

yes," she said innocently, "it would be wonderful if anything could ever make him change."

"He is making things exceedingly hard for himself."

"He always has."

"But events have a way of beating us all into a more . . . pliable frame of mind, sooner or later."

"I've heard many characteristics ascribed to him, but 'pliable' has never been one of them."

"Well, things change and people change with them. After all, it is a law of nature that animals must adapt themselves to their background. And I might add that adaptability is the one characteristic most stringently required at present by laws other than those of nature. We're in for a very difficult time, and I would hate to see you suffer the consequences of his intransigent attitude. I would hate—as your friend—to see you in the kind of danger he's headed for, unless he learns to cooperate."

"How sweet of you, Jim," she said sweetly.

He was doling his sentences out with cautious slowness, balancing himself between word and intonation to hit the right degree of semi-clarity. He wanted her to understand, but he did not want her to understand fully, explicitly, down to the root—since the essence of that modern language, which he had learned to speak expertly, was never to let oneself or others understand anything down to the root.

He had not needed many words to understand Mr. Weatherby. On his last trip to Washington, he had pleaded with Mr. Weatherby that a cut in the rates of the railroads would be a deathblow; the wage raises had been granted, but the demands for the cut in rates were still heard in the press—and Taggart had known what it meant, if Mr. Mouch still permitted them to be heard; he had known that the knife was still poised at his throat. Mr. Weatherby had not answered his pleas, but had said, in a tone of idly irrelevant speculation, "Wesley has so many tough problems. If he is to give everybody a breathing spell, financially speaking, he's got to put into operation a certain emergency program of which you have some inkling. But you know what hell the unprogressive elements of the country would raise about it. A man like Rearden, for instance. We don't want any more stunts of the sort he's liable to pull. Wesley would give a lot for somebody who could keep Rearden in line. But I guess that's something nobody can deliver. Though I may be wrong. You may know better, Jim, since Rearden is a sort of friend of yours, who comes to your parties and all that."

Looking at Lillian across the table, Taggart said, "Friendship, I find, is the most valuable thing in life—and I would be amiss if I didn't give you proof of mine."

"But I've never doubted it."

He lowered his voice to the tone of an ominous warning: "I think I should tell you, as a favor, to a friend, although it's confidential, that your husband's attitude is being discussed in high places—very high places. I'm sure you know what I mean."

This was why he hated Lillian Rearden, thought Taggart: she knew the game, but she played it with unexpected variations of her own.

It was against all rules to look at him suddenly, to laugh in his face, and—after all those remarks showing that she understood too little—to say bluntly, showing that she understood too much. "Why, darling, of course I know what you mean. You mean that the purpose of this very excellent luncheon was not a favor you wanted to do me, but a favor you wanted to get from me. You mean that it's you who are in danger and could use that favor to great advantage for a trade in high places. And you mean that you are reminding me of my promise to deliver the goods."

"The sort of performance he put on at his trial was hardly what I'd call delivering the goods," he said angrily. "It wasn't what you had led me to expect."

"Oh my, no, it wasn't," she said placidly. "It certainly wasn't. But, darling, did you expect me not to know that after that performance of his he wouldn't be very popular in high places? Did you really think you had to tell me *that* as a confidential favor?"

"But it's true. I heard him discussed, so I thought I'd tell you."

"I'm sure it's true. I know that they would be discussing him. I know also that if there were anything they could do to him, they would have done it right after his trial. My, would they have been glad to do it! So I know that he's the only one among you who is in no danger whatever, at the moment I know that it's they who are afraid of him. Do you see how well I understand what you mean, darling?"

"Well, if you think you do, I must say that for my part I don't understand you at all. I don't know what it is you're doing."

"Why, I'm just setting things straight—so that you'll know that I know how much you need me. And now that it's straight, I'll tell you the truth in my turn: I didn't double-cross you, I merely failed. His performance at the trial—I didn't expect it any more than you did. Less. I had good reason not to expect it. But something went wrong. I don't know what it was. I am trying to find out. When I do, I will keep my promise. Then you'll be free to take full credit for it and to tell your friends in high places that it's you who've disarmed him."

"Lillian," he said nervously, "I meant it when I said that I was anxious to give you proof of my friendship—so if there's anything I can do for—"

She laughed. "There isn't. I know you mean it. But there's nothing you can do for me. No favor of any kind. No trade. I'm a truly non-commercial person, I want nothing in return. Tough luck, Jim. You'll just have to remain at my mercy."

"But then why should you want to do it at all? What are you getting out of it?"

She leaned back, smiling. "This lunch. Just seeing you here. Just knowing that you had to come to me."

An angry spark flashed in Taggart's veiled eyes, then his eyelids narrowed slowly and he, too, leaned back in his chair, his face relaxing to a faint look of mockery and satisfaction. Even from within that unstated, unnamed, undefined muck which represented his code