

She considered it earnestly. "No," she said, "I hadn't thought of it. But I can see why you wouldn't."

"Why?" It was a question to which he had no answer.

"Nobody's really good enough for you, Mr. Taggart," she answered very simply, not as flattery, but as a matter of fact.

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't think I like people very much, Mr. Taggart. Not most of them."

"I don't either. Not any of them."

"I thought a man like you—you wouldn't know how mean they can be and how they try to step on you and ride on your back, if you let them. I thought the big men in the world could get away from them and not have to be flea-bait all of the time, but maybe I was wrong."

"What do you mean, flea-bait?"

"Oh, it's just something I tell myself when things get tough—that I've got to beat my way out to where I won't feel like I'm flea-bitten all the time by all kinds of lousiness—but maybe it's the same anywhere, only the fleas get bigger."

"Much bigger."

She remained silent, as if considering something. "It's funny," she said sadly to some thought of her own.

"What's funny?"

"I read a book once where it said that great men are always unhappy, and the greater—the unhappier. It didn't make sense to me. But maybe it's true."

"It's much truer than you think."

She looked away, her face disturbed.

"Why do you worry so much about the great men?" he asked. "What are you, a hero worshipper of some kind?"

She turned to look at him and he saw the light of an inner smile, while her face remained solemnly grave, it was the most eloquently personal glance he had ever seen directed at himself, while she answered in a quiet, impersonal voice. "Mr. Taggart, what else is there to look up to?"

A screeching sound, neither quite bell nor buzzer, rang out suddenly and went on ringing with nerve-grating insistence.

She jerked her head, as if awakening at the scream of an alarm clock, then sighed. "That's closing time, Mr. Taggart," she said regretfully.

"Go get your hat—I'll wait for you outside," he said.

She stared at him, as if among all of life's possibilities this was one she had never held as conceivable.

"No kidding?" she whispered.

"No kidding."

She whirled around and ran like a streak to the door of the employees' quarters, forgetting her counter, her duties and all feminine concern about never showing eagerness in accepting a man's invitation.

He stood looking after her for a moment, his eyes narrowed. He did not name to himself the nature of his own feeling—never to

"Mr. Taggart, what is it that makes you so unhappy?"

"Why should you care whether I am or not?"

"Because . . . well, if you haven't the right to be happy and proud, who has?"

"That's what I want to know—who has?" He turned to her abruptly, the words exploding as if a safety fuse had blown. "He didn't invent iron ore and blast furnaces, did he?"

"Who?"

"Rearden. He didn't invent smelting and chemistry and air compression. He couldn't have invented his Metal but for thousands and thousands of other people. *His* Metal! Why does he think it's his? Why does he think it's his invention? Everybody uses the work of everybody else. Nobody ever invents anything."

She said, puzzled, "But the iron ore and all those other things were there all the time. Why didn't anybody else make that Metal, but Mr. Rearden did?"

"He didn't do it for any noble purpose, he did it just for his own profit. He's never done anything for any other reason."

"What's wrong with that, Mr. Taggart?" Then she laughed softly, as if at the sudden solution of a riddle. "That's nonsense, Mr. Taggart. You don't mean it. You know that Mr. Rearden has *earned* all his profits, and so have you. You're saying those things just to be modest; when everybody knows what a great job you people have done—you and Mr. Rearden and your sister, who must be such a wonderful person!"

"Yeah? That's what *you* think. She's a hard, insensitive woman who spends her life building tracks and bridges, not for any great ideal, but only because that's what she enjoys doing. If she enjoys it, what is there to admire about her doing it? I'm not so sure it was great—building that Line for all those prosperous industrialists in Colorado, when there are so many poor people in blighted areas who need transportation."

"But, Mr. Taggart, it was you who fought to build that Line."

"Yes, because it was my duty—to the company and the stockholders and our employees. But don't expect me to enjoy it. I'm not so sure it was great—inventing this complex new Metal, when so many nations are in need of plain iron—why, do you know that the People's State of China hasn't even got enough nails to put wooden roofs over people's heads?"

"But . . . but I don't see that that's *your* fault."

"Somebody should attend to it. Somebody with the vision to see beyond his own pocketbook. No sensitive person these days—when there's so much suffering around us—would devote ten years of his life to splashing about with a lot of trick metals. You think it's great? Well, it's not any kind of superior ability, but just a hide that you couldn't pierce if you poured a ton of his own steel over his head! There are many people of much greater ability in the world, but you don't read about them in the headlines and you don't run to gape at them at grade crossings—because they can't invent noncollapsible bridges at a time when the suffering of mankind weighs on their spirit!"

She was looking at him silently, respectfully, her joyous eagerness toned down, her eyes subdued. He felt better.

He picked up his drink, took a gulp, and chuckled abruptly at a sudden recollection.

"It was funny, though," he said, his tone easier, livelier, the tone of a confidence to a pal. "You should have seen Orren Boyle yesterday, when the first flash came through on the radio from Wyatt Junction! He turned green—but I mean, *green*, the color of a fish that's been flying around too long! Do you know what he did last night, by way of taking the bad news? Hired himself a suite at the Valhalla Hotel—and you know what that is—and the last I heard, he was still there today, drinking himself under the table and the beds, with a few choice friends of his and half the female population of upper Amsterdam Avenue!"

"Who is Mr. Boyle?" she asked, stupefied.

"Oh, a fat slob that's inclined to overreach himself. A smart guy who gets too smart at times. You should have seen his face yesterday! I got a kick out of that. That—and Dr. Floyd Ferris. That smoothy didn't like it a bit, oh not a bit!—the elegant Dr. Ferris of the State Science Institute, the servant of the people, with the patent-leather vocabulary—but he carried it off pretty well, I must say, only you could see him squirming in every paragraph—I mean, that interview he gave out this morning, where he said, 'The country gave Rearden that Metal, now we expect him to give the country something in return.' That was pretty nifty, considering who's been riding on the gravy train and . . . well, considering. That was better than Bertram Scudder—Mr. Scudder couldn't think of anything but 'No comment,' when his fellow gentlemen of the press asked him to voice his sentiments. 'No comment'—from Bertram Scudder who's never been known to shut his trap from the day he was born, about anything you ask him or don't ask. Abyssinian poetry or the state of the ladies' rest rooms in the textile industry! And Dr. Pritchett, the old fool, is going around saying that he knows for certain that Rearden didn't invent that Metal—because he was told, by an unnamed reliable source, that Rearden stole the formula from a penniless inventor whom he murdered!"

He was chuckling happily. She was listening as to a lecture on higher mathematics, grasping nothing, not even the style of the language, a style which made the mystery greater, because she was certain that it did not mean—coming from him—what it would have meant anywhere else.

He refilled his glass and drained it, but his gaiety vanished abruptly. He slumped into an armchair, facing her, looking up at her from under his bald forehead, his eyes blurred.

"She's coming back tomorrow," he said, with a sound like a chuckle devoid of amusement.

"Who?"

"My sister. My dear sister. Oh, she'll think she's great, won't she?"

"You dislike your sister, Mr. Taggart?" He made the same sound; its meaning was so eloquent that she needed no other answer. "Why?" she asked.