

as if it were she who had to hide, she who had to run from the ugliness of being seen in the act of seeing them—a panic made of revulsion, of pity, of embarrassment, of that mental chastity which recoils from confronting a man with the unanswerable proof of his evil.

She stood in the middle of her room, unable to grasp what action was now possible to her. Then her knees gave way, folding gently, she found herself sitting on the floor and she stayed there, staring at the carpet, shaking.

It was neither anger nor jealousy nor indignation, but the blank horror of dealing with the grotesquely senseless. It was the knowledge that neither their marriage nor his love for her nor his insistence on holding her nor his love for that other woman nor this gratuitous adultery had any meaning whatever, that there was no shred of sense in any of it and no use to grope for explanations. She had always thought of evil as purposeful, as a means to some end; what she was seeing now was evil for evil's sake.

She did not know how long she had sat there, when she heard their steps and voices, then the sound of the front door closing. She got up, with no purpose in mind, but impelled by some instinct from the past, as if acting in a vacuum where honesty was not relevant any longer, but knowing no other way to act.

She met Jim in the anteroom. For a moment, they looked at each other as if neither could believe the other's reality.

"When did you come back?" he snapped. "How long have you been home?"

"I don't know . . ."

He was looking at her face. "What's the matter with you?"

"Jim, I—" She struggled, gave up and waved her hand toward his bedroom. "Jim, I know."

"What do you know?"

"You were there . . . with a woman."

His first action was to push her into his study and slam the door, as if to hide them both, he could no longer say from whom. An unadmitted rage was boiling in his mind, struggling between escape and explosion, and it blew up into the sensation that this negligible little wife of his was depriving him of his triumph, that he would not surrender to her his new enjoyment.

"Sure!" he screamed. "So what? What are you going to do about it?"

She stared at him blankly.

"Sure! I was there with a woman! That's what I did, because that's what I felt like doing! Do you think you're going to scare me with your gasps, your stares, your whimpering virtue?" He snapped his fingers. "*That* for your opinion! I don't give a hoot in hell about your opinion! Take it and like it!" It was her white, defenseless face that drove him on, lashing him into a state of pleasure, the pleasure of feeling as if his words were blows disfiguring a human face. "Do you think you're going to make me hide? I'm sick of having to put on an act for your righteous satisfaction! Who the hell are you, you cheap little nobody? I'll do as I please, and you'll keep your mouth shut and go through the right tricks in public, like everybody else,

and stop demanding that I act in my own home!—nobody is virtuous in his own home, the show is only for company!—but if you expect me to mean it—to *mean* it, you damn little fool!—you'd better grow up in a hurry!"

It was not her face that he was seeing, it was the face of the man at whom he wanted and would never be able to throw his deed of this night—but she had always stood as the worshipper, the defender, the agent of that man in his eyes, he had married her for it, so she could serve his purpose now, and he screamed, "Do you know who she was, the woman I laid? It was—"

"No!" she cried. "Jim! I don't have to know!"

"It was Mrs. Rearden! Mrs. Hank Rearden!"

She stepped back. He felt a brief flash of terror--because she was looking at him as if she were seeing that which had to remain unadmitted to himself. She asked, in a dead voice that had the incongruous sound of common sense, "I suppose you will now want us to get divorced?"

He burst out laughing "You goddamn fool! You still mean it! You still want it big and pure! I wouldn't think of divorcing you--and don't go imagining that I'll let you divorce me! You think it's as important as that? Listen, you fool, there isn't a husband who doesn't sleep with other women and there isn't a wife who doesn't know it, but they don't talk about it! I'll lay anybody I please, and you go and do the same, like all those bitches, and keep your mouth shut!"

He saw the sudden, startling sight of a look of hard, unclouded, unfeeling, almost inhuman intelligence in her eyes. "Jim, if I were the kind who did or would, you wouldn't have married me."

"No. I wouldn't have."

"Why did you marry me?"

He felt himself drawn as by a whirlpool, part in relief that the moment of danger was past, part in irresistible defiance of the same danger. "Because you were a cheap, helpless, preposterous little guttersnipe, who'd never have a chance at anything to equal me! Because I thought you'd love me! I thought you'd know that you had to love me!"

"As you are?"

"Without daring to ask what I am! Without reasons! Without putting me on the spot always to live up to reason after reason after reason, like being on some goddamn dress parade to the end of my days!"

"You loved me . . . because I was worthless?"

"Well, what did you think you were?"

"You loved me for being rotten?"

"What else did you have to offer? But you didn't have the humility to appreciate it. I wanted to be generous, I wanted to give you security—what security is there in being loved for one's virtues? The competition's wide open, like a jungle market place, a better person will always come along to beat you! But I—I was willing to love you for your flaws, for your faults and weaknesses, for your ignorance, your crudeness, your vulgarity—and that's safe, you'd have nothing

to fear, nothing to hide, you could be yourself, your real, stinking, sinful, ugly self—everybody's self is a gutter—but you could hold my love, with nothing demanded of you!"

"You wanted me to . . . accept your love . . . as alms?"

"Did you imagine that you could *earn* it? Did you imagine that you could deserve to marry me, you poor little tramp? I used to buy the likes of you for the price of a meal! I wanted you to know, with every step you took, with every mouthful of caviar you swallowed, that you owed it all to *me*, that you had nothing and were nothing and could never hope to equal, deserve or repay!"

"I . . . tried . . . to deserve it."

"Of what use would you be to me if you had?"

"You didn't want me to?"

"Oh, you goddamn fool!"

"You didn't want me to improve? You didn't want me to rise? You thought me rotten and you wanted me to say rotten?"

"Of what use would you be to me, if you earned it all, and I had to work to hold you, and you could trade elsewhere if you chose?"

"You wanted it to be alms . . . for both of us and from both? You wanted us to be two beggars chained to each other?"

"Yes, you goddamn evangelist! Yes, you goddamned hero worshipper! Yes!"

"You chose me because I was worthless?"

"Yes!"

"You're lying, Jim."

His answer was only a startled glance of astonishment.

"Those girls that you used to buy for the price of a meal, they would have been glad to let their real selves become a gutter, they would have taken your alms and never tried to rise, but you would not marry one of them. You married me, because you knew that I did not accept the gutter, inside or out, that I was struggling to rise and would go on struggling--didn't you?"

"Yes!" he cried.

Then the headlight she had felt rushing upon her, hit its goal—and she screamed in the bright explosion of the impact—she screamed in physical terror, backing away from him.

"What's the matter with you?" he cried, shaking, not daring to see in her eyes the thing she had seen.

She moved her hands in groping gestures, half-waving it away, half-trying to grasp it; when she answered, her words did not quite name it, but they were the only words she could find: "You . . . you're a killer . . . for the sake of killing . . ."

It was too close to the unnamed; shaking with terror, he swung out blindly and struck her in the face.

She fell against the side of an armchair, her head striking the floor, but she raised her head in a moment and looked up at him blankly, without astonishment, as if physical reality were merely taking the form she had expected. A single pear-shaped drop of blood went slithering slowly from the corner of her mouth.

He stood motionless—and for a moment they looked at each other, as if neither dared to move.