

sensation that disappointment would now be irrelevant. It was eagerness and an odd, solemn stillness, the sudden certainty that she was facing the approach of something unknown and of the gravest importance.

The swiftness of Francisco's movements was carrying him toward the hill while he was raising his head to glance up. He saw her above, at the door of the cabin, and stopped. She could not distinguish the expression on his face. He stood still for a long moment, his face raised to her. Then he started up the hill.

She felt—almost as if she had expected it—that this was a scene from their childhood. He was coming toward her, not running, but moving upward with a kind of triumphant, confident eagerness. No, she thought, this was not their childhood—it was the future as she would have seen it then, in the days when she waited for him as for her release from prison. It was a moment's view of a morning they would have reached, if her vision of life had been fulfilled, if they had both gone the way she had then been so certain of going. Held motionless by wonder, she stood looking at him, taking this moment, not in the name of the present, but as a salute to their past.

When he was close enough and she could distinguish his face, she saw the look of that luminous gaiety which transcends the solemn by proclaiming the great innocence of a man who has earned the right to be light-hearted. He was smiling and whistling some piece of music that seemed to flow like the long, smooth, rising flight of his steps. The melody seemed distantly familiar to her, she felt that it belonged with this moment, yet she felt also that there was something odd about it, something important to grasp, only she could not think of it now.

"Hi, Slug!"

"Hi, Frisco!"

She knew—by the way he looked at her, by an instant's drop of his eyelids closing his eyes, by the brief pull of his head striving to lean back and resist, by the faint, half-smiling, half-helpless relaxation of his lips, by the sudden harshness of his arms as he seized her—that it was involuntary, that he had not intended it, and that it was irresistibly right for both of them.

The desperate violence of the way he held her, the hurting pressure of his mouth on hers, the exultant surrender of his body to the touch of hers, were not the form of a moment's pleasure—she knew that no physical hunger could bring a man to this—she knew that it was the statement she had never heard from him, the greatest confession of love a man could make. No matter what he had done to wreck his life, this was still the Francisco d'Anconia in whose bed she had been so proud of belonging—no matter what betrayals she had met from the world, her vision of life had been true and some indestructible part of it had remained within him—and in answer to it, her body responded to his, her arms and mouth held him, confessing her desire, confessing an acknowledgment she had always given him and always would.

Then the rest of his years came back to her, with a stab of the pain of knowing that the greater his person, the more terrible his

guilt in destroying it. She pulled herself away from him, she shook her head, she said, in answer to both of them, "No."

He stood looking at her, disarmed and smiling. "Not yet. You have a great deal to forgive me, first. But I can tell you everything now."

She had never heard that low, breathless quality of helplessness in his voice. He was fighting to regain control, there was almost a touch of apology in his smile, the apology of a child pleading for indulgence, but there was also an adult's amusement, the laughing declaration that he did not have to hide his struggle, since it was happiness that he was wrestling with, not pain.

She backed away from him; she felt as if emotion had flung her ahead of her own consciousness, and questions were now catching up with her, groping toward the form of words.

"Dagny, that torture you've been going through, here, for the last month . . . answer me as honestly as you can . . . do you think you could have borne it twelve years ago?"

"No," she answered; he smiled. "Why do you ask that?"

"To redeem twelve years of my life, which I won't have to regret."

"What do you mean? And"—her questions had caught up with her—"and what do you know about my torture here?"

"Dagny, aren't you beginning to see that I would know everything about it?"

"How did you . . . Francisco! What were you whistling when you were coming up the hill?"

"Why, was I? I don't know."

"It was the Fifth Concerto by Richard Halley, wasn't it?"

"Oh . . . !" He looked startled, then smiled in amusement at himself, then answered gravely, "I'll tell you that later."

"How did you find out where I was?"

"I'll tell you that, too."

"You forced it out of Eddie."

"I haven't seen Eddie for over a year."

"He was the only one who knew it."

"It wasn't Eddie who told me."

"I didn't want anybody to find me."

He glanced slowly about him, she saw his eyes stop on the path she had built, on the planted flowers, on the fresh-shingled roof. He chuckled, as if he understood and as if it hurt him. "You shouldn't have been left here for a month," he said. "God, you shouldn't have! It's my first failure, at the one time when I didn't want to fail. But I didn't think you were ready to quit. Had I known it, I would have watched you day and night."

"Really? What for?"

"To spare you"—he pointed at her work—"all this."

"Francisco," she said, her voice low, "if you're concerned about my torture, don't you know that I don't want to hear you speak of it, because—" She stopped; she had never complained to him, not in all those years; her voice flat, she said only, "—that I don't want to hear it?"

"Because I'm the one man who has no right to speak of it? Dagny,

if you think that I don't know how much I've hurt you, I'll tell you about the years when I . . . But it's over. Oh, darling, it's over!"

"Is it?"

"Forgive me, I mustn't say that. Not until you say it." He was trying to control his voice, but the look of happiness was beyond his power to control.

"Are you happy because I've lost everything I lived for? All right, I'll say it, if this is what you've come to hear: you were the first thing I lost—does it amuse you now to see that I've lost the rest?"

He glanced straight at her, his eyes drawn narrow by such an intensity of earnestness that the glance was almost a threat, and she knew that whatever the years had meant to him—"amusement" was the one word she had no right to utter.

"Do you really think that?" he asked.

She whispered, "No . . ."

"Dagny, we can never lose the things we live for. We may have to change their form at times, if we've made an error, but the purpose remains the same and the forms are ours to make."

"That is what I've been telling myself for a month. But there's no way left open toward any purpose whatever."

He did not answer. He sat down on a boulder by the door of the cabin, watching her as if he did not want to miss a single shadow of reaction on her face. "What do you think now of the men who quit and vanished?" he asked.

She shrugged, with a faint smile of helpless sadness, and sat down on the ground beside him. "You know," she said. "I used to think that there was some destroyer who came after them and made them quit. But I guess there wasn't. There have been times, this past month, when I've almost wished he would come for me, too. But nobody came."

"No?"

"No. I used to think that he gave them some inconceivable reason to make them betray everything they loved. But that wasn't necessary. I know how they felt. I can't blame them any longer. What I don't know is how they learned to exist afterward—if any of them still exist."

"Do you feel that you've betrayed Taggart Transcontinental?"

"No. I . . . I feel that I would have betrayed it by remaining at work."

"You would have."

"If I had agreed to serve the looters, it's . . . it's Nat Taggart that I would have delivered to them. I couldn't. I couldn't let his achievement, and mine, end up with the looters as our final goal."

"No, you couldn't. Do you call this indifference? Do you think that you love the railroad less than you did a month ago?"

"I think that I would give my life for just one more year on the railroad . . . But I can't go back to it."

"Then you know what they felt, all the men who quit, and what it was that they loved when they gave up."

"Francisco," she asked, not looking at him, her head bent, "why did you ask me whether I could have given it up twelve years ago?"