

you off in no time. . . . However, financial aspects are not my chief concern—nor yours, Jim."

"I did underestimate you," he said slowly.

"Oh, well, that's an error I'm willing to help you correct. I know the sort of problem *he* presents to you. I know why you're afraid of him, as you have good reason to be. But . . . well, you're in business and in politics, so I'll try to say it in your language. A businessman says that he can deliver the goods, and a ward heeler says that he can deliver the vote, is that right? Well, what I wanted you to know is that I can deliver *him*, any time I choose. You may act accordingly."

In the code of his friends, to reveal any part of one's self was to give a weapon to an enemy—but he signed her confession and matched it, when he said, "I wish I were as smart about my sister."

She looked at him without astonishment; she did not find the words irrelevant. "Yes, *there's* a tough one," she said. "No vulnerable point? No weaknesses?"

"None."

"No love affairs?"

"God, no!"

She shrugged, in sign of changing the subject: Dagny Taggart was a person on whom she did not care to dwell. "I think I'll let you run along, so that you can chat a little with Ralph Eubank," she said. "He looks worried, because you haven't looked at him all evening and he's wondering whether literature will be left without a friend at court."

"Lillian, you're wonderful!" he said quite spontaneously.

She laughed. "That, my dear, is the non-material tiara I wanted!"

The remnant of a smile stayed on her face as she moved through the crowd, a fluid smile that ran softly into the look of tension and boredom worn by all the faces around her. She moved at random, enjoying the sense of being seen, her eggshell satin gown shimmering like heavy cream with the motion of her tall figure.

It was the green-blue spark that caught her attention, it flashed for an instant under the lights, on the wrist of a thin, naked arm. Then she saw the slender body, the gray dress, the fragile, naked shoulders. She stopped. She looked at the bracelet, frowning.

Dagny turned at her approach. Among the many things that Lillian resented, the impersonal politeness of Dagny's face was the one she resented most.

"What do you think of your brother's marriage, Miss Taggart?" she asked casually, smiling.

"I have no opinion about it."

"Do you mean to say that you don't find it worthy of any thought?"

"If you wish to be exact—yes, that's what I mean."

"Oh, but don't you see any human significance in it?"

"No."

"Don't you think that a person such as your brother's bride does deserve some interest?"

"Why, no."

"I envy you, Miss Taggart. I envy your Olympian detachment. It

is, I think, the secret of why lesser mortals can never hope to equal your success in the field of business. They allow their attention to be divided—at least to the extent of acknowledging achievements in other fields."

"What achievements are we talking about?"

"Don't you grant any recognition at all to the women who attain unusual heights of conquest, not in the industrial, but in the human realm?"

"I don't think that there is such a word as 'conquest'—in the human realm."

"Oh, but consider, for instance, how hard other women would have had to work—if work were the only means available to them—to achieve what this girl has achieved through the person of your brother."

"I don't think she knows the exact nature of what she has achieved."

Rearden saw them together. He approached. He felt that he had to hear it, no matter what the consequences. He stopped silently beside them. He did not know whether Lillian was aware of his presence; he knew that Dagny was.

"Do show a little generosity toward her, Miss Taggart," said Lillian. "At least, the generosity of attention. You must not despise the women who do not possess your brilliant talent, but who exercise their own particular endowments. Nature always balances her gifts and offers compensations—don't you think so?"

"I'm not sure I understand you."

"Oh, I'm sure you don't want to hear me become more explicit!"

"Why, yes, I do."

Lillian shrugged angrily; among the women who were her friends, she would have been understood and stopped long ago; but this was an adversary new to her—a woman who refused to be hurt. She did not care to speak more clearly, but she saw Rearden looking at her. She smiled and said, "Well, consider your sister-in-law, Miss Taggart. What chance did she have to rise in the world? None—by your exacting standards. She could not have made a successful career in business. She does not possess your unusual mind. Besides, men would have made it impossible for her. They would have found her too attractive. So she took advantage of the fact that men have standards which, unfortunately, are not as high as yours. She resorted to talents which, I'm sure, you despise. You have never cared to compete with us lesser women in the sole field of our ambition—in the achievement of power over men."

"If you call it power, Mrs. Rearden—then, no, I haven't."

She turned to go, but Lillian's voice stopped her: "I would like to believe that you're fully consistent, Miss Taggart, and fully devoid of human frailties. I would like to believe that you've never felt the desire to flatter—or to offend—anyone. But I see that you expected both Henry and me to be here tonight."

"Why, no, I can't say that I did. I had not seen my brother's guest list."

"Then why are you wearing that bracelet?"

Dagny's eyes moved deliberately straight to hers. "I always wear it."

"Don't you think that that's carrying a joke too far?"

"It was never a joke, Mrs. Rearden."

"Then you'll understand me if I say that I'd like you to give that bracelet back to me."

"I understand you. But I will not give it back."

Lillian let a moment pass, as if to let them both acknowledge the meaning of their silence. For once, she held Dagny's glance without smiling. "What do you expect me to think, Miss Taggart?"

"Anything you wish."

"What is your motive?"

"You knew my motive when you gave me the bracelet."

Lillian glanced at Rearden. His face was expressionless; she saw no reaction, no hint of intention to help her or stop her, nothing but an attentiveness that made her feel as if she were standing in a spotlight.

Her smile came back, as a protective shield, an amused, patronizing smile, intended to convert the subject into a drawing-room issue again. "I'm sure, Miss Taggart, that you realize how enormously improper this is."

"No."

"But surely you know that you are taking a dangerous and ugly risk."

"No."

"You do not take into consideration the possibility of being . . . misunderstood?"

"No."

Lillian shook her head in smiling reproach. "Miss Taggart, don't you think that this is a case where one cannot afford to indulge in abstract theory, but must consider practical reality?"

Dagny would not smile. "I have never understood what is meant by a statement of that kind."

"I mean that your attitude may be highly idealistic--as I am sure it is - but, unfortunately, most people do not share your lofty frame of mind and will misinterpret your action in the one manner which would be most abhorrent to you."

"Then the responsibility and the risk will be theirs, not mine."

"I admire your . . . no, I must not say 'innocence,' but shall I say 'purity'?" You have never thought of it, I'm sure, but life is not as straight and logical as . . . as a railroad track. It is regrettable, but possible, that your high intentions may lead people to suspect things which . . . well, which I'm sure you know to be of a sordid and scandalous nature."

Dagny was looking straight at her. "I don't."

"But you cannot ignore that possibility."

"I do." Dagny turned to go.

"Oh, but should you wish to evade a discussion if you have nothing to hide?" Dagny stopped. "And if your brilliant--and reckless--courage permits you to gamble with your reputation, should you ignore the danger to Mr. Rearden?"