

"About a method of taxing the income taxers. All methods of taxation are complex, but this one is very simple, because it's the naked essence of all the others. Let me explain it to you."

She listened. She heard a sparkling voice reciting, in the tone of a dryly meticulous bookkeeper, a report about financial transfers, bank accounts, income-tax returns, as if he were reading the dusty pages of a ledger--a ledger where every entry was made by means of offering his own blood as the collateral to be drained at any moment, at any slip of his bookkeeping pen. As she listened, she kept seeing the perfection of his face--and she kept thinking that this was the head on which the world had placed a price of millions for the purpose of delivering it to the rot of death. . . . The face she had thought too beautiful for the scars of a productive career--she kept thinking ruinably, missing half his words--the face too beautiful to risk. . . . Then it struck her that his physical perfection was only a simple illustration, a childish lesson given to her in crudely obvious terms on the nature of the outer world and on the fate of any human value in a subhuman age: Whatever the justice or the evil of his course, she thought, how could they . . . no! she thought, his course *was* just, and this was the horror of it, that there was no other course for justice to select, that she could not condemn him, that she could neither approve nor utter a word of reproach.

". . . and the names of my customers. Miss Taggart, were chosen slowly, one by one I had to be certain of the nature of their character and career. On my list of restitution, your name was one of the first."

She forced herself to keep her face expressionlessly tight, and she answered only, "I see."

"Your account is one of the last left unpaid. It is here, at the Mulligan Bank, to be claimed by you on the day when you join us."

"I see."

"Your account, however, is not as large as some of the others, even though huge sums were extorted from you by force in the past twelve years. You will find--as it is marked on the copies of your income-tax returns which Mulligan will hand over to you--that I have refunded only those taxes which you paid on the salary you earned as Operating Vice-President, but not the taxes you paid on your income from your Taggart Transcontinental stock. You deserved every penny of that stock, and in the days of your father I would have refunded every penny of your profit--but under your brother's management, Taggart Transcontinental has taken its share of the looting, it has made profits by force, by means of government favors, subsidies, moratoriums, directives. You were not responsible for it, you were, in fact, the greatest victim of that policy--but I refunded only the money which was made by pure productive ability, not the money any part of which was loot taken by force."

"I see."

They had finished their breakfast. Danneskjöld lighted a cigarette and watched her for an instant through the first jet of smoke, as if he knew the violence of the conflict in her mind--then he grinned at Galt and rose to his feet.

"I'll run along," he said. "My wife is waiting for me."

"What?" she gasped.

"My wife," he repeated gaily, as if he had not understood the reason of her shock.

"Who is your wife?"

"Kay Ludlow."

The implications that struck her were more than she could bear to consider. "When . . . when were you married?"

"Four years ago."

"How could you show yourself anywhere long enough to go through a wedding ceremony?"

"We were married here, by Judge Narragansett."

"How can"—she tried to stop, but the words burst involuntarily, in helpless indignant protest, whether against him, fate or the outer world, she could not tell—"how can she live through eleven months of thinking that you, at any moment, might be . . . ?" She did not finish.

He was smiling, but she saw the enormous solemnity of that which he and his wife had needed to earn their right to this kind of smile. "She can live through it, Miss Taggart, because we do not hold the belief that this earth is a realm of misery where man is doomed to destruction. We do not think that tragedy is our natural fate and we do not live in chronic dread of disaster. We do not expect disaster until we have specific reason to expect it—and when we encounter it, we are free to fight it. It is not happiness, but suffering that we consider unnatural. It is not success, but calamity that we regard as the abnormal exception in human life."

Galt accompanied him to the door, then came back, sat down at the table and in a leisurely manner reached for another cup of coffee.

She shot to her feet, as if flung by a jet of pressure breaking a safety valve. "Do you think that I'll ever accept his money?"

He waited until the curving streak of coffee had filled his cup, then glanced up at her and answered. "Yes, I think so."

"Well, I won't! I won't let him risk his life for it!"

"You have no choice about that."

"I have the choice never to claim it!"

"Yes, you have."

"Then it will lie in that bank till doomsday!"

"No, it won't. If you don't claim it, some part of it—a very small part—will be turned over to me in your name."

"In my name? Why?"

"To pay for your room and board."

She stared at him, her look of anger switching to bewilderment, then dropped slowly back on her chair.

He smiled. "How long did you think you were going to stay here, Miss Taggart?" He saw her startled look of helplessness. "You haven't thought of it? I have. You're going to stay here for a month. For the one month of our vacation, like the rest of us. I am not asking for your consent—you did not ask for ours when you came here. You broke our rules, so you'll have to take the consequences. Nobody leaves the valley during this month. I could let you go, of

course, but I won't. There's no rule demanding that I hold you, but by forcing your way here, you've given me the right to any choice I make—and I'm going to hold you simply because I want you here. If, at the end of a month, you decide that you wish to go back, you will be free to do so. Not until then."

She sat straight, the planes of her face relaxed, the shape of her mouth softened by the faint, purposeful suggestion of a smile; it was the dangerous smile of an adversary, but her eyes were coldly brilliant and veiled at once, like the eyes of an adversary who fully intends to fight, but hopes to lose.

"Very well," she said.

"I shall charge you for your room and board—it is against our rules to provide the unearned sustenance of another human being. Some of us have wives and children, but there is a mutual trade involved in that, and a mutual payment"—he glanced at her—"of a kind I am not entitled to collect. So I shall charge you fifty cents a day and you will pay me when you accept the account that lies in your name at the Mulligan Bank. If you don't accept the account, Mulligan will charge your debt against it and he will give me the money when I ask for it."

"I shall comply with your terms," she answered; her voice had the shrewd, confident, deliberating slowness of a trader. "But I shall not permit the use of that money for my debts."

"How else do you propose to comply?"

"I propose to earn my room and board."

"By what means?"

"By working."

"In what capacity?"

"In the capacity of your cook and housemaid."

For the first time, she saw him take the shock of the unexpected, in a manner and with a violence she had not foreseen. It was only an explosion of laughter on his part—but he laughed as if he were hit beyond his defenses, much beyond the immediate meaning of her words; she felt that she had struck his past, tearing loose some memory and meaning of his own which she could not know. He laughed as if he were seeing some distant image, as if he were laughing in its face, as if this were his victory—and hers.

"If you will hire me," she said, her face severely polite, her tone harshly clear, impersonal and businesslike, "I shall cook your meals, clean your house, do your laundry and perform such other duties as are required of a servant—in exchange for my room, board and such money as I will need for some items of clothing. I may be slightly handicapped by my injuries for the next few days, but that will not last and I will be able to do the job fully."

"Is that what you want to do?" he asked.

"That is what I want to do—" she answered, and stopped before she uttered the rest of the answer in her mind: more than anything else in the world.

He was still smiling, it was a smile of amusement, but it was as if amusement could be transmuted into some shining glory. "All right, Miss Taggart," he said, "I'll hire you."