

at her and the glance was part amusement, part contemptuous reproach.

He said nothing, until they were alone, walking down the trail to the valley. Then he glanced at her again, the amusement sharper in his eyes, and said, "You had to put me to a test in order to learn whether I'd fall to the lowest possible stage of altruism?"

She did not answer, but looked at him in open, undefensive admission.

He chuckled and looked away, and a few steps later said slowly, in the tone of a quotation. "Nobody stays here by faking reality *in any manner whatever.*"

Part of the intensity of her relief—she thought, as she walked silently by his side—was the shock of a contrast: she had seen, with the sudden, immediate vividness of sensory perception, an exact picture of what the code of self-sacrifice would have meant, if enacted by the three of them. Galt, giving up the woman he wanted, for the sake of his friend, faking his greatest feeling out of existence and himself out of her life, no matter what the cost to him and to her, then dragging the rest of his years through the waste of the untaught and unfulfilled—she, turning for consolation to a second choice, faking a love she did not feel, being willing to fake, since her will to self-deceit was the essential required for Galt's self-sacrifice, then living out her years in hopeless longing, accepting, as relief for an unhealing wound, some moments of weary affection, plus the tenet that love is futile and happiness is not to be found on earth—Francisco, struggling in the elusive fog of a counterfeit reality, his life a fraud staged by the two who were dearest to him and most trusted, struggling to grasp what was missing from his happiness, struggling down the brittle scaffold of a lie over the abyss of the discovery that he was not the man she loved, but only a resented substitute, half-charity-patient, half-crutch, his perceptiveness becoming his danger and only his surrender to lethargic stupidity protecting the shoddy structure of his joy, struggling and giving up and settling into the dreary routine of the conviction that fulfillment is impossible to man—the three of them, who had had all the gifts of existence spread out before them, ending up as embittered hulks, who cry in despair that life is frustration—the frustration of not being able to make unreality real.

But *this*—she thought—was men's moral code in the outer world, a code that told them to act on the premise of one another's weakness, deceit and stupidity, and this was the pattern of their lives, this struggle through a fog of the pretended and unacknowledged, this belief that facts are not solid or final, this state where, denying any form to reality, men stumble through life, unreal and unformed, and die having never been born. *Here*—she thought, looking down through green branches at the glittering roofs of the valley—one dealt with men as clear and firm as sun and rocks, and the immense light-heartedness of her relief came from the knowledge that no battle was hard, no decision was dangerous where there was no soggy uncertainty, no shapeless evasion to encounter.

"Did it ever occur to you, Miss Taggart," said Galt, in the casual

tone of an abstract discussion, but as if he had known her thoughts, "that there is no conflict of interests among men, neither in business nor in trade nor in their most personal desires—if they omit the irrational from their view of the possible and destruction from their view of the practical? There is no conflict, and no call for sacrifice, and no man is a threat to the aims of another—if men understand that reality is an absolute not to be faked, that lies do not work, that the unearned cannot be had, that the undeserved cannot be given, that the destruction of a value which is, will not bring value to that which isn't. The businessman who wishes to gain a market by throttling a superior competitor, the worker who wants a share of his employer's wealth, the artist who envies a rival's higher talent—they're all wishing facts out of existence, and destruction is the only means of their wish. If they pursue it, they will not achieve a market, a fortune or an immortal fame—they will merely destroy production, employment and art. A wish for the irrational is not to be achieved, whether the sacrificial victims are willing or not. But men will not cease to desire the impossible and will not lose their longing to destroy—so long as self-destruction and self-sacrifice are preached to them as the practical means of achieving the happiness of the recipients."

He glanced at her and added slowly, a slight emphasis as sole change in the impersonal tone of his voice, "No one's happiness but my own is in my power to achieve or to destroy. You should have had more respect for him and for me than to fear what you had feared."

She did not answer, she felt as if a word would overfill the fullness of this moment, she merely turned to him with a look of acquiescence that was disarmed, childishly humble and would have been an apology but for its shining joy.

He smiled—in amusement, in understanding, almost in comradeship of the things they shared and in sanction of the things she felt.

They went on in silence, and it seemed to her that this was a summer day out of a carefree youth she had never lived, it was just a walk through the country by two people who were free for the pleasure of motion and sunlight, with no unsolved burdens left to carry. Her sense of lightness blended with the weightless sense of walking downhill, as if she needed no effort to walk, only to restrain herself from flying, and she walked, fighting the speed of the downward pull, her body leaning back, the wind blowing her skirt like a sail to brake her motion.

They parted at the bottom of the trail; he went to keep an appointment with Midas Mulligan, while she went to Hammond's Market with a list of items for the evening's dinner as the sole concern of her world.

His wife—she thought, letting herself hear consciously the word Dr. Akston had not pronounced, the word she had long since felt, but never named—for three weeks she had been his wife in every sense but one, and that final one was still to be earned, but this much was real and today she could permit herself to know it, to feel it, to live with that one thought for this one day.