

bearing the name of my wife will give you some form of contentment, I won't take it away from you. It's I who've broken my word, so I will atone for it to the extent I can. You know, of course, that I could buy one of those modern judges and obtain a divorce any time I wished. I won't do it. I will keep my word, if you so desire, but this is the only form in which I can keep it. Now make your choice—but if you choose to hold me, you must never speak to me about her, you must never show her that you know, if you meet her in the future, you must never touch that part of my life."

She stood still, looking up at him, the posture of her body slouched and loose, as if its sloppiness were a form of defiance, as if she did not care to resume for his sake the discipline of a graceful bearing.

"Miss Dagny Taggart . . ." she said, and chuckled. "The superwoman whom common, average wives were not supposed to suspect. The woman who cared for nothing but business and dealt with men as a man. The woman of great spirit who admired you platonically, just for your genius, your mills and your Metal!" She chuckled. "I should have known that she was just a bitch who wanted you in the same way as any bitch would want you—because you are fully as expert in bed as you are at a desk, if I am a judge of such matters. But she would appreciate that better than I, since she worships expertness of any kind and since she had probably been laid by every section hand on her railroad!"

She stopped, because she saw, for the first time in her life, by what sort of look one learns that a man is capable of killing. But he was not looking at her. She was not sure whether he was seeing her at all or hearing her voice.

He was hearing his own voice saying her words—saying them to Dagny in the sun-striped bedroom of Ellis Wyatt's house. He was seeing, in the nights behind him, Dagny's face in those moments when, his body leaving hers, she lay still with a look of radiance that was more than a smile, a look of youth, of early morning, of gratitude to the fact of one's own existence. And he was seeing Lillian's face, as he had seen it in bed beside him, a lifeless face with evasive eyes, with some feeble sneer on its lips and the look of sharing some smutty guilt. He saw who was the accuser and who the accused—he saw the obscenity of letting impotence hold itself as virtue and damn the power of living as a sin—he saw, with the clarity of direct perception, in the shock of a single instant, the terrible ugliness of that which had once been his own belief.

It was only an instant, a conviction without words, a knowledge grasped as a feeling, left unsealed by his mind. The shock brought him back to the sight of Lillian and to the sound of her words. She appeared to him suddenly as some inconsequential presence that had to be dealt with at the moment.

"Lillian," he said, in an unstressed voice that did not grant her even the honor of anger, "you are not to speak of her to me. If you ever do it again, I will answer you as I would answer a hoodlum: I will beat you up. Neither you nor anyone else is to discuss her."

She glanced at him. "Really?" she said. It had an odd, casual sound—as if the word were tossed away, leaving some hook im-

planted in her mind. She seemed to be considering some sudden vision of her own.

He said quietly, in weary astonishment. "I thought you would be glad to discover the truth. I thought you would prefer to know—for the sake of whatever love or respect you felt for me—that if I betrayed you, it was not cheaply and casually, it was not for a chorus girl, but for the cleanest and most serious feeling of my life."

The ferocious spring with which she whirled to him was involuntary, as was the naked twist of hatred in her face. "Oh, you god-damn fool!"

He remained silent.

Her composure returned, with the faint suggestion of a smile of secret mockery. "I believe you're waiting for my answer?" she said. "No, I won't divorce you. Don't ever hope for that. We shall continue as we are—if that is what you offered and if you think it can continue. See whether you can flout all moral principles and get away with it!"

He did not listen to her while she reached for her coat, telling him that she was going back to their home. He barely noticed it when the door closed after her. He stood motionless, held by a feeling he had never experienced before. He knew that he would have to think later, to think and understand, but for the moment he wanted nothing but to observe the wonder of what he felt.

It was a sense of freedom, as if he stood alone in the midst of an endless sweep of clean air, with only the memory of some weight that had been torn off his shoulders. It was the feeling of an immense deliverance. It was the knowledge that it did not matter to him what Lillian felt, what she suffered or what became of her, and more: not only that it did not matter, but the shining, guiltless knowledge that it did not have to matter.

## Chapter VI MIRACLE METAL

"But can we get away with it?" asked Wesley Mouch. His voice was high with anger and thin with fear.

Nobody answered him. James Taggart sat on the edge of an arm-chair not moving, looking up at him from under his forehead. Orren Boyle gave a vicious tap against an ashtray, shaking the ash off his cigar. Dr. Floyd Ferris smiled. Mr. Weatherby folded his lips and hands. Fred Kinnan, head of the Amalgamated Labor of America, stopped pacing the office, sat down on the window sill and crossed his arms. Eugene Lawson, who had sat hunched downward, absent-mindedly rearranging a display of flowers on a low glass table, raised his torso resentfully and glanced up. Mouch sat at his desk, with his fist on a sheet of paper.

It was Eugene Lawson who answered. "That's not, it seems to me, the way to put it. We must not let vulgar difficulties obstruct our feeling that it's a noble plan motivated solely by the public welfare. It's for the good of the people. The people need it. Need comes first, so we don't have to consider anything else."