

married Jim for his money—as what shopgirl wouldn't have? But you see, I married Jim because I . . . I thought that he was *you*. I thought that he was Taggart Transcontinental. Now I know that he's"—she hesitated, then went on firmly, as if not to spare herself anything—"he's some sort of vicious moocher, though I can't understand of what kind or why. When I spoke to you at my wedding, I thought that I was defending greatness and attacking its enemy . . . but it was in reverse . . . it was in such horrible, unbelievable reverse! . . . So I wanted to tell you that I know the truth . . . not so much for your sake, I had no right to presume that you'd care, but . . . but for the sake of the things I loved."

Dagny said slowly, "Of course I forgive it."

"Thank you," she whispered, and turned to go.

"Sit down."

She shook her head. "That . . . that was all, Miss Taggart."

Dagny allowed herself the first touch of a smile, no more than in the look of her eyes, as she said, "Cherryl, my name is Dagny."

Cherryl's answer was no more than a faint, tremulous crease of her mouth, as if together, they had completed a single smile. "I . . . I didn't know whether I should—"

"We're sisters, aren't we?"

"No! Not through Jim!" It was an involuntary cry.

"No, through our own choice. Sit down, Cherryl." The girl obeyed, struggling not to show the eagerness of her acceptance, not to grasp for support, not to break. "You've had a terrible time, haven't you?"

"Yes . . . but that doesn't matter . . . that's my own problem . . . and my own fault."

"I don't think it was your own fault."

Cherryl did not answer, then said suddenly, desperately, "Look . . . what I don't want is charity."

"Jim must have told you--and it's true--that I never engage in charity."

"Yes, he did . . . But what I mean is—"

"I know what you mean."

"But there's no reason why you should have to feel concern for me . . . I didn't come here to complain and . . . and load another burden on your shoulders. . . . That I happen to suffer, doesn't give me a claim on you."

"No, it doesn't. But that you value all the things I value, does."

"You mean . . . if you want to talk to me, it's not alms? Not just because you feel sorry for me?"

"I feel terribly sorry for you, Cherryl, and I'd like to help you—not because you suffer, but because you haven't deserved to suffer."

"You mean, you wouldn't be kind to anything weak or whining or rotten about me? Only to whatever you see in me that's good?"

"Of course."

Cherryl did not move her head, but she looked as if it were lifted—as if some bracing current were relaxing her features into that rare look which combines pain and dignity.

"It's not alms, Cherryl. Don't be afraid to speak to me."

"It's strange . . . You're the first person I can talk to . . . and it

feels so easy . . . yet I . . . I was afraid to speak to you. I wanted to ask your forgiveness long ago . . . ever since I learned the truth. I went as far as the door of your office, but I stopped and stood there in the hall and didn't have the courage to go in. . . . I didn't intend to come here tonight. I went out only to . . . to think something over, and then, suddenly, I knew that I wanted to see you, that in the whole of the city this was the only place for me to go and the only thing still left for me to do."

"I'm glad you did."

"You know, Miss Tag—Dagny," she said softly, in wonder, "you're not as I expected you to be at all. . . . They, Jim and his friends, they said you were hard and cold and unfeeling."

"But it's true, Cherryl. I am, in the sense they mean--only have they ever told you in just what sense they mean it?"

"No. They never do. They only sneer at me when I ask them what they mean by anything . . . about anything. What did they mean about you?"

"Whenever anyone accuses some person of being 'unfeeling,' he means that that person is just. He means that that person has no causeless emotions and will not grant him a feeling which he does not deserve. He means that 'to feel' is to go against reason, against moral values, against reality. He means . . . What's the matter?" she asked, seeing the abnormal intensity of the girl's face.

"It's . . . it's something I've tried so hard to understand . . . for such a long time. . . ."

"Well, observe that you never hear that accusation in defense of innocence, but always in defense of guilt. You never hear it said by a good person about those who fail to do him justice. But you always hear it said by a rotter about those who treat him as a rotter, those who don't feel any sympathy for the evil he's committed or for the pain he suffers as a consequence. Well, it's true—that is what I do not feel. But those who feel it, feel nothing for any quality of human greatness, for any person or action that deserves admiration, approval, esteem. *These* are the things I feel. You'll find that it's one or the other. Those who grant sympathy to guilt, grant none to innocence. Ask yourself which, of the two, are the *unfeeling* persons. And then you'll see what motive is the opposite of charity."

"What?" she whispered.

"Justice, Cherryl."

Cherryl shuddered suddenly and dropped her head. "Oh God!" she moaned "If you knew what hell Jim has been giving me because I believed just what you said!" She raised her face in the sweep of another shudder, as if the things she had tried to control had broken through; the look in her eyes was terror. "Dagny," she whispered, "Dagny, I'm afraid of them . . . of Jim and all the others . . . not afraid of something they'll do . . . if it were that, I could escape . . . but afraid, as if there's no way out . . . afraid of what they are and . . . and that they exist."

Dagny came forward swiftly to sit on the arm of her chair and seize her shoulder in a steady grasp. "Quiet, kid," she said. "You're wrong. You must never feel afraid of people in that way

You must never think that their existence is a reflection on yours—yet that's what you're thinking."

"Yes . . . Yes, I feel that there's no chance for me to exist, if they do . . . no chance, no room, no world I can cope with. . . . I don't want to feel it, I keep pushing it back, but it's coming closer and I know I have no place to run. . . . I can't explain what it feels like, I can't catch hold of it—and that's part of the terror, that you *can't* catch hold of anything—it's as if the whole world were suddenly destroyed, but not by an explosion—an explosion is something hard and solid—but destroyed by . . . by some horrible kind of softening . . . as if nothing were solid, nothing held any shape at all, and you could poke your finger through stone wall and the stone would give, like jelly, and mountains would slither, and buildings would switch their shapes like clouds—and that would be the end of the world, not fire and brimstone, but goo"

"Cherryl . . . Cherryl, you poor kid, there have been centuries of philosophers plotting to turn the world into just that—to destroy people's minds by making them believe that that's what they're seeing. But you don't have to accept it. You don't have to see through the eyes of others, hold on to yours, stand on your own judgment, you know that what is, *is*—say it aloud, like the holiest of prayers, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise"

"But . . . but nothing *is*, any more. Jim and his friends—they're not—I don't know what I'm looking at, when I'm among them. I don't know what I'm hearing when they speak . . . it's not real, any of it, it's some ghastly sort of act that they're all going through . . . and I don't know what they're after. . . . Dagny! We've always been told that human beings have such a great power of knowledge, so much greater than animals, but I—I feel blinder than any animal right now, blinder and more helpless. An animal knows who are its friends and who are its enemies, and when to defend itself. It doesn't expect a friend to step on it or to cut its throat. It doesn't expect to be told that love is blind, that plunder is achievement, that gangsters are statesmen and that it's great to break the spine of Hank Rarden!—oh God, what am I saying?"

"I know what you're saying."

"I mean, how am I to deal with people? I mean, if nothing held firm for the length of one hour—we couldn't go on, could we? Well, I know that things are solid—but people? Dagny! They're nothing and anything, they're not beings, they're only switches, just constant switches without any shape. But I have to live among them. How am I to do it?"

"Cherryl, what you've been struggling with is the greatest problem in history, the one that has caused all of human suffering. You've understood much more than most people, who suffer and die, never knowing what killed them. I'll help you to understand. It's a big subject and a hard battle—but first, above all, don't be afraid."

The look on Cherryl's face was an odd, wistful longing, as if, seeing Dagny from a great distance, she were straining and failing to come closer. "I wish I could wish to fight," she said softly, "but I don't. I don't even want to win any longer. There's one change that I don't