couldn't believe it when somebody told me that Mrs. Rearden had invited him."

"*I* invited him."

"But . . ." Then her voice dropped. "Why?"

"I don't attach any importance to occasions of this kind."

"I'm sorry, Hank. I didn't know you were so tolerant. I'm not."

He said nothing.

"I know you don't like parties. Neither do I. But sometimes I wonder . . . perhaps we're the only ones who were meant to be able to enjoy them."

"I am afraid I have no talent for it."

"Not for this. But do you think any of these people are enjoying it? They're just straining to be more senseless and aimless than usual. To be light and unimportant . . . You know, I think that only if one feels immensely important can one feel truly light."

"I wouldn't know."

"It's just a thought that disturbs me once in a while. . . . I thought it about my first ball. . . . I keep thinking that parties are intended to be celebrations, and celebrations should be only for those who have something to celebrate."

"I have never thought of it."

She could not adapt her words to the rigid formality of his manner; she could not quite believe it. They had always been at ease together, in his office. Now he was like a man in a strait jacket.

"Hank, look at it. If you didn't know any of these people, wouldn't it seem beautiful? The lights and the clothes and all the imagination that went to make it possible . . ." She was looking at the room. She did not notice that he had not followed her glance. He was looking down at the shadows on her naked shoulder, the soft, blue shadows made by the light that fell through the strands of her hair. "Why have we left it all to fools? It should have been ours."

"In what manner?"

"I don't know . . . I've always expected parties to be exciting and brilliant, like some rare drink." She laughed; there was a note of sadness in it. "But I don't drink, either. That's just another symbol that doesn't mean what it was intended to mean." He was silent. She added, "Perhaps there's something that we have missed."

"I am not aware of it."

In a flash of sudden, desolate emptiness, she was glad that he had not understood or responded, feeling dimly that she had revealed too much, yet not knowing what she had revealed. She shrugged, the movement running through the curve of her shoulder like a faint convulsion. "It's just an old illusion of mine," she said indifferently. "Just a mood that comes once every year or two. Let me see the latest steel price index and I'll forget all about it."

She did not know that his eyes were following her, as she walked away from him.

She moved slowly through the room, looking at no one. She noticed a small group huddled by the unlighted fireplace. The room was not cold, but they sat as if they drew comfort from the thought of a non-existent fire.

"I do not know why, but I am growing to be afraid of the dark. No, not now, only when I am alone. What frightens me is night. Night as such."

The speaker was an elderly spinster with an air of breeding and hopelessness. The three women and two men of the group were well dressed, the skin of their faces was smoothly well tended, but they had a manner of anxious caution that kept their voices one tone lower than normal and blurred the differences of their ages, giving them all the same gray look of being spent. It was the look one saw in groups of respectable people everywhere. Dagny stopped and listened.

"But my dear," one of them asked, "why should it frighten you?"

"I don't know," said the spinster. "I am not afraid of prowlers or robberies or anything of the sort. But I stay awake all night. I fall asleep only when I see the sky turning pale. It is very odd. Every evening, when it grows dark, I get the feeling that this time it is final, that daylight will not return."

"My cousin who lives on the coast of Maine wrote me the same thing," said one of the women.

"Last night," said the spinster, "I stayed awake because of the shooting. There were guns going off all night, way out at sea. There were no flashes. There was nothing. Just those detonations, at long intervals, somewhere in the fog over the Atlantic."

"I read something about it in the paper this morning. Coast Guard target practice."

"Why, no," the spinster said indifferently. "Everybody down on the shore knows what it was. It was Ragnar Danneskjöld. It was the Coast Guard trying to catch him."

"Ragnar Danneskjöld in Delaware Bay?" a woman gasped.

"Oh, yes. They say it is not the first time."

"Did they catch him?"

"No."

"Nobody can catch him," said one of the men.

"The People's State of Norway has offered a million-dollar reward for his head."

"That's an awful lot of money to pay for a pirate's head."

"But how are we going to have any order or security or planning in the world, with a pirate running loose all over the seven seas?"

"Do you know what it was that he seized last night?" said the spinster. "The big ship with the relief supplies we were sending to the People's State of France."

"How does he dispose of the goods he seizes?"

"Ah, that—nobody knows."

"I met a sailor once, from a ship he'd attacked, who'd seen him in person. He said that Ragnar Danneskjöld has the purest gold hair and the most frightening face on earth, a face with no sign of any feeling. If there ever was a man born without a heart, he's it—the sailor said."

"A nephew of mine saw Ragnar Danneskjöld's ship one night, off the coast of Scotland. He wrote me that he couldn't believe his

eyes. It was a better ship than any in the navy of the People's State of England."

"They say he hides in one of those Norwegian fjords where neither God nor man will ever find him. That's where the Vikings used to hide in the Middle Ages."

"There's a reward on his head offered by the People's State of Portugal, too. And by the People's State of Turkey."

"They say it's a national scandal in Norway. He comes from one of their best families. The family lost its money generations ago, but the name is of the noblest. The ruins of their castle are still in existence. His father is a bishop. His father has disowned him and excommunicated him. But it had no effect."

"Did you know that Ragnar Danneskjöld went to school in this country? Sure. The Patrick Henry University."

"Not really?"

"Oh yes. You can look it up."

"What bothers me is . . . You know, I don't like it. I don't like it that he's now appearing right here, in our own waters. I thought things like that could happen only in the wastelands. Only in Europe. But a big-scale outlaw of that kind operating in Delaware in our day and age!"

"He's been seen off Nantucket, too. And at Bar Harbor. The newspapers have been asked not to write about it."

"Why?"

"They don't want people to know that the navy can't cope with him."

"I don't like it. It feels funny. It's like something out of the Dark Ages."

Dagny glanced up. She saw Francisco d'Anconia standing a few steps away. He was looking at her with a kind of stressed curiosity; his eyes were mocking.

"It's a strange world we're living in," said the spinster, her voice low.

"I read an article," said one of the women tonelessly. "It said that times of trouble are good for us. It is good that people are growing poorer. To accept privations is a moral virtue."

"I suppose so," said another, without conviction.

"We must not worry. I heard a speech that said it is useless to worry or to blame anyone. Nobody can help what he does, that is the way things made him. There is nothing we can do about anything. We must learn to bear it."

"What's the use anyway? What is man's fate? Hasn't it always been to hope, but never to achieve? The wise man is the one who does not attempt to hope."

"That is the right attitude to take."

"I don't know . . . I don't know what is right any more . . . How can we ever know?"

"Oh well, who is John Galt?"

Dagny turned brusquely and started away from them. One of the women followed her.