

"I am."

"Do you believe that one must be responsible for one's own errors?"

"I do."

"Then why aren't you letting me bear the consequences of mine?"

"I am and you will."

"If I find, when it is too late, that I want to return to this valley--why should you have to bear the risk of keeping that door open to me?"

"I don't have to. I wouldn't do it if I had no selfish end to gain."

"What selfish end?"

"I want you here."

She closed her eyes and inclined her head in open admission of defeat—defeat in the argument and in her attempt to face calmly the full meaning of that which she was leaving.

Then she raised her head and, as if she had absorbed his kind of frankness, she looked at him, hiding neither her suffering nor her longing nor her calm, knowing that all three were in her glance.

His face was as it had been in the sunlight of the moment when she had seen it for the first time: a face of merciless serenity and unflinching perceptiveness, without pain or fear or guilt. She thought that were it possible for her to stand looking at him, at the straight lines of his eyebrows over the dark green eyes, at the curve of the shadow underscoring the shape of his mouth, at the poured-metal planes of his skin in the open collar of his shirt and the casually immovable posture of his legs—she would wish to spend the rest of her life on this spot and in this manner. And in the next instant she knew that if her wish were granted, the contemplation would lose all meaning, because she would have betrayed all the things that gave it value.

Then, not as memory, but as an experience of the present, she felt herself reliving the moment when she had stood at the window of her room in New York, looking at a fogbound city, at the unattainable shape of Atlantis sinking out of reach—and she knew that she was now seeing the answer to that moment. She felt, not the words she had then addressed to the city, but that untranslated sensation from which the words had come: You, whom I have always loved and never found, you whom I expected to see at the end of the rails beyond the horizon—

Aloud, she said, "I want you to know this. I started my life with a single absolute: that the world was mine to shape in the image of my highest values and never to be given up to a lesser standard, no matter how long or hard the struggle"—you whose presence I had always felt in the streets of the city, the wordless voice within her was saying, and whose world I had wanted to build—"Now I know that I was fighting for this valley"—it is my love for you that had kept me moving—"It was this valley that I saw as possible and would exchange for nothing less and would not give up to a mindless evil"—my love and my hope to reach you and my wish to be worthy of you on the day when I would stand before you face to face—"I am going back to fight for this valley—to release it from its under-

ground, to regain for it its full and rightful realm, to let the earth belong to you in fact, as it does in spirit—and to meet you again on the day when I'm able to deliver to you the whole of the world—or, if I fail, to remain in exile from this valley to the end of my life—but what is left of my life will still be yours, and I will go on in your name, even though it is a name I'm never to pronounce, I will go on serving you, even though I'm never to win, I will go on, to be worthy of you on the day when I would have met you, even though I won't—"I will fight for it, even if I have to fight against you, even if you damn me as a traitor . . . even if I am never to see you again."

He had stood without moving, he had listened with no change in his face, only his eyes had looked at her as if he were hearing every word, even the words she had not pronounced. He answered, with the same look, as if the look were holding some circuit not yet to be broken, his voice catching some tone of hers, as if in signal of the same code, a voice with no sign of emotion except in the spacing of the words:

"If you fail, as men have failed in their quest for a vision that should have been possible, yet has remained forever beyond their reach—if, like them, you come to think that one's highest values are not to be attained and one's greatest vision is not to be made real—don't damn this earth, as they did, don't damn existence. You have seen the Atlantis they were seeking, it is here, it exists—but one must enter it naked and alone, with no rags from the falsehoods of centuries, with the purest clarity of mind—not an innocent heart, but that which is much rarer: an intransigent mind—as one's only possession and key. You will not enter it until you learn that you do not need to convince or to conquer the world. When you learn it, you will see that through all the years of your struggle, nothing had haired you from Atlantis and there were no chains to hold you, except the chains you were willing to wear. Through all those years, that which you most wished to win was waiting for you"—he looked at her as if he were speaking to the unspoken words in her mind—"waiting as unremittingly as you were fighting, as passionately, as desperately—but with a greater certainty than yours. Go out to continue your struggle. Go on carrying unchosen burdens, taking undeserved punishment and believing that justice can be served by the offer of your own spirit to the most unjust of tortures. But in your worst and darkest moments, remember that you have seen another kind of world. Remember that you can reach it whenever you choose to see. Remember that it will be waiting and that it's real, it's possible—it's yours."

Then, turning his head a little, his voice as clear, but his eyes breaking the circuit, he asked, "What time do you wish to leave tomorrow?"

"Oh . . . ! As early as it will be convenient for you."

"Then have breakfast ready at seven and we'll take off at eight."

"I will."

He reached into his pocket and extended to her a small, shining

disk which she could not distinguish at first. He dropped it on the palm of her hand: it was a five-dollar gold piece.

"The last of your wages for the month," he said.

Her fingers snapped closed over the coin too tightly, but she answered calmly and tonelessly, "Thank you."

"Good night, Miss Taggart."

"Good night."

She did not sleep in the hours that were still left to her. She sat on the floor of her room, her face pressed to the bed, feeling nothing but the sense of his presence beyond the wall. At times, she felt as if he were before her, as if she were sitting at his feet. She spent her last night with him in this manner.

* * *

She left the valley as she had come, carrying away nothing that belonged to it. She left the few possessions she had acquired—her peasant skirt, a blouse, an apron, a few pieces of underwear—folded neatly in a drawer of the chest in her room. She looked at them for a moment, before she closed the drawer, thinking that if she came back, she would, perhaps, still find them there. She took nothing with her but the five-dollar gold piece and the band of tape still wound about her ribs.

The sun touched the peaks of the mountains, drawing a shining circle as a frontier of the valley when she climbed aboard the plane. She leaned back in the seat beside him and looked at Galt's face bent over her, as it had been bent when she had opened her eyes on the first morning. Then she closed her eyes and felt his hands tying the blindfold across her face.

She heard the blast of the motor, not as sound, but as the shudder of an explosion inside her body; only it felt like a distant shudder, as if the person feeling it would have been hurt if she were not so far away.

She did not know when the wheels left the ground or when the plane crossed the circle of the peaks. She lay still, with the pounding beat of the motor as her only perception of space, as if she were carried inside a current of sound that rocked once in a while. The sound came from his engine, from the control of his hands on the wheel; she held onto that; the rest was to be endured, not resisted.

She lay still, her legs stretched forward, her hands on the arms of the seat, with no sense of motion, not even her own, to give her a sense of time, with no space, no sight, no future, with the night of closed eyelids under the pressure of the cloth—and with the knowledge of his presence beside her as her single, unchanging reality.

They did not speak. Once, she said suddenly, "Mr. Galt."

"Yes?"

"No. Nothing. I just wanted to know whether you were still there."

"I will always be there."

She did not know for how many miles the memory of the sound of words seemed like a small landmark rolling away into the distance, then vanishing. Then there was nothing but the stillness of an indivisible present.

She did not know whether a day had passed or an hour, when she felt the downward, plunging motion which meant that they were