without masonry. She rose reluctantly. She resented the small defeat of being tired, but she knew that she was, tonight.

The outer office was dark and empty; her staff had gone. Only Eddie Willers was still there, at his desk in his glass partitioned enclosure that looked like a cube of light in a corner of the large room. She waved to him on her way out.

She did not take the elevator to the lobby of the building, but to the concourse of the Taggart Terminal. She liked to walk through it on her way home.

She had always felt that the concourse looked like a temple. Glancing up at the distant ceiling, she saw dim vaults supported by giant granite columns, and the tops of vast windows glazed by darkness. The vaulting held the solemn peace of a cathedral, spread in protection high above the rushing activity of men.

Dominating the concourse, but ignored by the travelers as a habitual sight, stood a statue of Nathaniel Taggart, the founder of the railroad. Dagny was the only one who remained aware of it and had never been able to take it for granted. To look at that statue whenever she crossed the concourse, was the only form of prayer she knew.

Nathaniel Taggart had been a penniless adventurer who had come from somewhere in New England and built a railroad across a continent, in the days of the first steel rails. His railroad still stood; his battle to build it had dissolved into a legend, because people preferred not to understand it or to believe it possible.

He was a man who had never accepted the creed that others had the right to stop him. He set his goal and moved toward it, his way as straight as one of his rails. He never sought any loans, bonds, subsidies, land grants or legislative favors from the government. He obtained money from the men who owned it, going from door to door—from the mahogany doors of bankers to the clapboard doors of lonely farmhouses. He never talked about the public good. He merely told people that they would make big profits on his railroad, he told them why he expected the profits and he gave his reasons. He had good reasons. Through all the generations that followed, Taggart Transcontinental was one of the few railroads that never went bankrupt and the only one whose controlling stock remained in the hands of the founder's descendants.

In his lifetime, the name "Nat Taggart" was not famous, but notorious; it was repeated, not in homage, but in resentful curiosity; and if anyone admired him, it was as one admires a successful bandit. Yet no penny of his wealth had been obtained by force or fraud; he was guilty of nothing, except that he earned his own fortune and never forgot that it was his.

Many stories were whispered about him. It was said that in the

wilderness of the Middle West, he murdered a state legislator who attempted to revoke a charter granted to him, to revoke it when his rail was laid halfway across the state some legislators had planned to make a fortune on Taggart stock—by selling it short Nat Taggart was indicted for the murder but the charge could never be proved He had no trouble with legislators from then on

It was said that Nat Taggart had staked his life on his railroad many times, but once, he staked more than his life Desperate for funds with the construction of his line suspended he threw down three flights of stairs a distinguished gentleman who offered him a loan from the government Then he pledged his wife as security for a loan from a millionaire who hated him and admired her beauty He repaid the loan on time and did not have to surrender his pledge The deal had been made with his wife's consent She was a great beauty from the noblest family of a southern state and she had been disinherited by her family because she eloped with Nat Taggart when he was only a ragged young adventurer

Dagny regretted at times that Nat Taggart was her ancestor What she felt for him did not belong in the category of unchosen family affections She did not want her feeling to be the thing one was supposed to owe an uncle or a grandfather She was incapable of love for any object not of her own choice and she resented anyone's demand for it But had it been possible to choose an ancestor she would have chosen Nat Taggart in voluntary homage and with all of her gratitude

Nat Taggart's statue was copied from an artist's sketch of him, the only record ever made of his appearance He had lived far into old age but one could never think of him except as he was on that sketch—as a young man In her childhood his statue had been Dagny's first concept of the exalted When she was sent to church or to school and heard people using that word, she thought that she knew what they meant she thought of the statue

The statue was of a young man with a tall gaunt body and an angular face He held his head as if he faced a challenge and found joy in his capacity to meet it All that Dagny wanted of life was contained in the desire to hold her head as he did

Tonight she looked at the statue when she walked across the concourse It was a moment's rest it was as if a burden she could not name were lightened and as if a faint current of air were touching her forehead

In a corner of the concourse by the main entrance there was a small newsstand The owner a quiet, courteous old man with an air of breeding had stood behind his counter for twenty years He had owned a cigarette factory once but it had gone bankrupt and he had resigned himself to the lonely obscurity of his little stand in the midst of an eternal whirlpool of strangers He had no family or friends left alive He had a hobby which was his only pleasure, he gathered cigarettes from all over the world for his private collection, he knew every brand made or that had ever been made

Dagny liked to stop at his newsstand on her way out He seemed to be part of the Taggart Terminal, like an old watchdog too feeble

to protect it, but reassuring by the loyalty of his presence. He liked to see her coming, because it amused him to think that he alone knew the importance of the young woman in a sports coat and a slanting hat who came hurrying anonymously through the crowd.

She stopped tonight as usual, to buy a package of cigarettes. "How is the collection?" she asked him. "Any new specimens?"

He smiled sadly, shaking his head. "No, Miss Taggart. There aren't any new brands made anywhere in the world. Even the old ones are going one after another. There's only five or six kinds left selling now. There used to be dozens. People aren't making anything new any more."

"They will. That's only temporary."

He glanced at her and did not answer. Then he said, "I like cigarettes, Miss Taggart. I like to think of fire held in a man's hand. Fire, a dangerous force tamed at his fingertips. I often wonder about the hours when a man sits alone, watching the smoke of a cigarette thinking. I wonder what great things have come from such hours. When a man thinks, there is a spot of fire alive in his mind—and it is proper that he should have the burning point of a cigarette as his one expression."

"Do they ever think?" she asked involuntarily and stopped the question was her one personal torture and she did not want to discuss it.

The old man looked as if he had noticed the sudden stop and understood it, but he did not start discussing it, he said instead, "I don't like the thing that's happening to people, Miss Taggart."

"What?"

"I don't know. But I've watched them here for twenty years and I've seen the change. They used to rush through here, and it was wonderful to watch. It was the hurry of men who knew where they were going and were eager to get there. Now they're hurrying because they are afraid. It's not a purpose that drives them, it's fear. They're not going anywhere, they're escaping. And I don't think they know what it is that they want to escape. They don't look at one another. They jerk when brushed against. They smile too much, but it's an ugly kind of smiling. It's not joy, it's pleading. I don't know what it is that's happening to the world." He shrugged. "Oh, well, who is John Galt?"

"He's just a meaningless phrase!"

She was startled by the sharpness of her own voice, and she added in apology, "I don't like that empty piece of slang. What does it mean? Where did it come from?"

"Nobody knows," he answered slowly.

"Why do people keep saying it? Nobody seems able to explain just what it stands for, yet they all use it as if they knew the meaning."

"Why does it disturb you?" he asked.

"I don't like what they seem to mean when they say it."

"I don't, either, Miss Taggart."

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Eddie Willers ate his dinners in the employees' cafeteria of the Taggart Terminal. There was a restaurant in the building, patronized