

world was gone, if his mills had ceased to serve his values—then the mills were only a pile of dead scrap, to be left to crumble, the sooner the better—to be left, not as an act of treason, but as an act of loyalty to their actual meaning.

The mills were still a mile ahead when a small spurt of flame caught his sudden attention. Among all the shades of fire in the vast spread of structures, he could tell the abnormal and the out-of-place: this one was too raw a shade of yellow and it was darting from a spot where no fire had reason to be, from a structure by the gate of the main entrance.

In the next instant, he heard the dry crack of a gunshot, then three answering cracks in swift succession, like an angry hand slapping a sudden assailant.

Then the black mass barring the road in the distance took shape, it was not mere darkness and it did not recede as he came closer—it was a mob squirming at the main gate, trying to storm the mills.

He had time to distinguish waving arms, some with clubs, some with crowbars, some with rifles—the yellow flames of burning wood gushing from the window of the gatekeeper's office—the blue cracks of gunfire darting out of the mob and the answers spitting from the roof of the structures—he had time to see a human figure twisting backward and falling from the top of a car—then he sent his wheels into a shrieking curve, turning into the darkness of a side road.

He was going at the rate of sixty miles an hour down the ruts of an unpaved soil, toward the eastern gate of the mills—and the gate was in sight when the impact of tires on a gully threw the car off the road, to the edge of a ravine where an ancient slag heap lay at the bottom. With the weight of his chest and elbow on the wheel, pitted against two tons of speeding metal, the curve of his body forced the curve of the car to complete its screaming half-circle sweeping it back onto the road and into the control of his hands. It had taken one instant, but in the next his foot went down on the brake, tearing the engine to a stop: for in the moment when his headlights had swept the ravine, he had glimpsed an oblong shape, darker than the gray of the weeds on the slope, and it had seemed to him that a brief white blur had been a human hand waving for help.

Throwing off his overcoat, he went hurrying down the side of the ravine, lumps of earth giving way under his feet, he went catching at the dried coils of brush, half-running, half-sliding toward the long black form which he could now distinguish to be a human body. A scum of cotton was swimming against the moon, he could see the white of a hand and the shape of an arm lying stretched in the weeds, but the body lay still, with no sign of motion.

"Mr. Rearden . . ."

It was a whisper struggling to be a cry, it was the terrible sound of eagerness fighting against a voice that could be nothing but a moan of pain.

He did not know which came first, it felt like a single shock: his thought that the voice was familiar, a ray of moonlight breaking through the cotton, the movement of falling down on his knees by the white oval of a face, and the recognition. It was the Wet Nurse.

He felt the boy's hand clutching his with the abnormal strength of agony, while he was noticing the tortured lines of the face, the drained lips, the glazing eyes and the thin, dark trickle from a small, black hole in too wrong, too close a spot on the left side of the boy's chest.

"Mr. Rearden . . . I wanted to stop them . . . I wanted to save you . . ."

"What happened to you, kid?"

"They shot me, so I wouldn't talk . . . I wanted to prevent"—his hand fumbled toward the red glare in the sky—"what they're doing . . . I was too late, but I've tried to . . . I've tried . . . And . . . I'm still able . . . to talk . . . Listen, they—"

"You need help. Let's get you to a hospital and—"

"No! Wait! I . . . I don't think I have much time left to me and . . . and I've got to tell you . . . Listen, that riot . . . it's staged . . . on orders from Washington . . . It's not workers . . . not *your* workers . . . it's those new boys of theirs and . . . and a lot of goons hired on the outside . . . Don't believe a word they'll tell you about it . . . It's a frame-up . . . it's *their* rotten kind of frame-up . . ."

There was a desperate intensity in the boy's face, the intensity of a crusader's battle, his voice seemed to gain a sound of life from some fuel burning in broken spurts within him—and Rearden knew that the greatest assistance he could now render was to listen.

"They . . . they've got a Steel Unification Plan ready . . . and they need an excuse for it . . . because they know that the country won't take it . . . and you won't stand for it . . . They're afraid this one's going to be too much for everybody . . . it's just a plan to skin you alive, that's all . . . So they want to make it look like you're starving your workers . . . and the workers are running amuck and you're unable to control them . . . and the government's got to step in for your own protection and for public safety . . . That's going to be their pitch, Mr. Rearden . . ."

Rearden was noticing the torn flesh of the boy's hands, the drying mud of blood and dust on his palms and his clothing, gray patches of dust on knees and stomach, scrambled with the needles of burs. In the intermittent fits of moonlight, he could see the trail of flattened weeds and glistening smears going off into the darkness below. He dreaded to think how far the boy had crawled and for how long.

"They didn't want you to be here tonight, Mr. Rearden . . . They didn't want you to see their 'People's rebellion' . . . Afterwards . . . you know how they screw up the evidence . . . there won't be a straight story to get anywhere . . . and they hope to fool the country . . . and you . . . that they're acting to protect you from violence . . . Don't let them get away with it, Mr. Rearden! . . . Tell the country . . . tell the people . . . tell the newspapers . . . Tell them that I told you . . . it's under oath . . . I swear it . . . that makes it legal, doesn't it? . . . doesn't it? . . . that gives you a chance?"

Rearden pressed the boy's hand in his. "Thank you, kid."

"I . . . I'm sorry I'm late, Mr. Rearden, but . . . but they didn't let me in on it till the last minute . . . till just before it started . . . They called me in on a . . . a strategy conference . . . there was a