

dered, once in a while, whether he had been right. . . . It has ceased to disturb me, long ago."

He smiled. There was nothing but bitterness now, in his smile and his face.

"These three men, these three who held all the hope which the gift of intelligence ever proffered, these three from whom we expected such a magnificent future—one of them was Francisco d'Anconia, who became a depraved playboy. Another was Ragnar Danneskjöld, who became a plain bandit. So much for the promise of the human mind."

"Who was the third one?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The third one did not achieve even that sort of notorious distinction. He vanished without a trace—into the great unknown of mediocrity. He is probably a second assistant book-keeper somewhere."

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"It's a lie! I didn't run away!" cried James Taggart. "I came here because I happened to be sick. Ask Dr. Wilson. It's a form of flu. He'll prove it. And how did you know that I was here?"

Dagny stood in the middle of the room; there were melting snowflakes on her coat collar, on the brim of her hat. She glanced around, feeling an emotion that would have been sadness, had she had time to acknowledge it.

It was a room in the house of the old Taggart estate on the Hudson. Jim had inherited the place, but he seldom came here. In their childhood, this had been their father's study. Now it had the desolate air of a room which is used, yet uninhabited. There were slipcovers on all but two chairs, a cold fireplace and the dismal warmth of an electric heater with a cord twisting across the floor, a desk, its glass surface empty.

Jim lay on the couch, with a towel wrapped for a scarf around his neck. She saw a stale, filled ashtray on a chair beside him, a bottle of whisky, a wilted paper cup, and two-day-old newspapers scattered about the floor. A portrait of their grandfather hung over the fireplace, full figure, with a railroad bridge in the fading background.

"I have no time for arguments, Jim."

"It was your idea! I hope you'll admit to the Board that it was your idea. That's what your goddamn Rearden Metal has done to us! If we had waited for Orren Boyle . . ." His unshaved face was pulled by a twisted scramble of emotions: panic, hatred, a touch of triumph, the relief of screaming at a victim—and the faint, cautious, begging look that sees a hope of help.

He had stopped tentatively, but she did not answer. She stood watching him, her hands in the pockets of her coat.

"There's nothing we can do now!" he moaned. "I tried to call Washington, to get them to seize the Phoenix-Durango and turn it over to us, on the ground of emergency, but they won't even discuss it! Too many people objecting, they say, afraid of some fool precedent or another! . . . I got the National Alliance of Railroads to suspend the deadline and permit Dan Conway to operate his road for another year—that would have given us time—but he's refused

to do it! I tried to get Ellis Wyatt and his bunch of friends in Colorado to demand that Washington order Conway to continue operations—but all of them, Wyatt and all the rest of those bastards, refused! It's *their* skin, worse than ours, they're sure to go down the drain—but they've refused!"

She smiled briefly, but made no comment.

"Now there's nothing left for us to do! We're caught. We can't give up that branch and we can't complete it. We can't stop or go on. We have no money. Nobody will touch us with a ten-foot pole! What have we got left without the Rio Norte Line? But we can't finish it. We'd be boycotted. We'd be blacklisted. That union of track workers would sue us. They would, there's a law about it. We can't complete that Line! Christ! What are we going to do?"

She waited. "Through, Jim?" she asked coldly. "If you are, I'll tell you what we're going to do."

He kept silent, looking up at her from under his heavy eyelids.

"This is not a proposal, Jim. It's an ultimatum. Just listen and accept. I am going to complete the construction of the Rio Norte Line. I personally, not Taggart Transcontinental. I will take a leave of absence from the job of Vice-President. I will form a company in my own name. Your Board will turn the Rio Norte Line over to me. I will act as my own contractor. I will get my own financing. I will take full charge and sole responsibility. I will complete the Line on time. After you have seen how the Rearden Metal rails can take it, I will transfer the Line back to Taggart Transcontinental and I'll return to my job. That is all."

He was looking at her silently, dangling a bedroom slipper on the tip of his foot. She had never supposed that hope could look ugly in a man's face, but it did: it was mixed with cunning. She turned her eyes away from him, wondering how it was possible that a man's first thought in such a moment could be a search for something to put over on her.

Then, preposterously, the first thing he said, his voice anxious, was, "But who will run Taggart Transcontinental in the meantime?"

She chuckled; the sound astonished her, it seemed old in its bitterness. She said, "Eddie Willers."

"Oh no! He couldn't!"

She laughed, in the same brusque, mirthless way. "I thought you were smarter than I about things of this kind. Eddie will assume the title of Acting Vice-President. He will occupy my office and sit at my desk. But who do you suppose will run Taggart Transcontinental?"

"But I don't see how—"

"I will commute by plane between Eddie's office and Colorado. Also, there are long-distance phones available. I will do just what I have been doing. Nothing will change, except the kind of show you will put on for your friends . . . and the fact that it will be a little harder for me."

"What show?"

"You understand me, Jim. I have no idea what sort of games you're tangled in, you and your Board of Directors. I don't know how many ends you're all playing against the middle and against one