

misses a target, made him look like a hero of Western legend—and Rearden watched him with detached, impersonal pleasure, as if the battle of the mills were not his any longer, but he could still enjoy the sight of the competence and certainty with which men of that distant age had once combatted evil.

The beam of a roving searchlight struck Rearden's face, and when the light swept past he saw the man on the roof leaning down, as if peering in his direction. The man waved to someone to replace him, then vanished abruptly from his post.

Rearden hurried on through the short stretch of darkness ahead—but then, from the side, from the crack of an alley, he heard a drunken voice yell, "There he is!" and whirled to see two beefy figures advancing upon him. He saw a leering, mindless face with a mouth hung loose in a joyless chuckle, and a club in a rising fist—he heard the sound of running steps approaching from another direction, he attempted to turn his head, then the club crashed down on his skull from behind—and in the moment of splitting darkness, when he wavered, refusing to believe it, then felt himself going down, he felt a strong, protective arm seizing him and breaking his fall, he heard a gun exploding an inch above his ear, then another explosion from the same gun in the same second, but it seemed faint and distant, as if he had fallen down a shaft.

His first awareness, when he opened his eyes, was a sense of profound serenity. Then he saw that he was lying on a couch in a modern, sternly gracious room—then he realized that it was his office and that the two men standing beside him were the mills' doctor and the superintendent. He felt a distant pain in his head, which would have been violent had he cared to notice it, and he felt a strip of tape across his hair, on the side of his head. The sense of serenity was the knowledge that he was free.

The meaning of his bandage and the meaning of his office were not to be accepted or to exist, together—it was not a combination for men to live with—this was not his battle any longer, nor his job, nor his business.

"I think I'll be all right, Doctor," he said, raising his head.

"Yes, Mr. Rearden, fortunately." The doctor was looking at him as if still unable to believe that this had happened to Hank Rearden inside his own mills; the doctor's voice was tense with angry loyalty and indignation. "Nothing serious, just a scalp wound and a slight concussion. But you must take it easy and allow yourself to rest."

"I will," said Rearden firmly.

"It's all over," said the superintendent, waying at the mills beyond the window. "We've got the bastards beaten and on the run. You don't have to worry, Mr. Rearden. It's all over."

"It is," said Rearden. "There must be a lot of work left for you to do, Doctor."

"Oh yes! I never thought I'd live to see the day when—"

"I know. Go ahead, take care of it. I'll be all right."

"Yes, Mr. Rearden."

"I'll take care of the place," said the superintendent, as the doctor

hurried out. "Everything's under control, Mr. Rearden. But it was the dirtiest—"

"I know," said Rearden. "Who was it that saved my life? Somebody grabbed me as I fell, and fired at the thugs."

"Did he! Straight at their faces. Blew their heads off. That was that new furnace foreman of ours. Been here two months. Best man I've ever had. He's the one who got wise to what the gravy boys were planning and warned me, this afternoon. Told me to arm our men, as many as we could. We got no help from the police or the state troopers, they dodged all over the place with the fanciest delays and excuses I ever heard of, it was all fixed in advance, the goons weren't expecting any armed resistance. It was that furnace foreman—Frank Adams is his name—who organized our defense, ran the whole battle, and stood on a roof, picking off the scum that came too close to the gate. Boy, what a marksman! I shudder to think how many of our lives he saved tonight. Those bastards were out for blood, Mr. Rearden."

"I'd like to see him."

"He's waiting somewhere outside. It's he who brought you here, and he asked permission to speak to you, when possible."

"Send him in. Then go back out there, take charge, finish the job."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Rearden?"

"No, nothing else."

He lay still, alone in the silence of his office. He knew that the meaning of his mills had ceased to exist, and the fullness of the knowledge left no room for the pain of regretting an illusion. He had seen, in a final image, the soul and essence of his enemies: the mindless face of the thug with the club. It was not the face itself that made him draw back in horror, but the professors, the philosophers, the moralists, the mystics who had released that face upon the world.

He felt a peculiar cleanliness. It was made of pride and of love for this earth, this earth which was his, not theirs. It was the feeling which had moved him through his life, the feeling which some among men know in their youth, then betray, but which *he* had never betrayed and had carried within him as a battered, attacked, unidentified, but living motor—the feeling which he could now experience in its full, uncontested purity: the sense of his own superlative value and the superlative value of his life. It was the final certainty that his life was his, to be lived with no bondage to evil, and that that bondage had never been necessary. It was the radiant serenity of knowing that he was free of fear, of pain, of guilt.

If it's true, he thought, that there are avengers who are working for the deliverance of men like me, let them see me now, let them tell me their secret, let them claim me, let them—"Come in!" he said aloud, in answer to the knock on his door.

The door opened and he lay still. The man standing on the threshold, with disheveled hair, a soot-streaked face and furnace-smudged arms, dressed in scorched overalls and bloodstained shirt, standing as if he wore a cape waving behind him in the wind, was Francisco d'Anconia.