seem to have the strength to make. You see, I had never expected anything like my marriage to Jim. Then when it happened, I thought that life was much more wonderful than I had expected. And now to get used to the idea that life and people are much more horrible than anything I had imagined and that my marriage was not a glorious miracle, but some unspeakable kind of evil which I'm still afraid to learn fully—*that* is what I can't force myself to take. I can't get past it." She glanced up suddenly. "Dagny, how did you do it? How did you manage to remain unmangled?"

"By holding to just one rule."

"Which?"

"To place nothing—*nothing*—above the verdict of my own mind."

"You've taken some terrible beatings . . . maybe worse than I did . . . worse than any of us. . . . What held you through it?"

"The knowledge that my life is the highest of values, too high to give up without a fight."

She saw a look of astonishment, of incredulous recognition on Cherryl's face, as if the girl were struggling to recapture some sensation across a span of years. "Dagny"—her voice was a whisper—"that's . . . that's what I felt when I was a child . . . that's what I seem to remember most about myself . . . *that* kind of feeling . . . and I never lost it, it's there, it's always been there, but as I grew up, I thought it was something that I must hide. . . . I never had any name for it, but just now, when you said it, it struck me that that's what it was. . . . Dagny, to feel that way about your own life—is that *good*?"

"Cherryl, listen to me carefully: that feeling—with everything, which it requires and implies—is the highest, noblest and only good on earth."

"The reason I ask is because I . . . I wouldn't have dared to think that. Somehow, people always made me feel as if they thought it was a sin . . . as if that were the thing in me which they resented and . . . and wanted to destroy."

"It's true. Some people do want to destroy it. And when you learn to understand their motive, you'll know the darkest, ughest and only evil in the world, but you'll be safely out of its reach."

Cherryl's smile was like a feeble flicker struggling to retain its hold upon a few drops of fuel, to catch them, to flare up. "It's the first time in months," she whispered, "that I've felt as if . . . as if there's still a chance." She saw Dagny's eyes watching her with attentive concern, and she added, "I'll be all right . . . Let me get used to it—to you, to all the things you said. I think I'll come to believe it . . . to believe that it's real . . . and that Jim doesn't matter." She rose to her feet, as if trying to retain the moment of assurance.

Prompted by a sudden, causeless certainty, Dagny said sharply, "Cherryl, I don't want you to go home tonight."

"Oh no! I'm all right. I'm not afraid, that way. Not of going home."

"Didn't something happen there tonight?"

"No . . . not really . . . nothing worse than usual. It was just that I began to see things a little more clearly, that was all. . . . I'm all

right. I have to think, think harder than I ever did before . . . and then I'll decide what I must do. May I—" She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"May I come back to talk to you again?"

"Of course."

"Thank you, I . . . I'm very grateful to you."

"Will you promise me that you'll come back?"

"I promise."

Dagny saw her walking off down the hall toward the elevator, saw the slump of her shoulders, then the effort that lifted them, saw the slender figure that seemed to sway then marshal all of its strength to remain erect. She looked like a plant with a broken stem, still held together by a single fiber, struggling to heal the breach, which one more gust of wind would finish.

* *

Through the open door of his study, James Taggart had seen Cherryl cross the anteroom and walk out of the apartment. He had slammed his door and slumped down on the davenport, with patches of spilled champagne still soaking the cloth of his trousers, as if his own discomfort were a revenge upon his wife and upon a universe that would not provide him with the celebration he had wanted.

After a while, he leaped to his feet, tore off his coat and threw it across the room. He reached for a cigarette, but snapped it in half and flung it at a painting over the fireplace.

He noticed a vase of Venetian glass—a museum piece, centuries old, with an intricate system of blue and gold arteries twisting through its transparent body. He seized it and flung it at the wall; it burst into a rain of glass as thin as a shattered light bulb.

He had bought that vase for the satisfaction of thinking of all the connoisseurs who could not afford it. Now he experienced the satisfaction of a revenge upon the centuries which had prized it—and the satisfaction of thinking that there were millions of desperate families, any one of whom could have lived for a year on the price of that vase.

He kicked off his shoes, and fell back on the davenport, letting his stocking feet dangle in mid-air.

The sound of the doorbell startled him: it seemed to match his mood. It was the kind of brusque, demanding, impatient snap of sound he would have produced if he were now jabbing his finger at someone's doorbell.

He listened to the butler's steps, promising himself the pleasure of refusing admittance to whoever was seeking it. In a moment, he heard the knock at his door and the butler entered to announce, "Mrs. Rearden to see you, sir."

"What? . . . Oh . . . Well! Have her come in!"

He swung his feet down to the floor, but made no other concession, and waited with half a smile of alerted curiosity, choosing not to rise until a moment after Lillian had entered the room.

She wore a wine-colored dinner gown, an imitation of an Empire traveling suit, with a miniature double-breasted jacket gripping her high waistline over the long sweep of the skirt, and a small hat

clinging to one ear, with a feather sweeping down to curl under her chin. She entered with a brusque, unrhythmical motion, the train of her dress and the feather of her hat swirling, then flapping against her legs and throat, like pennants signaling nervousness.

"Lillian, my dear, am I to be flattered, delighted or just plain flabbergasted?"

"Oh, don't make a fuss about it! I had to see you, and it had to be immediately, that's all."

The impatient tone, the peremptory movement with which she sat down were a confession of weakness; by the rules of their unwritten language, one did not assume a demanding manner unless one were seeking a favor and had no value—no threat—to barter.

"Why didn't you stay at the Gonzales reception?" she asked, her casual smile failing to hide the tone of irritation. "I dropped in on them after dinner, just to catch hold of you—but they said you hadn't been feeling well and had gone home."

He crossed the room and picked up a cigarette, for the pleasure of padding in his stocking feet past the formal elegance of her costume. "I was bored," he answered.

"I can't stand them," she said, with a little shudder; he glanced at her in astonishment: the words sounded involuntary and sincere. "I can't stand Señor Gonzales and that whore he's got himself for a wife. It's disgusting that they've become so fashionable, they and their parties. I don't feel like going anywhere any longer. It's not the same style any more, not the same spirit. I haven't run into Balph Eubank for months, or Dr. Pritchett, or any of the boys. And all those new faces that look like butcher's assistants! After all, *our* crowd were gentlemen."

"Yeah," he said reflectively. "Yeah, there's some funny kind of difference. It's like on the railroad, too: I could get along with Clem Weatherby, he was civilized, but Cuffy Meigs—that's something else again, that's . . ." He stopped abruptly

"It's perfectly preposterous," she said, in the tone of a challenge to the space at large. "They can't get away with it."

She did not explain "who" or "with what." He knew what she meant. Through a moment of silence, they looked as if they were clinging to each other for reassurance.

In the next moment, he was thinking with pleasurable amusement that Lillian was beginning to show her age. The deep burgundy color of her gown was unbecoming, it seemed to draw a purplish tinge out of her skin, a tinge that gathered, like twilight, in the small gullies of her face, softening her flesh to a texture of tired slackness, changing her look of bright mockery into a look of stale malice.

He saw her studying him, smiling and saying crisply, with the smile as license for insult, "You *are* unwell, aren't you, Jim? You look like a disorganized stableboy."

He chuckled. "I can afford it."

"I know it, darling. You're one of the most powerful men in New York City." She added, "It's a good joke on New York City."

"It is."

"I concede that you're in a position to do anything. That's why I