

three of them walked home together. A few squares of lighted windows hung scattered through the darkness, and the first streams of mist were weaving slowly across the panes, like shadows cast by a distant sea. They walked in silence, but the sound of their steps, blending into a single, steady beat, was like a speech to be grasped and not to be uttered in any other form.

After a while, Francisco said, "It changes nothing, it only makes the span a little longer, and the last stretch is always the hardest—but it's the last."

"I will hope so," she said. In a moment, she repeated quietly, "The last is the hardest." She turned to Galt. "May I make one request?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me go tomorrow?"

"If you wish."

When Francisco spoke again, moments later, it was as if he were addressing the unnamed wonder in her mind; his voice had the tone of answering a question: "Dagny, all three of us are in love"—she jerked her head to him—"with the same thing, no matter what its forms. Don't wonder why you feel no breach among us. You'll be one of us, so long as you'll remain in love with your rails and your engines—and they'll lead you back to us, no matter how many times you lose your way. The only man never to be redeemed is the man without passion."

"Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?"

"For . . . for the way you sound."

"How do I sound? Name it, Dagny."

"You sound . . . as if you're happy."

"I am—in exactly the same way you are. Don't tell me what you feel. I know it. But, you see, the measure of the hell you're able to endure is the measure of your love. The hell I couldn't bear to witness would be to see you being indifferent."

She nodded silently, unable to name as joy any part of the things she felt, yet feeling that he was right.

Clots of mist were drifting, like smoke, across the moon, and in the diffused glow she could not distinguish the expressions of their faces, as she walked between them: the only expressions to perceive were the straight silhouettes of their bodies, the unbroken sound of their steps and her own feeling that she wished to walk on and on, a feeling she could not define, except that it was neither doubt nor pain.

When they approached his cabin, Francisco stopped, the gesture of his hand embracing them both as he pointed to his door. "Will you come in—since it's to be our last night together for some time? Let's have a drink to the future of which all three of us are certain."

"Are we?" she asked.

"Yes," said Galt, "we are."

She looked at their faces when Francisco switched on the light in his house. She could not define their expressions, it was not happiness or any emotion pertaining to joy, their faces were taut and solemn, but it was a glowing solemnity—she thought—if this were

possible, and the odd glow she felt within her, told her that her own face had the same look.

Francisco reached for three glasses from a cupboard, but stopped, as at a sudden thought. He placed one glass on the table, then reached for the two silver goblets of Sebastián d'Anconia and placed them beside it.

"Are you going straight to New York, Dagny?" he asked, in the calm, unstrained tone of a host, bringing out a bottle of old wine.

"Yes," she answered as calmly.

"I'm flying to Buenos Aires day after tomorrow," he said, uncorking the bottle. "I'm not sure whether I'll be back in New York later, but if I am, it will be dangerous for you to see me."

"I won't care about that," she said, "unless you feel that I'm not entitled to see you any longer."

"True, Dagny. You're not. Not in New York."

He was pouring the wine and he glanced up at Galt. "John, when will you decide whether you're going back or staying here?"

Galt looked straight at him, then said slowly, in the tone of a man who knows all the consequences of his words, "I have decided, Francisco. I'm going back."

Francisco's hand stopped. For a long moment, he was seeing nothing, but Galt's face. Then his eyes moved to hers. He put the bottle down and he did not step back, but it was as if his glance drew back to a wider range, to include them both.

"But of course," he said.

He looked as if he had moved still farther and were now seeing the whole spread of their years: his voice had an even, unmuffled sound, a quality that matched the size of the vision.

"I knew it twelve years ago," he said. "I knew it before you could have known, and it's I who should have seen that you would see That night, when you called us to New York, I thought of it then as"--he was speaking to Galt, but his eyes moved to Dagny--"as everything that you were seeking . . . everything you told us to live for or die, if necessary. I should have seen that you would think it, too. It could not have been otherwise. It is as it had--and ought to be. It was set then, twelve years ago." He looked at Galt and chuckled softly. "And you say that it's I who've taken the hardest beating?"

He turned with too swift a movement--then, too slowly, as if in deliberate emphasis, he completed the task of pouring the wine, filling the three vessels on the table. He picked up the two silver goblets, looked down at them for the pause of an instant, then extended one to Dagny, the other to Galt.

"Take it," he said. "You've earned it--and it wasn't chance."

Galt took the goblet from his hand, but it was as if the acceptance was done by their eyes as they looked at each other.

"I would have given anything to let it be otherwise," said Galt, "except that which is beyond giving."

She held her goblet, she looked at Francisco and she let him see her eyes glance at Galt. "Yes," she said in the tone of an answer "But I have not earned it--and what you've paid, I'm paying it now.

and I don't know whether I'll ever earn enough to hold clear title, but if hell is the price—and the measure—then let me be the greediest of the three of us."

As they drank, as she stood, her eyes closed, feeling the liquid motion of the wine inside her throat, she knew that for all three of them this was the most tortured—and the most exultant—moment they had ever reached.

She did not speak to Galt, as they walked down the last stretch of the trail to his house. She did not turn her head to him, feeling that even a glance would be too dangerous. She felt, in their silence, both the calm of a total understanding and the tension of the knowledge that they were not to name the things they understood.

But she faced him, when they were in his living room, with full confidence and as if in sudden certainty of a right—the certainty that she would not break and that it was now safe to speak. She said evenly, neither as plea nor as triumph, merely as the statement of a fact, "You are going back to the outer world because I will be there."

"Yes."

"I do not want you to go."

"You have no choice about it."

"You are going for my sake."

"No, for mine."

"Will you allow me to see you there?"

"No."

"I am not to see you?"

"No."

"I am not to know where you are or what you do?"

"You're not."

"Will you be watching me, as you did before?"

"More so."

"Is your purpose to protect me?"

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"To be there on the day when you decide to join us."

She looked at him attentively, permitting herself no other reaction, but as if groping for an answer to the first point she had not fully understood.

"All the rest of us will be gone," he explained. "It will become too dangerous to remain. I will remain as your last key, before the door of this valley closes altogether."

"Oh!" She choked it off before it became a moan. Then, regaining the manner of impersonal detachment, she asked, "Suppose I were to tell you that my decision is final and that I am never to join you?"

"It would be a lie."

"Suppose I were now to decide that I wish to make it final and to stand by it, no matter what the future?"

"No matter what future evidence you observe and what convictions you form?"

"Yes."

"That would be worse than a lie."

"You are certain that I have made the wrong decision?"