Dagny asked slowly, "What is the danger to Mr. Rearden?"

"I'm sure you understand me."

"I don't."

"Oh, but surely it isn't necessary to be more explicit."

"It is—if you wish to continue this discussion."

Lillian's eyes went to Rearden's face, searching for some sign to help her decide whether to continue or to stop. He would not help her.

"Miss Taggart," she said, "I am not your equal in philosophical altitude. I am only an average wife. Please give me that bracelet—if you do not wish me to think what I might think and what you wouldn't want me to name."

"Mrs. Rearden, is this the manner and place in which you choose to suggest that I am sleeping with your husband?"

"Certainly not!" The cry was immediate; it had a sound of panic and the quality of an automatic reflex, like the jerk of withdrawal of a pickpocket's hand caught in action. She added, with an angry, nervous chuckle, in a tone of sarcasm and sincerity that confessed a reluctant admission of her actual opinion, "That would be the possibility farthest from my mind."

"Then you will please apologize to Miss Taggart," said Rearden.

Dagny caught her breath, cutting off all but the faint echo of a gasp. They both whirled to him. Lillian saw nothing in his face; Dagny saw torture.

"It isn't necessary, Hank," she said.

"It is—for me," he answered coldly, not looking at her; he was looking at Lillian in the manner of a command that could not be disobeyed.

Lillian studied his face with mild astonishment, but without anxiety or anger, like a person confronted by a puzzle of no significance. "But of course," she said complaisantly, her voice smooth and confident again. "Please accept my apology, Miss Taggart, if I gave you the impression that I suspected the existence of a relationship which I would consider improbable for you and—from my knowledge of his inclinations—impossible for my husband."

She turned and walked away indifferently, leaving them together, as if in deliberate proof of her words

Dagny stood still, her eyes closed; she was thinking of the night when Lillian had given her the bracelet. He had taken his wife's side, then; he had taken hers, now. Of the three of them, she was the only one who understood fully what this meant.

"Whatever is the worst you may wish to say to me, you will be right."

She heard him and opened her eyes. He was looking at her coldly, his face harsh, allowing no sign of pain or apology to suggest a hope of forgiveness.

"Dearest, don't torture yourself like that," she said. "I knew that you're married. I've never tried to evade that knowledge. I'm not hurt by it tonight."

Her first word was the most violent of the several blows he felt; she had never used that word before. She had never let him hear

that particular tone of tenderness. She had never spoken of his marriage in the privacy of their meetings—yet she spoke of it here with effortless simplicity.

She saw the anger in his face—the rebellion against pity—the look of saying to her contemptuously that he had betrayed no torture and needed no help—then the look of realization that she knew his face as thoroughly as he knew hers—he closed his eyes, inclined his head a little, and he said very quietly, "Thank you."

She smiled and turned away from him.

James Taggart held an empty champagne glass in his hand and noticed the haste with which Balph Eubank waved at a passing waiter, as if the waiter were guilty of an unpardonable lapse. Then Eubank completed his sentence:

"—but *you*, Mr. Taggart, would know that a man who lives on a higher plane cannot be understood or appreciated. It's a hopeless struggle—trying to obtain support for literature from a world ruled by businessmen. They are nothing but stuffy, middle-class vulgarians or else predatory savages like Rearden."

"Jim," said Bertram Scudder, slapping his shoulder, "the best compliment I can pay you is that you're *not* a real businessman!"

"You're a man of culture, Jim," said Dr. Pritchett, "you're not an ex-ore-digger like Rearden. I don't have to explain to you the crucial need of Washington assistance to higher education."

"You really liked my last novel, Mr. Taggart?" Balph Eubank kept asking. "You *really* liked it?"

Orren Boyle glanced at the group, on his way across the room, but did not stop. The glance was sufficient to give him an estimate of the nature of the group's concerns. Fair enough, he thought, one's got to trade something. He knew, but did not care to name just what was being traded.

"We are at the dawn of a new age," said James Taggart, from above the rim of his champagne glass. "We are breaking up the vicious tyranny of economic power. We will set men free of the rule of the dollar. We will release our spiritual aims from dependence on the owners of material means. We will liberate our culture from the stranglehold of the profit-chasers. We will build a society dedicated to higher ideals, and we will replace the aristocracy of money by—"

"—the aristocracy of pull," said a voice beyond the group.

They whirled around. The man who stood facing them was Francisco d'Anconia.

His face looked tanned by a summer sun, and his eyes were the exact color of the sky on the kind of day when he had acquired his tan. His smile suggested a summer morning. The way he wore his formal clothes made the rest of the crowd look as if they were masquerading in borrowed costumes.

"What's the matter?" he asked in the midst of their silence. "Did I say something that somebody here didn't know?"

"How did *you* get here?" was the first thing James Taggart found himself able to utter.

"By plane to Newark, by taxi from there, then by elevator from my suite fifty-three floors above you."