

"But I do know it," said the woman, in the soft, mysterious tone of sharing a secret.

"You know what?"

"I know who is John Galt."

"Who?" Dagny asked tensely, stopping.

"I know a man who knew John Galt in person. This man is an old friend of a great-aunt of mine. He was there and he saw it happen. Do you know the legend of Atlantis, Miss Taggart?"

"What?"

"Atlantis."

"Why . . . vaguely."

"The Isles of the Blessed. That is what the Greeks called it, thousands of years ago. They said Atlantis was a place where hero-spirits lived in a happiness unknown to the rest of the earth. A place which only the spirits of heroes could enter, and they reached it without dying, because they carried the secret of life within them. Atlantis was lost to mankind, even then. But the Greeks knew that it had existed. They tried to find it. Some of them said it was underground, hidden in the heart of the earth. But most of them said it was an island. A radiant island in the Western Ocean. Perhaps what they were thinking of was America. They never found it. For centuries afterward, men said it was only a legend. They did not believe it, but they never stopped looking for it, because they knew that that was what they had to find."

"Well, what about John Galt?"

"He found it."

Dagny's interest was gone. "Who was he?"

"John Galt was a millionaire, a man of inestimable wealth. He was sailing his yacht one night, in mid-Atlantic, fighting the worst storm ever wreaked upon the world, when he found it. He saw it in the depth, where it had sunk to escape the reach of men. He saw the towers of Atlantis shining on the bottom of the ocean. It was a sight of such kind that when one had seen it, one could no longer wish to look at the rest of the earth. John Galt sank his ship and went down with his entire crew. They all chose to do it. My friend was the only one who survived."

"How interesting."

"My friend saw it with his own eyes," said the woman, offended. "It happened many years ago. But John Galt's family hushed up the story."

"And what happened to his fortune? I don't recall ever hearing of a Galt fortune."

"It went down with him." She added belligerently, "You don't have to believe it."

"Miss Taggart doesn't," said Francisco d'Anconia. "I do."

They turned. He had followed them and he stood looking at them with the insolence of exaggerated earnestness.

"Have you ever had faith in anything, Señor d'Anconia?" the woman asked angrily.

"No, madame."

He chuckled at her brusque departure. Dagny asked coldly, "What's the joke?"

"The joke's on that fool woman. She doesn't know that she was telling you the truth."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"No."

"Then what do you find so amusing?"

"Oh, a great many things here. Don't you?"

"No."

"Well, *that's* one of the things I find amusing."

"Francisco, will you leave me alone?"

"But I have. Didn't you notice that you were first to speak to me tonight?"

"Why do you keep watching me?"

"Curiosity."

"About what?"

"Your reaction to the things which you don't find amusing."

"Why should you care about my reaction to anything?"

"That is my own way of having a good time, which, incidentally, you are not having, are you, Dagny? Besides, you're the only woman worth watching here."

She stood defiantly still, because the way he looked at her demanded an angry escape. She stood as she always did, straight and taut, her head lifted impatiently. It was the unfeminine pose of an executive. But her naked shoulder betrayed the fragility of the body under the black dress, and the pose made her most truly a woman. The proud strength became a challenge to someone's superior strength, and the fragility a reminder that the challenge could be broken. She was not conscious of it. She had met no one able to see it.

He said, looking down at her body. "Dagny, what a magnificent waste!"

She had to turn and escape. She felt herself blushing, for the first time in years: blushing because she knew suddenly that the sentence named what she had felt all evening.

She ran, trying not to think. The music stopped her. It was a sudden blast from the radio. She noticed Mort Liddy, who had turned it on, waving his arms to a group of friends, yelling. "That's it! That's it! I want you to hear it!"

The great burst of sound was the opening chords of Halley's Fourth Concerto. It rose in tortured triumph, speaking its denial of pain, its hymn to a distant vision. Then the notes broke. It was as if a handful of mud and pebbles had been flung at the music, and what followed was the sound of the rolling and the dripping. It was Halley's Concerto swung into a popular tune. It was Halley's melody torn apart, its holes stuffed with hiccoughs. The great statement of joy had become the giggling of a barroom. Yet it was still the remnant of Halley's melody that gave it form; it was the melody that supported it like a spinal cord.

"Pretty good?" Mort Liddy was smiling at his friends, boastfully and nervously. "Pretty good, eh? Best movie score of the year. Got

me a prize. Got me a long-term contract. Yeah, this was my score for *Heaven's in Your Backyard*."

Dagny stood, staring at the room, as if one sense could replace another, as if sight could wipe out sound. She moved her head in a slow circle, trying to find an anchor somewhere. She saw Francisco leaning against a column, his arms crossed; he was looking straight at her; he was laughing.

Don't shake like this, she thought. Get out of here. This was the approach of an anger she could not control. She thought: Say nothing. Walk steadily. Get out.

She had started walking, cautiously, very slowly. She heard Lillian's words and stopped. Lillian had said it many times this evening, in answer to the same question, but it was the first time that Dagny heard it.

"This?" Lillian was saying, extending her arm with the metal bracelet for the inspection of two smartly groomed women. "Why, no, it's not from a hardware store, it's a very special gift from my husband. Oh, yes, of course it's hideous. But don't you see? It's supposed to be priceless. Of course, I'd exchange it for a common diamond bracelet any time, but somehow nobody will offer me one for it, even though it is so very, very valuable. Why? My dear, it's the first thing ever made of Rearden Metal."

Dagny did not see the room. She did not hear the music. She felt the pressure of dead stillness against her eardrums. She did not know the moment that preceded, or the moments that were to follow. She did not know those involved, neither herself, nor Lillian, nor Rearden, nor the meaning of her own action. It was a single instant, blasted out of context. She had heard. She was looking at the bracelet of green-blue metal.

She felt the movement of something being torn off her wrist, and she heard her own voice saying in the great stillness, very calmly, a voice cold as a skeleton, naked of emotion, "If you are not the coward that I think you are, you will exchange it."

On the palm of her hand, she was extending her diamond bracelet to Lillian.

"You're not serious, Miss Taggart?" said a woman's voice.

It was not Lillian's voice. Lillian's eyes were looking straight at her. She saw them. Lillian knew that she was serious.

"Give me that bracelet," said Dagny, lifting her palm higher, the diamond band glittering across it.

"This is horrible!" cried some woman. It was strange that the cry stood out so sharply. Then Dagny realized that there were people standing around them and that they all stood in silence. She was hearing sounds now, even the music: it was Halley's mangled Concerto, somewhere far away.

She saw Rearden's face. It looked as if something within him were mangled, like the music; she did not know by what. He was watching them.

Lillian's mouth moved into an upturned crescent. It resembled a smile. She snapped the metal bracelet open, dropped it on Dagny's palm and took the diamond band.