

pretty ugly deals. It would be pretty messy for Mr. Mouch, if it all came out in public. So you kept your promise and you got the job for him, because you thought you had him. And so you did. And he paid off pretty handsomely, didn't he? But it works only just so long. After a while, Mr. Wesley Mouch might get to be so powerful and the scandal so old, that nobody will care how he got his start or whom he double-crossed. Nothing lasts forever. Wesley was Rearden's man, and then he was your man, and he might be somebody else's man tomorrow."

"Are you giving me a hint?"

"Why no, I'm giving you a friendly warning. We're old friends, Jimmy, and I think that that's what we ought to remain. I think we can be very useful to each other, you and I, if you don't start getting the wrong ideas about friendship. Me--I believe in a balance of power."

"Did you prevent Mouch from coming here tonight?"

"Well, maybe I did and maybe I didn't. I'll let you worry about it. That's good for me, if I did—and still better, if I didn't."

Cherryl's eyes followed James Taggart through the crowd. The faces that kept shifting and gathering around her seemed so friendly and their voices were so eagerly warm that she felt certain there was no malice anywhere in the room. She wondered why some of them talked to her about Washington, in a hopeful, confidential manner of half-sentences, half-hints, as if they were seeking her help for something secret she was supposed to understand. She did not know what to say, but she smiled and answered whatever she pleased. She could not disgrace the person of "Mrs. Taggart" by any touch of fear.

Then she saw the enemy. It was a tall, slender figure in a gray evening gown, who was now her sister-in-law.

The pressure of anger in Cherryl's mind was the stored accumulation of the sounds of Jim's tortured voice. She felt the nagging pull of a duty left undone. Her eyes kept returning to the enemy and studying her intently. The pictures of Dagny Taggart in the newspapers had shown a figure dressed in slacks, or a face with a slanting hat brim and a raised coat collar. Now she wore a gray evening gown that seemed indecent, because it looked austere, modest, so modest that it vanished from one's awareness and left one too aware of the slender body it pretended to cover. There was a tone of blue in the gray cloth that went with the gun-metal gray of her eyes. She wore no jewelry, only a bracelet on her wrist, a chain of heavy metal links with a green-blue cast.

Cherryl waited, until she saw Dagny standing alone, then tore forward, cutting resolutely across the room. She looked at close range into the gun-metal eyes that seemed cold and intense at once, the eyes that looked at her directly with a polite, impersonal curiosity.

"There's something I want you to know," said Cherryl, her voice taut and harsh, "so that there won't be any pretending about it. I'm not going to put on the sweet relative act. I know what you've done to Jim and how you've made him miserable all his life. I'm going to

protect him against you. I'll put you in your place. I'm Mrs. Taggart. I'm the woman in this family now."

"That's quite all right," said Dagny. "I'm the man."

Cherryl watched her walk away, and thought that Jim had been right: this sister of his was a creature of cold evil who had given her no response, no acknowledgment, no emotion of any kind except a touch of something that looked like an astonished, indifferent amusement.

Rearden stood by Lillian's side and followed her when she moved. She wished to be seen with her husband; he was complying. He did not know whether anyone looked at him or not; he was aware of no one around them, except the person whom he could not permit himself to see.

The image still holding his consciousness was the moment when he had entered this room with Lillian and had seen Dagny looking at them. He had looked straight at her, prepared to accept any blow her eyes would choose to give him. Whatever the consequences to Lillian, he would have confessed his adultery publicly, there and in that moment, rather than commit the unspeakable act of evading Dagny's eyes, of closing his face into a coward's blankness, of pretending to her that he did not know the nature of his action.

But there had been no blow. He knew every shade of sensation ever reflected in Dagny's face; he had known that she had felt no shock; he had seen nothing but an untouched serenity. Her eyes had moved to his, as if acknowledging the full meaning of this encounter, but looking at him as she would have looked anywhere, as she looked at him in his office or in her bedroom. It had seemed to him that she had stood before them both, at the distance of a few steps, revealed to them as simply and openly as the gray dress revealed her body.

She had bowed to them, the courteous movement of her head including them both. He had answered, he had seen Lillian's brief nod, and then he had seen Lillian moving away and realized that he had stood with his head bowed for a long moment.

He did not know what Lillian's friends were saying to him or what he was answering. As a man goes step by step, trying not to think of the length of a hopeless road, so he went moment by moment, keeping no imprint of anything in his mind. He heard snatches of Lillian's pleased laughter and a tone of satisfaction in her voice.

After a while, he noticed the women around him; they all seemed to resemble Lillian, with the same look of static grooming, with thin eyebrows plucked to a static lift and eyes frozen in a static amusement. He noticed that they were trying to flirt with him, and that Lillian watched it as if she were enjoying the hopelessness of their attempts. This, then—he thought—was the happiness of feminine vanity which she had begged him to give her, these were the standards which he did not live by, but had to consider. He turned for escape to a group of men.

He could not find a single straight statement in the conversation of the men; whatever subject they seemed to be talking about never seemed to be the subject they were actually discussing. He listened