She started as night operator at a small country station. She had to work nights for the first few years, while attending a college of engineering.

James Taggart began his career on the railroad at the same time; he was twenty-one. He started in the Department of Public Relations.

Dagny's rise among the men who operated Taggart Transcontinental was swift and uncontested. She took positions of responsibility because there was no one else to take them. There were a few rare men of talent around her, but they were becoming rarer every year. Her superiors, who held the authority, seemed afraid to exercise it, they spent their time avoiding decisions, so she told people what to do and they did it. At every step of her rise, she did the work long before she was granted the title. It was like advancing through empty rooms. Nobody opposed her, yet nobody approved of her progress.

Her father seemed astonished and proud of her, but he said nothing and there was sadness in his eyes when he looked at her in the office. She was twenty-nine years old when he died. "There has always been a Taggart to run the railroad," was the last thing he said to her. He looked at her with an odd glance: it had the quality of a salute and of compassion, together.

The controlling stock of Taggart Transcontinental was left to James Taggart. He was thirty-four when he became President of the railroad. Dagny had expected the Board of Directors to elect him, but she had never been able to understand why they did it so eagerly. They talked about tradition, the president had always been the eldest son of the Taggart family; they elected James Taggart in the same manner as they refused to walk under a ladder, to propitiate the same kind of fear. They talked about his gift of "making railroads popular," his "good press," his "Washington ability." He seemed unusually skillful at obtaining favors from the Legislature.

Dagny knew nothing about the field of "Washington ability" or what such an ability implied. But it seemed to be necessary, so she dismissed it with the thought that there were many kinds of work which were offensive, yet necessary, such as cleaning sewers; somebody had to do it, and Jim seemed to like it.

She had never aspired to the presidency; the Operating Department was her only concern. When she went out on the line, old railroad men, who hated Jim, said, "There will always be a Taggart to run the railroad," looking at her as her father had looked. She was armed against Jim by the conviction that he was not smart enough to harm the railroad too much and that she would always be able to correct whatever damage he caused.

At sixteen, sitting at her operator's desk, watching the lighted windows of Taggart trains roll past, she had thought that she had entered her kind of world. In the years since, she learned that she hadn't. The adversary she found herself forced to fight was not worth matching or beating; it was not a superior ability which she would have found honor in challenging; it was ineptitude—a gray spread of cotton that seemed soft and shapeless, that could offer no resistance to anything or anybody, yet managed to be a barrier in her way. She stood,

disarmed, before the riddle of what made this possible She could find no answer

It was only in the first few years that she felt herself screaming silently at times, for a glimpse of human ability a single glimpse of clean hard radiant competence She had fits of tortured longing for a friend or an enemy with a mind better than her own But the longing passed She had a job to do She did not have time to feel pain not often

The first step of the policy that James Taggart brought to the railroad was the construction of the San Sebastian Line Many men were responsible for it but to Dagny one name stood written across the venture a name that wiped out all others whenever she saw it It stood across five years of struggle across miles of wasted track across sheets of figures that recorded the losses of Taggart Transcontinental like a red trickle from a wound which would not heal as it stood on the ticker tape of every stock exchange left in the world— as it stood on smokestacks in the red glare of furnaces melting copper—as it stood in scandalous headlines—as it stood on parchment pages recording the nobility of the centuries— as it stood on cards attached to flowers in the boudoirs of women scattered through three continents

The name was Francisco d Anconia

At the age of twenty three when he inherited his fortune Francisco d Anconia had been famous as the copper king of the world Now at thirty six he was famous as the richest man and the most spectacularly worthless playboy on earth He was the last descendant of one of the noblest families of Argentina He owned cattle ranches coffee plantations and most of the copper mines of Chile He owned half of South America and sundry mines scattered through the United States as small change

When Francisco d'Anconia suddenly bought miles of bare mountains in Mexico news leaked out that he had discovered vast deposits of copper He made no effort to sell stock in his venture the stock was begged out of his hands and he merely chose those whom he wished to favor from among the applicants His financial talent was called phenomenal no one had ever beaten him in any transaction— he added to his incredible fortune with every deal he touched and every step he made when he took the trouble to make it Those who censured him most were first to seize the chance of riding on his talent, toward a share of his new wealth James Taggart Orren Boyle and their friends were among the heaviest stockholders of the project which Francisco d Anconia had named the San Sebastian Mines

Dagny was never able to discover what influences prompted James Taggart to build a railroad branch from Texas into the wilderness of San Sebastián It seemed likely that he did not know it himself like a field without a windbreak he seemed open to any current, and the final sum was made by chance A few among the Directors of Taggart Transcontinental objected to the project The company needed all its resources to rebuild the Rio Norte Line, it could not