

He sat down on the edge of the bed—and she smiled, noticing that the stern formality of his full dress clothes made his action so simply, naturally intimate. He smiled in answer. He had come, prepared to reject the forgiveness she had granted him at the party, as one rejects a favor from too generous an adversary. Instead, he reached out suddenly and moved his hand over her forehead, down the line of her hair, in a gesture of protective tenderness, in the sudden feeling of how delicately childlike she was, this adversary who had borne the constant challenge of his strength, but who should have had his protection.

"You're carrying so much," he said, "and it's I who make it harder for you . . ."

"No, Hank, you don't and you know it."

"I know that you have the strength not to let it hurt you, but it's a strength I have no right to call upon. Yet I do, and I have no solution, no atonement to offer. I can only admit that I know it and that there's no way I can ask you to forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

"I had no right to bring her into your presence."

"It did not hurt me. Only . . ."

"Yes?"

" . . . only seeing the way you suffered . . . was hard to see."

"I don't think that suffering makes up for anything, but whatever I felt, I didn't suffer enough. If there's one thing I loathe, it's to speak of my own suffering--that should be no one's concern but mine. But if you want to know, since you know it already--yes, it was hell for me. And I wish it were worse. At least, I'm not letting myself get away with it."

He said it sternly, without emotion, as an impersonal verdict upon himself. She smiled, in amused sadness, she took his hand and pressed it to her lips, and shook her head in rejection of the verdict, holding her face hidden against his hand.

"What do you mean?" he asked softly.

"Nothing . . ." Then she raised her head and said firmly "Hank, I knew you were married. I knew what I was doing. I chose to do it. There's nothing that you owe me, no duty that you have to consider."

He shook his head slowly, in protest.

"Hank, I want nothing from you except what you wish to give me. Do you remember that you called me a trader once? I want you to come to me seeking nothing but your own enjoyment. So long as you wish to remain married, whatever your reason, I have no right to resent it. My way of trading is to know that the joy you give me is paid for by the joy you get from me--not by your suffering or mine. I don't accept sacrifices and I don't make them. If you asked me for more than you meant to me, I would refuse. If you asked me to give up the railroad, I'd leave you. If ever the pleasure of one has to be bought by the pain of the other, there better be no trade at all. A trade by which one gains and the other loses is a fraud. You don't do it in business, Hank. Don't do it in your own life."

Like a dim sound track under her words, he was hearing the words

said to him by Lillian; he was seeing the distance between the two, the difference in what they sought from him and from life.

"Dagny, what do you think of my marriage?"

"I have no right to think of it."

"You must have wondered about it."

"I did . . . before I came to Ellis Wyatt's house. Not since."

"You've never asked me a question about it."

"And won't."

He was silent for a moment, then said, looking straight at her, underscoring his first rejection of the privacy she had always granted him, "There's one thing I want you to know: I have not touched her since . . . Ellis Wyatt's house."

"I'm glad."

"Did you think I could?"

"I've never permitted myself to wonder about that."

"Dagny, do you mean that if I had, you . . . you'd accept that, too?"

"Yes."

"You wouldn't hate it?"

"I'd hate it more than I can tell you. But if that were your choice, I would accept it. I want you, Hank."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips, she felt the moment's struggle in his body, in the sudden movement with which he came down, half collapsing, and let his mouth cling to her shoulder. Then he pulled her forward, he pulled the length of her body in the pale blue nightgown to lie stretched across his knees, he held it with an unsmiling violence, as if in hatred for her words and as if they were the words he had most wanted to hear.

He bent his face down to hers and she heard the question that had come again and again in the nights of the year behind them, always torn out of him involuntarily, always as a sudden break that betrayed his constant, secret torture: "Who was your first man?"

She strained back, trying to draw away from him, but he held her. "No, Hank," she said, her face hard.

The brief, taut movement of his lips was a smile. "I know that you won't answer it, but I won't stop asking-- because *that* is what I'll never accept."

"Ask yourself why you won't accept it."

He answered, his hand moving slowly from her breasts to her knees, as if stressing his ownership, and hating it, "Because . . . the things you've permitted me to do . . . I didn't think you could, not ever, not even for me . . . but to find that you did, and more: that you had permitted another man, had wanted him to, had--"

"Do you understand what you're saying? That you've never accepted my wanting you, either--you've never accepted that I *should* want you, just as I should have wanted him, once."

He said, his voice low, "That's true."

She tore herself away from him with a brusque, twisting movement, she stood up, but she stood looking down at him with a faint smile, and she said softly, "Do you know your only real guilt? With the greatest capacity for it, you've never learned to enjoy yourself."

You've always rejected your own pleasure too easily. You've been willing to bear too much."

"He said that, too."

"Who?"

"Francisco d'Anconia."

He wondered why he had the impression that the name shocked her and that she answered an instant too late. "He said that to you?"

"We were talking about quite a different subject."

In a moment, she said calmly, "I saw you talking to him. Which one of you was insulting the other, this time?"

"We weren't. Dagny, what do you think of him?"

"I think that he's done it intentionally—that smash-up we're in for, tomorrow."

"I know he has. Still, what do you think of him as a person?"

"I don't know. I ought to think that he's the most depraved person I've ever met."

"You ought to? But you don't?"

"No. I can't quite make myself feel certain of it."

He smiled. "That's what's strange about him. I know that he's a liar, a loafer, a cheap playboy, the most viciously irresponsible waste of a human being I ever imagined possible. Yet, when I look at him, I feel that if ever there was a man to whom I would entrust my life, he's the one."

She gasped. "Hank, are you saying that you like him?"

"I'm saying that I didn't know what it meant, to like a man. I didn't know how much I missed it—until I met him."

"Good God, Hank, you've fallen for him!"

"Yes—I think I have." He smiled. "Why does it frighten you?"

"Because . . . because I think he's going to hurt you in some terrible way . . . and the more you see in him, the harder it will be to bear . . . and it will take you a long time to get over it, if ever. . . . I feel that I ought to warn you against him, but I can't—because I'm certain of nothing about him, not even whether he's the greatest or the lowest man on earth."

"I'm certain of nothing about him—except that I like him."

"But think of what he's done. It's not Jim and Boyle that he's hurt, it's you and me and Ken Danagger and the rest of us, because Jim's gang will merely take it out on us—and it's going to be another disaster, like the Wyatt fire."

"Yes . . . yes, like the Wyatt fire. But, you know, I don't think I care too much about that. What's one more disaster? Everything's going anyway, it's only a question of a little faster or a little slower, all that's left for us ahead is to keep the ship afloat as long as we can and then go down with it."

"Is that his excuse for himself? Is that what he's made you feel?"

"No. Oh, no! That's the feeling I lose when I speak to him. The strange thing is what he does make me feel."

"What?"

"Hope."

She nodded, in helpless wonder, knowing that she had felt it, too.

"I don't know why," he said. "But I look at people and they seem