

James Taggart, his face indecent in its exposure of emotions which centuries had taught men to keep hidden, rushed up to Francisco and screamed, "Is it true?"

"Why, James," said Francisco, smiling, "what's the matter? Why do you seem to be upset? Money is the root of all evil—so I just got tired of being evil."

Taggart ran toward the main exit, yelling something to Orren Boyle on the way. Boyle nodded and kept on nodding, with the eagerness and humility of an inefficient servant, then darted off in another direction. Cherryl, her wedding veil coiling like a crystal cloud upon the air, as she ran after him, caught Taggart at the door. "Jim, what's the matter?" He pushed her aside and she fell against the stomach of Paul Larkin, as Taggart rushed out.

Three persons stood immovably still, like three pillars spaced through the room, the lines of their sight cutting across the spread of the wreckage. Dagny, looking at Francisco—Francisco and Rearden, looking at each other.

Chapter III WHITE BLACKMAIL

"What time is it?"

It's running out, thought Rearden—but he answered, "I don't know. Not yet midnight," and remembering his wrist watch, added, "Twenty of."

"I'm going to take a train home," said Lillian.

He heard the sentence, but it had to wait its turn to enter the crowded passages to his consciousness. He stood looking absently at the living room of his suite, a few minutes' elevator ride away from the party. In a moment, he answered automatically, "At this hour?"

"It's still early. There are plenty of trains running."

"You're welcome to stay here, of course."

"No. I think I prefer to go home." He did not argue. "What about you, Henry? Do you intend going home tonight?"

"No." He added, "I have business appointments here tomorrow."

"As you wish."

She shrugged her evening wrap off her shoulders, caught it on her arm and started toward the door of his bedroom, but stopped.

"I hate Francisco d'Anconia," she said tensely. "Why did he have to come to that party? And didn't he know enough to keep his mouth shut, at least till tomorrow morning?" He did not answer. "It's monstrous—what he's allowed to happen to his company. Of course, he's nothing but a rotten playboy—still, a fortune of that size is a responsibility, there's a limit to the negligence a man can permit himself!" He glanced at her face: it was oddly tense, the features sharpened, making her look older. "He owed a certain duty to his stockholders, didn't he? . . . Didn't he, Henry?"

"Do you mind if we don't discuss it?"

She made a tightening, sidewise movement with her lips, the equivalent of a shrug, and walked into the bedroom.

He stood at the window, looking down at the streaming roofs of

automobiles, letting his eyes rest on something while his faculty of sight was disconnected. His mind was still focused on the crowd in the ballroom downstairs and on two figures in that crowd. But as his living room remained on the edge of his vision, so the sense of some action he had to perform remained on the edge of his consciousness. He grasped it for a moment—it was the fact that he had to remove his evening clothes—but farther beyond the edge there was the feeling of reluctance to undress in the presence of a strange woman in his bedroom, and he forgot it again in the next moment.

Lillian came out, as trimly groomed as she had arrived, the beige traveling suit outlining her figure with efficient tightness, the hat tilted over half a head of hair set in waves. She carried her suitcase, swinging it a little, as if in demonstration of her ability to carry it.

He reached over mechanically and took the suitcase out of her hand.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going to take you to the station."

"Like this? You haven't changed your clothes."

"It doesn't matter."

"You don't have to escort me. I'm quite able to find my own way. If you have business appointments tomorrow, you'd better go to bed."

He did not answer, but walked to the door, held it open for her and followed her to the elevator.

They remained silent when they rode in a taxicab to the station. At such moments as he remembered her presence, he noticed that she sat efficiently straight, almost flaunting the perfection of her poise; she seemed alertly awake and contented, as if she were starting out on a purposeful journey of early morning.

The cab stopped at the entrance to the Taggart Terminal. The bright lights flooding the great glass doorway transformed the lateness of the hour into a sense of active, timeless security. Lillian jumped lightly out of the cab, saying, "No, no, you don't have to get out, drive on back. Will you be home for dinner tomorrow—or next month?"

"I'll telephone you," he said.

She waved her gloved hand at him and disappeared into the lights of the entrance. As the cab started forward, he gave the driver the address of Dagny's apartment.

The apartment was dark when he entered, but the door to her bedroom was half-open and he heard her voice saying, "Hello, Hank."

He walked in, asking, "Were you asleep?"

"No."

He switched on the light. She lay in bed, her head propped by the pillow, her hair falling smoothly to her shoulders, as if she had not moved for a long time; but her face was untroubled. She looked like a schoolgirl, with the tailored collar of a pale blue nightgown lying severely high at the base of her throat; the nightgown's front was a deliberate contrast to the severity, a spread of pale blue embroidery that looked luxuriously adult and feminine.