

She inclined her head in a dryly formal acknowledgment. "Thank you."

"I will pay you ten dollars a month, in addition to your room and board."

"Very well."

"I shall be the first man in this valley to hire a servant." He got up, reached into his pocket and threw a five-dollar gold piece down on the table. "As advance on your wages," he said.

She was startled to discover, as her hand reached for the gold piece, that she felt the eager, desperate, tremulous hope of a young girl on her first job: the hope that she would be able to deserve it.

"Yes, sir," she said, her eyes lowered.

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Owen Kellogg arrived on the afternoon of her third day in the valley.

She did not know which shocked him most: the sight of her standing on the edge of the airfield as he descended from the plane--the sight of her clothes: her delicate, transparent blouse, tailored by the most expensive shop in New York, and the wide, cotton-print skirt she had bought in the valley for sixty cents--her cane, her bandages or the basket of groceries on her arm.

He descended among a group of men, he saw her, he stopped, then ran to her as if flung forward by some emotion so strong that, whatever its nature, it looked like terror.

"Miss Taggart . . ." he whispered--and said nothing else, while she laughed, trying to explain how she had come to beat him to his destination.

He listened, as if it were irrelevant, and then he uttered the thing from which he had to recover, "But we thought you were dead."

"Who thought it?"

"All of us . . . I mean, everybody in the outside world."

Then she suddenly stopped smiling, while his voice began to recapitulate his story and his first sound of joy.

"Miss Taggart, don't you remember? You told me to phone Winston, Colorado, and to tell them that you'd be there by noon of the next day. That was to be the day before yesterday, May thirty-first. But you did not reach Winston--and by late afternoon, the news was on all the radios that you were lost in a plane crash somewhere in the Rocky Mountains."

She nodded slowly, grasping the events she had not thought of considering.

"I heard it aboard the Comet," he said. "At a small station in the middle of New Mexico. The conductor held us there for an hour, while I helped him to check the story on long-distance phones. He was hit by the news just as I was. They all were--the train crew, the station agent, the switchmen. They huddled around me while I called the city rooms of newspapers in Denver and New York. We didn't learn much. Only that you had left the Afton airfield just before dawn on May thirty-first, that you seemed to be following some stranger's plane, that the attendant had seen you go off southeast--"

and that nobody had seen you since . . . And that searching parties were combing the Rockies for the wreckage of your plane."

She asked involuntarily, "Did the Comet reach San Francisco?"

"I don't know. She was crawling north through Arizona, when I gave up. There were too many delays, too many things going wrong, and a total confusion of orders. I got off and spent the night hitchhiking my way to Colorado, bumming rides on trucks, on buggies, on horse carts, to get there on time—to get to our meeting place, I mean, where we gather for Midas' ferry plane to pick us up and bring us here."

She started walking slowly up the path toward the car she had left in front of Hammond's Grocery Market. Kellogg followed, and when he spoke again, his voice dropped a little, slowing down with their steps, as if there were something they both wished to delay.

"I got a job for Jeff Allen," he said, his voice had the peculiarly solemn tone proper for saying: I have carried out your last will. "Your agent at Laurel grabbed him and put him to work the moment we got there. The agent needed every able-bodied—no, able-minded—man he could find."

They had reached the car, but she did not get in.

"Miss Taggart, you weren't hurt badly, were you? Did you say you crashed, but it wasn't serious?"

"No, not serious at all. I'll be able to get along without Mr. Mulligan's car by tomorrow—and in a day or two I won't need this thing, either." She swung her cane and tossed it contemptuously into the car. They stood in silence, she was waiting.

"The last long-distance call I made from that station in New Mexico," he said slowly, "was to Pennsylvania. I spoke to Hank Rearden. I told him everything I knew. He listened, and then there was a pause, and then he said, 'Thank you for calling me.'" Kellogg's eyes were lowered; he added, "I never want to hear that kind of pause again as long as I live."

He raised his eyes to hers; there was no reproach in his glance, only the knowledge of that which he had not suspected when he heard her request, but had guessed since.

"Thank you," she said, and threw the door of the car open. "Can I give you a lift? I have to get back and get dinner ready before my employer comes home."

It was in the first moment of returning to Galt's house, of standing alone in the silent, sun-filled room, that she faced the full meaning of what she felt. She looked at the window, at the mountains barring the sky in the east. She thought of Hank Rearden as he sat at his desk, now, two thousand miles away, his face tightened into a retaining wall against agony, as it had been tightened under all the blows of all his years—and she felt a desperate wish to fight his battle, to fight for him, for his past, for that tension of his face and the courage that fed it—as she wanted to fight for the Comet that crawled by a last effort across a desert on a crumbling track. She shuddered, closing her eyes, feeling as if she were guilty of double treason, feeling as if she were suspended in space between this valley and the rest of the earth, with no right to either.

The feeling vanished when she sat facing Galt across the dinner table. He was watching her, openly and with an untroubled look, as if her presence were normal—and as if the sight of her were all he wished to allow into his consciousness.

She leaned back a little, as if complying with the meaning of his glance, and said dryly, efficiently, in deliberate denial, "I have checked your shirts and found one with two buttons missing, and another with the left elbow worn through. Do you wish me to mend them?"

"Why, yes—if you can do it."

"I can do it."

It did not seem to alter the nature of his glance; it merely seemed to stress its satisfaction, as if this were what he had wished her to say—except that she was not certain whether satisfaction was the name for the thing she saw in his eyes and fully certain that he had not wished her to say anything.

Beyond the window, at the edge of the table, storm clouds had wiped out the last remnants of light in the eastern sky. She wondered why she felt a sudden reluctance to look out, why she felt as if she wanted to cling to the golden patches of light on the wood of the table, on the buttered crust of the rolls, on the copper coffee pot, on Galt's hair—to cling as to a small island on the edge of a void.

Then she heard her own voice asking suddenly, involuntarily, and she knew that this was the treason she had wanted to escape, "Do you permit any communication with the outside world?"

"No."

"Not any? Not even a note without return address?"

"No."

"Not even a message, if no secret of yours were given away?"

"Not from here. Not during this month. Not to outsiders at any time."

She noticed that she was avoiding his eyes, and she forced herself to lift her head and face him. His glance had changed; it was watchful, unmoving, implacably perceptive. He asked, looking at her as if he knew the reason of her query, "Do you wish to ask for a special exception?"

"No," she answered, holding his glance.

Next morning, after breakfast, when she sat in her room, carefully placing a patch on the sleeve of Galt's shirt, with her door closed, not to let him see her fumbling effort at an unfamiliar task, she heard the sound of a car stopping in front of the house.

She heard Galt's steps hurrying across the living room, she heard him jerk the entrance door open and call out with the joyous anger of relief: "It's about time!"

She rose to her feet, but stopped; she heard his voice, its tone abruptly changed and grave, as if in answer to the shock of some sight confronting him: "What's the matter?"

"Hello, John," said a clear, quiet voice that sounded steady, but weighted with exhaustion.

She sat down on her bed, feeling suddenly drained of strength: the voice was Francisco's.