"Because she thinks she's so good. What right has she to think it? What right has anybody to think he's good? Nobody's any good."

"You don't mean it, Mr. Taggart."

"I mean, we're only human beings—and what's a human being? A weak, ugly, sinful creature, born that way, rotten in his bones—so humility is the one virtue he ought to practice. He ought to spend his life on his knees, begging to be forgiven for his dirty existence. When a man thinks he's good—*that's* when he's rotten. Pride is the worst of all sins, no matter what he's done."

"But if a man knows that what he's done is good?"

"Then he ought to apologize for it."

"To whom?"

"To those who haven't done it."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. It takes years and years of study in the higher reaches of the intellect. Have you ever heard of *The Metaphysical Contradictions of the Universe*, by Dr. Simon Pritchett?" She shook her head, frightened. "How do you know what's good, anyway? Who knows what's good? Who can ever know? There are no absolutes—as Dr. Pritchett has proved irrefutably. Nothing is absolute. Everything is a matter of opinion. How do you know that the bridge hasn't collapsed? You only *think* it hasn't. How do you know that there's any bridge at all? You think that a system of philosophy—such as Dr. Pritchett's—is just something academic, remote, impractical? But it isn't. Oh, boy, how it isn't!"

"But, Mr. Taggart, the Line you built—"

"Oh, what's that Line, anyway? It's only a material achievement. Is that of any importance? Is there any greatness in anything material? Only a low animal can gape at that bridge—when there are so many higher things in life. But do the higher things ever get recognition? Oh no! Look at people. All that hue and cry and front pages about some trick arrangement of some scraps of matter. Do they care about any nobler issue? Do they ever give front pages to a phenomenon of the spirit? Do they notice or appreciate a person of finer sensibility? And you wonder whether it's true that a great man is doomed to unhappiness in this depraved world!" He leaned forward, staring at her intently. "I'll tell you . . . I'll tell you something . . unhappiness is the hallmark of virtue. If a man is unhappy, really, truly unhappy, it means that he is a superior sort of person."

He saw the puzzled, anxious look of her face. "But, Mr. Taggart, you got everything you wanted. Now you have the best railroad in the country, the newspapers call you the greatest business executive of the age, they say the stock of your company made a fortune for you overnight, you got everything you could ask for—aren't you glad of it?"

In the brief space of his answer, she felt frightened, sensing a sudden fear within him. He answered, "No."

She didn't know why her voice dropped to a whisper. "You'd rather the bridge had collapsed?"

"I haven't said that!" he snapped sharply. Then he shrugged and waved his hand in a gesture of contempt. "You don't understand."

"I'm sorry . . . Oh, I know that I have such an awful lot to learn!"

"I am talking about a hunger for something much beyond that bridge. A hunger that nothing material will ever satisfy."

"What, Mr. Taggart? What is it you want?"

"Oh, there you go! The moment you ask, 'What is it?' you're back in the crude, material world where everything's got to be tagged and measured. I'm speaking of things that can't be named in materialistic words . . . the higher realms of the spirit, which man can never reach. . . . What's any human achievement, anyway? The earth is only an atom whirling in the universe—of what importance is that bridge to the solar system?"

A sudden, happy look of understanding cleared her eyes. "It's great of you, Mr. Taggart, to think that your own achievement isn't good enough for you. I guess no matter how far you've gone, you want to go still farther. You're ambitious. That's what I admire most: ambition. I mean, doing things, not stopping and giving up, but doing. I understand, Mr. Taggart . . . even if I don't understand all the big thoughts."

"You'll learn."

"Oh, I'll work very hard to learn!"

Her glance of admiration had not changed. He walked across the room, moving in that glance as in a gentle spotlight. He went to refill his glass. A mirror hung in the niche behind the portable bar. He caught a glimpse of his own figure: the tall body distorted by a sloppy, sagging posture, as if in deliberate negation of human grace, the thinning hair, the soft, sullen mouth. It struck him suddenly that she did not see him at all: what she saw was the heroic figure of a builder, with proudly straight shoulders and wind-blown hair. He chuckled aloud, feeling that this was a good joke on her, feeling dimly a satisfaction that resembled a sense of victory: the superiority of having put something over on her.

Sipping his drink, he glanced at the door of his bedroom and thought of the usual ending for an adventure of this kind. He thought that it would be easy: the girl was too awed to resist. He saw the reddish-bronze sparkle of her hair—as she sat, head bent, under a light—and a wedge of smooth, glowing skin on her shoulder. He looked away. Why bother? he thought.

The hint of desire that he felt was no more than a sense of physical discomfort. The sharpest impulse in his mind, nagging him to action, was not the thought of the girl, but of all the men who would not pass up an opportunity of this kind. He admitted to himself that she was a much better person than Betty Pope, perhaps the best person ever offered to him. The admission left him indifferent. He felt no more than he had felt for Betty Pope. He felt nothing. The prospect of experiencing pleasure was not worth the effort; he had no desire to experience pleasure.

"It's getting late," he said. "Where do you live? Let me give you another drink and then I'll take you home."

When he said good-bye to her at the door of a miserable rooming