

like a foreigner who recognized some of the words, but could not connect them into sentences. A young man, with a look of alcoholic insolence, staggered past the group and snapped, chuckling, "Learned your lesson, Rearden?" He did not know what the young rat had meant, but everybody else seemed to know it; they looked shocked and secretly pleased.

Lillian drifted away from him, as if letting him understand that she did not insist upon his literal attendance. He retreated to a corner of the room where no one would see him or notice the direction of his eyes. Then he permitted himself to look at Dagny.

He watched the gray dress, the shifting movement of the soft cloth when she walked, the momentary pauses sculptured by the cloth, the shadows and the light. He saw it as a bluish-gray smoke held shaped for an instant into a long curve that slanted forward to her knee and back to the tip of her sandal. He knew every facet the light would shape if the smoke were ripped away.

He felt a murky, twisting pain: it was jealousy of every man who spoke to her. He had never felt it before; but he felt it here, where everyone had the right to approach her, except himself.

Then, as if a single, sudden blow to his brain blasted a moment's shift of perspective, he felt an immense astonishment at what he was doing here and why. He lost, for that moment, all the days and dogmas of his past; his concepts, his problems, his pain were wiped out, he knew only--as from a great, clear distance--that man exists for the achievement of his desires, and he wondered why he stood here, he wondered who had the right to demand that he waste a single irreplaceable hour of his life, when his only desire was to seize the slender figure in gray and hold her through the length of whatever time there was left for him to exist.

In the next moment, he felt the shudder of recapturing his mind. He felt the tight, contemptuous movement of his lips pressed together in token of the words he cried to himself: You made a contract once, now stick to it. And then he thought suddenly that in business transactions the courts of law did not recognize a contract wherein no valuable consideration had been given by one party to the other. He wondered what made him think of it. The thought seemed irrelevant. He did not pursue it.

James Taggart saw Lillian Rearden drift casually toward him at the one moment when he chanced to be alone in the dim corner between a potted palm and a window. He stopped and waited to let her approach. He could not guess her purpose, but this was the manner which, in the code he understood, meant that he had better hear her.

"How do you like my wedding gift, Jim?" she asked, and laughed at his look of embarrassment. "No, no, don't try to go over the list of things in your apartment, wondering which one the hell it was. It's not in your apartment, it's right here, and it's a non-material gift, darling."

He saw the half-hint of a smile on her face, the look understood among his friends as an invitation to share a secret victory; it was the look, not of having outthought, but of having outsmarted some-

body. He answered cautiously, with a safely pleasant smile, "Your presence is the best gift you could give me."

"My presence, Jim?"

The lines of his face were shock-bound for a moment. He knew what she meant, but he had not expected her to mean it.

She smiled openly. "We both know whose presence is the most valuable one for you tonight—and the unexpected one. Didn't you really think of giving me credit for it? I'm surprised at you. I thought you had a genius for recognizing potential friends."

He would not commit himself; he kept his voice carefully neutral. "Have I failed to appreciate your friendship, Lillian?"

"Now, now, darling, you know what I'm talking about. You didn't expect *him* to come here, you didn't really think that *he* is afraid of you, did you? But to have the others think he is—that's quite an inestimable advantage, isn't it?"

"I'm . . . surprised, Lillian."

"Shouldn't you say 'impressed'? Your guests are quite impressed. I can practically hear them thinking all over the room. Most of them are thinking: 'If *he* has to seek terms with Jim Taggart, we'd better toe the line.' And a few are thinking: 'If *he's* afraid, we'll get away with much more.' This is as you want it, of course—and I wouldn't think of spoiling your triumph—but you and I are the only ones who know that you didn't achieve it single-handed."

He did not smile; he asked, his face blank, his voice smooth, but with a carefully measured hint of harshness, "What's your angle?"

She laughed. "Essentially—the same as yours, Jim. But speaking practically—none at all. It's just a favor I've done you, and I need no favor in return. Don't worry. I'm not lobbying for any special interests, I'm not after squeezing some particular directives out of Mr. Mouch, I'm not even after a diamond tiara from you. Unless, of course, it's a tiara of a non-material order, such as your appreciation."

He looked straight at her for the first time, his eyes narrowed, his face relaxed to the same half-smile as hers, suggesting the expression which, for both of them, meant that they felt at home with each other: an expression of contempt. "You know that I have always admired you, Lillian, as one of the truly superior women."

"I'm aware of it." There was the faintest coating of mockery spread, like shellac, over the smooth notes of her voice.

He was studying her insolently. "You must forgive me if I think that some curiosity is permissible between friends," he said, with no tone of apology. "I'm wondering from what angle you contemplate the possibility of certain financial burdens—or losses—which affect your own personal interests."

She shrugged. "From the angle of a horsewoman, darling. If you had the most powerful horse in the world, you would keep it bridled down to the gait required to carry you in comfort, even though this meant the sacrifice of its full capacity, even though its top speed would never be seen and its great power would be wasted. You would do it—because if you let the horse go full blast, it would throw