

She stopped. When she looked up at their faces, the fire had gone out of hers. She crumpled her sketch and flung it aside into the red dust of the gravel. "Oh, what for?" she cried, the despair breaking out for the first time. "To build three miles of railroad and abandon a transcontinental system!"

The two men were looking at her, she saw no reproach in their faces, only a look of understanding which was almost compassion.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, dropping her eyes.

"If you change your mind," said Francisco, "I'll hire you on the spot—or Midas will give you a loan in five minutes to finance that railroad, if you want to own it yourself."

She shook her head. "I can't . . ." she whispered, "not yet . . ."

She raised her eyes, knowing that they knew the nature of her despair and that it was useless to hide her struggle. "I've tried it once," she said. "I've tried to give it up . . . I know what it will mean . . . I'll think of it with every cross-tie I'll see laid here, with every spike driven . . . I'll think of that other tunnel and . . . and of Nat Taggart's bridge. . . . Oh, if only I didn't have to hear about it! If only I could stay here and never know what they're doing to the railroad, and never learn when it goes!"

"You'll have to hear about it," said Galt; it was that ruthless tone, peculiarly his, which sounded implacable by being simple, devoid of any emotional value, save the quality of respect for facts. "You'll hear the whole course of the last agony of Taggart Transcontinental. You'll hear about every wreck. You'll hear about every discontinued train. You'll hear about every abandoned line. You'll hear about the collapse of the Taggart Bridge. Nobody stays in this valley except by a full, conscious choice based on a full, conscious knowledge of every fact involved in his decision. Nobody stays here by faking reality in any manner whatever."

She looked at him, her head lifted, knowing what chance he was rejecting. She thought that no man of the outer world would have said this to her at this moment—she thought of the world's code that worshipped white lies as an act of mercy—she felt a stab of a revulsion against that code, suddenly seeing its full ugliness for the first time—she felt an enormous pride for the tight, clean face of the man before her—he saw the shape of her mouth drawn firm in self-control, yet softened by some tremulous emotion, while she answered quietly, "Thank you. You're right."

"You don't have to answer me now," he said. "You'll tell me when you've decided. There's still a week left."

"Yes," she said calmly, "just one more week."

He turned, picked up her crumpled sketch, folded it neatly and slipped it into his pocket.

"Dagny," said Francisco, "when you weigh your decision, consider the first time you quit, if you wish, but consider everything about it. In this valley, you won't have to torture yourself by shingling roofs and building paths that lead nowhere."

"Tell me," she asked suddenly, "how did you find out where I was, that time?"

He smiled, "It was John who told me. The destroyer, remember?"

You wondered why the destroyer had not sent anyone after you. But he had. It was he who sent me there."

"He sent you?"

"Yes."

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing much. Why?"

"What did he say? Do you remember the exact words?"

"Yes, I do remember. He said, 'If you want your chance, take it. You've earned it.' I remember, because—" He turned to Galt with the untroubled frown of a slight, casual puzzle. "John, I never quite understood why you said it. Why that? Why—my chance?"

"Do you mind if I don't answer you now?"

"No, but—"

Someone hailed him from the ledges of the mine, and he went off swiftly, as if the subject required no further attention.

She was conscious of the long span of moments she took while turning her head to Galt. She knew that she would find him looking at her. She could read nothing in his eyes, except a hint of derision, as if he knew what answer she was seeking and that she would not find it in his face.

"You gave him a chance that *you* wanted?"

"I could have no chance till he'd had every chance possible to him."

"How did you know what he had earned?"

"I had been questioning him about you for ten years, every time I could, in every way, from every angle. No, he did not tell me—it was the way he spoke of you that did. He didn't want to speak, but he spoke too eagerly, eagerly and reluctantly together—and then I knew that it had not been just a childhood friendship. I knew how much he had given up for the strike and how desperately he hoped he hadn't given it up forever. I? I was merely questioning him about one of our most important future strikers—as I questioned him about many others."

The hint of derision remained in his eyes; he knew that she had wanted to hear this, but that this was not the answer to the one question she feared.

She looked from his face to Francisco's approaching figure, not hiding from herself any longer that her sudden, heavy, desolate anxiety was the fear that Galt might throw the three of them into the hopeless waste of self-sacrifice.

Francisco approached, looking at her thoughtfully, as if weighing some question of his own, but some question that gave a sparkle of reckless gaiety to his eyes.

"Dagny, there's only one week left," he said. "If you decide to go back, it will be the last, for a long time." There was no reproach and no sadness in his voice, only some softened quality as sole evidence of emotion. "If you leave now—oh yes, you'll still come back—but it won't be soon. And I—in a few months, I'll come to live here permanently, so if you go, I won't see you again, perhaps for years. I'd like you to spend this last week with me. I'd like you

to move to my house. As my guest, nothing else, for no reason, except that I'd like you to."

He said it simply, as if nothing were or could be hidden among the three of them. She saw no sign of astonishment in Galt's face. She felt some swift tightening in her chest, something hard, reckless and almost vicious that had the quality of a dark excitement driving her blindly into action.

"But I'm an employee," she said, with an odd smile, looking at Galt, "I have a job to finish."

"I won't hold you to it," said Galt, and she felt anger at the tone of his voice, a tone that granted her no hidden significance and answered nothing but the literal meaning of her words. "You can quit the job any time you wish. It's up to you."

"No, it isn't. I'm a prisoner here. Don't you remember? I'm to take orders. I have no preferences to follow, no wishes to express, no decisions to make. I want the decision to be yours."

"You want it to be mine?"

"Yes!"

"You've expressed a wish."

The mockery of his voice was in its seriousness—and she threw at him defiantly, not smiling, as if daring him to continue pretending that he did not understand. "All right. *That's* what I wish!"

He smiled, as at a child's complex scheming which he had long since seen through. "Very well." But he did not smile, as he said, turning to Francisco, "Then—no."

The defiance toward an adversary who was the sternest of teachers, was all that Francisco had read in her face. He shrugged, regretfully, but gaily. "You're probably right. If you can't prevent her from going back—nobody can."

She was not hearing Francisco's words. She was stunned by the magnitude of the relief that hit her at the sound of Galt's answer, a relief that told her the magnitude of the fear it swept away. She knew, only after it was over, what had hung for her on his decision, she knew that had his answer been different, it would have destroyed the valley in her eyes.

She wanted to laugh, she wanted to embrace them both and laugh with them in celebration, it did not seem to matter whether she would stay here or return to the world, a week was like an endless span of time, either course seemed flooded by an unchanging sunlight—and no struggle was hard, she thought, if *this* was the nature of existence. The relief did not come from the knowledge that he would not renounce her, nor from any assurance that she would win—the relief came from the certainty that he would always remain what he was.

"I don't know whether I'll go back to the world or not," she said soberly, but her voice was trembling with subdued violence, which was pure gaiety. "I'm sorry that I'm still unable to make a decision. I'm certain of only one thing: that I won't be afraid to decide."

Francisco took the sudden brightness of her face as proof that the incident had been of no significance. But Galt understood; he glanced