mers on the Taggart estate. He had spent most of his childhood with the Taggart children, and now he worked for them, as his father and grandfather had worked for their father and grandfather.

The great oak tree had stood on a hill over the Hudson, in a lonely spot on the Taggart estate. Eddie Willers, aged seven, liked to come and look at that tree. It had stood there for hundreds of years, and he thought it would always stand there. Its roots clutched the hill like a fist with fingers sunk into the soil, and he thought that if a giant were to seize it by the top, he would not be able to uproot it, but would swing the hill and the whole of the earth with it, like a ball at the end of a string. He felt safe in the oak tree's presence; it was a thing that nothing could change or threaten; it was his greatest symbol of strength.

One night, lightning struck the oak tree. Eddie saw it next morning. It lay broken in half, and he looked into its trunk as into the mouth of a black tunnel. The trunk was only an empty shell; its heart had rotted away long ago; there was nothing inside—just a thin gray dust that was being dispersed by the whim of the faintest wind. The living power had gone, and the shape it left had not been able to stand without it.

Years later, he heard it said that children should be protected from shock, from their first knowledge of death, pain or fear. But these had never scarred him; his shock came when he stood very quietly, looking into the black hole of the trunk. It was an immense betrayal—the more terrible because he could not grasp what it was that had been betrayed. It was not himself, he knew, nor his trust; it was something else. He stood there for a while, making no sound, then he walked back to the house. He never spoke about it to anyone, then or since.

Eddie Willers shook his head, as the screech of a rusty mechanism changing a traffic light stopped him on the edge of a curb. He felt anger at himself. There was no reason that he had to remember the oak tree tonight. It meant nothing to him any longer, only a faint tinge of sadness—and somewhere within him, a drop of pain moving briefly and vanishing, like a raindrop on the glass of a window, its course in the shape of a question mark.

He wanted no sadness attached to his childhood; he loved its memories: any day of it he remembered now seemed flooded by a still, brilliant sunlight. It seemed to him as if a few rays from it reached into his present: not rays, more like pinpoint spotlights that gave an occasional moment's glitter to his job, to his lonely apartment, to the quiet, scrupulous progression of his existence.

He thought of a summer day when he was ten years old. That day, in a clearing of the woods, the one precious companion of his childhood told him what they would do when they grew up. The words were harsh and glowing, like the sunlight. He listened in admiration and in wonder. When he was asked what he would want to do, he answered at once, "Whatever is right," and added, "You ought to do something great . . . I mean, the two of us together." "What?" she asked. He said, "I don't know. That's what we ought to find out. Not just what you said. Not just business and earning a

living. Things like winning battles, or saving people out of fires, or climbing mountains." "What for?" she asked. He said, "The minister said last Sunday that we must always reach for the best within us. What do you suppose is the best within us?" "I don't know." "We'll have to find out." She did not answer; she was looking away, up the railroad track.

Eddie Willers smiled. He had said, "Whatever is right," twenty-two years ago. He had kept that statement unchallenged ever since; the other questions had faded in his mind; he had been too busy to ask them. But he still thought it self-evident that one had to do what was right; he had never learned how people could want to do otherwise; he had learned only that they did. It still seemed simple and incomprehensible to him: simple that things should be right, and incomprehensible that they weren't. He knew that they weren't. He thought of that, as he turned a corner and came to the great building of Taggart Transcontinental.

The building stood over the street as its tallest and proudest structure. Eddie Willers always smiled at his first sight of it. Its long bands of windows were unbroken, in contrast to those of its neighbors. Its rising lines cut the sky, with no crumbling corners or worn edges. It seemed to stand above the years, untouched. It would always stand there, thought Eddie Willers.

Whenever he entered the Taggart Building, he felt relief and a sense of security. This was a place of competence and power. The floors of its hallways were mirrors made of marble. The frosted rectangles of its electric fixtures were chips of solid light. Behind sheets of glass, rows of girls sat at typewriters, the clicking of their keys like the sound of speeding train wheels. And like an answering echo, a faint shudder went through the walls at times, rising from under the building, from the tunnels of the great terminal where trains started out to cross a continent and stopped after crossing it again, as they had started and stopped for generation after generation. Taggart Transcontinental, thought Eddie Willers. From Ocean to Ocean—the proud slogan of his childhood, so much more shining and holy than any commandment of the Bible. From Ocean to Ocean, forever—thought Eddie Willers, in the manner of a rededication, as he walked through the spotless halls into the heart of the building, into the office of James Taggart, President of Taggart Transcontinental.

James Taggart sat at his desk. He looked like a man approaching fifty, who had crossed into age from adolescence, without the intermediate stage of youth. He had a small, petulant mouth, and thin hair clinging to a bald forehead. His posture had a limp, decentralized sloppiness, as if in defiance of his tall, slender body, a body with an elegance of line intended for the confident poise of an aristocrat, but transformed into the gawkiness of a lout. The flesh of his face was pale and soft. His eyes were pale and veiled, with a glance that moved slowly, never quite stopping, gliding off and past things in eternal resentment of their existence. He looked obstinate and drained. He was thirty-nine years old.

He lifted his head with irritation, at the sound of the opening door.