

Washington had hoped to hold him by prompting *these* three to try for the role of hostages.

"You think you're so good, don't you?" It was a sudden cry and it came from Lillian; she had leaped to her feet to bar his exit; her face was distorted, as he had seen it once before, on that morning when she had learned the name of his mistress. "You're so good! You're so proud of yourself! Well, I have something to tell you!"

She looked as if she had not believed until this moment that her game was lost. The sight of her face struck him like a last shred completing a circuit, and in sudden clarity he knew what her game had been and why she had married him.

If to choose a person as the constant center of one's concern, as the focus of one's view of life, was to love—he thought—then it was true that she loved him; but if, to him, love was a celebration of one's self and of existence—then, to the self-haters and life-haters, the pursuit of destruction was the only form and equivalent of love. It was for the best of his virtues that Lillian had chosen him, for his strength, his confidence, his pride—she had chosen him as one chooses an object of love, as the symbol of man's living power, but the destruction of that power had been her goal.

He saw them as they had been at their first meeting: he, the man of violent energy and passionate ambition, the man of achievement, lighted by the flame of his success and flung into the midst of those pretentious ashes who called themselves an intellectual elite, the burned-out remnants of undigested culture, feeding on the afterglow of the minds of others, offering their denial of the mind as their only claim to distinction, and a craving to control the world as their only lust—she, the woman hanger-on of that elite, wearing their shopworn sneer as her answer to the universe, holding impotence as superiority and emptiness as virtue—he, unaware of their hatred, innocently scornful of their posturing fraud—she, seeing him as the danger to their world, as a threat, as a challenge, as a reproach.

The lust that drives others to enslave an empire, had become, in her limits, a passion for power over *him*. She had set out to break him, as if, unable to equal his value, she could surpass it by destroying it, as if the measure of his greatness would thus become the measure of hers, as if—he thought with a shudder—as if the vandal who smashed a statue were greater than the artist who had made it, as if the murderer who killed a child were greater than the mother who had given it birth.

He remembered her hammering derision of his work, his mills, his Metal, his success, he remembered her desire to see him drunk, just once, her attempts to push him into infidelity, her pleasure at the thought that he had fallen to the level of some sordid romance, her terror on discovering that that romance had been an attainment, not a degradation. Her line of attack, which he had found so baffling, had been constant and clear—it was his self-esteem she had sought to destroy, knowing that a man who surrenders his value is at the mercy of anyone's will; it was his moral purity she had struggled to breach, it was his confident rectitude she had wanted to shatter by

means of the poison of guilt—as if, were he to collapse, his depravity would give her a right to hers.

For the same purpose and motive, for the same satisfaction, as others weave complex systems of philosophy to destroy generations, or establish dictatorships to destroy a country, so she, possessing no weapons except femininity, had made it her goal to destroy one man.

Yours was the code of life—he remembered the voice of his lost young teacher—what, then, is theirs?

"I have something to tell you!" cried Lillian, with the sound of that impotent rage which wishes that words were brass knuckles. "You're so proud of yourself, aren't you? You're so proud of your name! Rearden Steel, Rearden Metal, Rearden Wife! That's what I was, wasn't I? Mrs. Rearden! Mrs. Henry Rearden!" The sounds she was making were now a string of cackling gasps, an unrecognizable corruption of laughter. "Well, I think you'd like to know that your wife's been laid by another man! I've been unfaithful to you, do you hear me? I've been unfaithful, not with some great, noble lover, but with the scummiest louse, with Jim Taggart! Three months ago! Before your divorce! While I was your wife! While I was still your wife!"

He stood listening like a scientist studying a subject of no personal relevance whatever. There, he thought, was the final abortion of the creed of collective interdependence, the creed of non-identity, non-property, non-fact: the belief that the moral stature of one is at the mercy of the action of another.

"I've been unfaithful to you! Don't you hear me, you stainless Puritan? I've slept with Jim Taggart, you incorruptible hero! Don't you hear me? . . . Don't you hear me? . . . Don't you . . . ?"

He was looking at her as he would have looked if a strange woman had approached him on the street with a personal confession—a look like the equivalent of the words: Why tell it to me?

Her voice trailed off. He had not known what the destruction of a person would be like; but he knew that he was seeing the destruction of Lillian. He saw it in the collapse of her face, in the sudden slackening of features, as if there were nothing to hold them together, in the eyes, blind, yet staring, staring inward, filled with that terror which no outer threat can equal. It was not the look of a person losing her mind, but the look of a mind seeing total defeat and, in the same instant, seeing her own nature for the first time—the look of a person seeing that after years of preaching non-existence, she had achieved it.

He turned to go. His mother stopped him at the door, seizing his arm. With a look of stubborn bewilderment, with the last of her effort at self-deceit, she moaned in a voice of tearfully petulant reproach. "Are you really incapable of forgiveness?"

"No, Mother," he answered, "I'm not. I would have forgiven the past—if, today, you had urged me to quit and disappear."

There was a cold wind outside, tightening his overcoat about him like an embrace, there was the great, fresh sweep of country stretching at the foot of the hill, and the clear, receding sky of twilight. Like two sunsets ending the day, the red glow of the sun was a