

ment and sent it rolling into a ditch: the violence of the noise shattered the vacuum.

"God damn him," he said evenly, not raising his voice, with a loathing past any display of emotion. "He probably didn't *feel* like attending to his job, and since he *needed* his pay check, nobody had the right to ask that he keep the phones in order."

"Come on," she said.

"We can rest, if you feel tired, Miss Taggart."

"I'm all right. We have no time to feel tired."

"That's our great error, Miss Taggart. We ought to take the time, some day."

She gave a brief chuckle, she stepped onto a tie of the track, stressing the step as her answer, and they went on.

It was hard, walking on ties, but when they tried to walk along the trackside, they found that it was harder. The soil, half-sand, half-dust, sank under their heels, like the soft, unresisting spread of some substance that was neither liquid nor solid. They went back to walking from tie to tie; it was almost like stepping from log to log in the midst of a river.

She thought of what an enormous distance five miles had suddenly become, and that a division point thirty miles away was now unattainable—after an era of railroads built by men who thought in thousands of transcontinental miles. That net of rails and lights, spreading from ocean to ocean, hung on the snap of a wire, on a broken connection inside a rusty phone—no, she thought, on something much more powerful and much more delicate. It hung on the connections in the minds of the men who knew that the existence of a wire, of a train, of a job, of themselves and their actions was an absolute not to be escaped. When such minds were gone, a two-thousand-ton train was left at the mercy of the muscles of her legs.

Tired?—she thought; even the strain of walking was a value, a small piece of reality in the stillness around them. The sensation of effort was a specific experience, it was pain and could be nothing else—in the midst of a space which was neither light nor dark, a soil which neither gave nor resisted, a fog which neither moved nor hung still. Their strain was the only evidence of their motion: nothing changed in the emptiness around them, nothing took form to mark their progress. She had always wondered, in incredulous contempt, about the sects that preached the annihilation of the universe as the ideal to be attained. *There*, she thought, was their world and the content of their minds made real.

When the green light of a signal appeared by the track, it gave them a point to reach and pass, but—incongruous in the midst of the floating dissolution—it brought them no sense of relief. It seemed to come from a long since extinguished world, like those stars whose light remains after they are gone. The green circle glowed in space, announcing a clear track, inviting motion where there was nothing to move. Who was that philosopher, she thought, who preached that motion exists without any moving entities? This was *his* world, too.

She found herself pushing forward with increasing effort, as if against some resistance that was, not pressure, but suction. Glancing

at Kellogg, she saw that he, too, was walking like a man braced against a storm. She felt as if the two of them were the sole survivors . . . of reality, she thought—two lonely figures fighting, not through a storm, but worse: through non-existence.

If was Kellogg who glanced back, after a while, and she followed his glance: there was no headlight behind them.

They did not stop. Looking straight ahead, he reached absently into his pocket; she felt certain that the movement was involuntary; he produced a package of cigarettes and extended it to her.

She was about to take a cigarette—then, suddenly, she seized his wrist and tore the package out of his hand. It was a plain white package that bore, as single imprint, the sign of the dollar.

"Give me the flashlight!" she ordered, stopping.

He stopped obediently and sent the beam of the flashlight at the package in her hands. She caught a glimpse of his face: he looked a little astonished and very amused.

There was no printing on the package, no trade name, no address, only the dollar sign stamped in gold. The cigarettes bore the same sign.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

He was smiling. "If you know enough to ask that, Miss Taggart, you should know that I won't answer."

"I know that this stands for something."

"The dollar sign? For a great deal. It stands on the vest of every fat, piglike figure in every cartoon, for the purpose of denoting a crook, a graftor, a scoundrel—as the one sure-fire brand of evil. It stands—as the money of a free country—for achievement, for success, for ability, for man's creative power—and, precisely for these reasons, it is used as a brand of infamy. It stands stamped on the forehead of a man like Hank Rearden, as a mark of damnation. Incidentally, do you know where that sign comes from? It stands for the initials of the United States."

He snapped the flashlight off, but he did not move to go; she could distinguish the hint of his bitter smile.

"Do you know that the United States is the only country in history that has ever used its own monogram as a symbol of depravity? Ask yourself why. Ask yourself how long a country that did that could hope to exist, and whose moral standards have destroyed it. It was the only country in history where wealth was not acquired by looting, but by production, not by force, but by trade, the only country whose money was the symbol of man's right to his own mind, to his work, to his life, to his happiness, to himself. If this is evil, by the present standards of the world, if this is the reason for damning us, then we—we, the dollar chasers and makers—accept it and choose to be damned by that world. We choose to wear the sign of the dollar on our foreheads, proudly, as our badge of nobility—the badge we are willing to live for and, if need be, to die."

He extended his hand for the package. She held it as if her fingers would not let it go, but gave up and placed it on his palm. With deliberate slowness, as if to underscore the meaning of his gesture, he offered her a cigarette. She took it and placed it between her