

"I didn't mean . . . that is, what I meant was—"

"Don't look so startled, James. If I land in New York and hear that there's a party going on, I wouldn't miss it, would I? You've always said that I'm just a party hound."

The group was watching them.

"I'm delighted to see you, of course," Taggart said cautiously, then added belligerently, to balance it. "But if you think you're going to—"

Francisco would not pick up the threat; he let Taggart's sentence slide into mid-air and stop, then asked politely, "If I think what?"

"You understand me very well."

"Yes. I do. Shall I tell you what I think?"

"This is hardly the moment for any—"

"I think you should present me to your bride, James. Your manners have never been glued to you too solidly—you always lose them in an emergency, and that's the time when one needs them most."

Turning to escort him toward Cherryl, Taggart caught the faint sound that came from Bertram Scudder; it was an unborn chuckle. Taggart knew that the men who had crawled at his feet a moment ago, whose hatred for Francisco d'Anconia was, perhaps, greater than his own, were enjoying the spectacle none the less. The implications of this knowledge were among the things he did not care to name.

Francisco bowed to Cherryl and offered his best wishes, as if she were the bride of a royal heir. Watching nervously, Taggart felt relief—and a touch of nameless resentment, which, if named, would have told him he wished the occasion deserved the grandeur that Francisco's manner gave it for a moment.

He was afraid to remain by Francisco's side and afraid to let him loose among the guests. He backed a few tentative steps away, but Francisco followed him, smiling.

"You didn't think I'd want to miss your wedding, James—when you're my childhood friend and best stockholder?"

"What?" gasped Taggart, and regretted it: the sound was a confession of panic.

Francisco did not seem to take note of it; he said, his voice gaily innocent, "Oh, but of course I know it. I know the stooge behind the stooge behind every name on the list of the stockholders of d'Anconia Copper. It's surprising how many men by the name of Smith and Gomez are rich enough to own big chunks of the richest corporation in the world—so you can't blame me if I was curious to learn what distinguished persons I actually have among my minority stockholders. I seem to be popular with an astonishing collection of public figures from all over the world—from People's States where you wouldn't think there's any money left at all."

Taggart said dryly, frowning, "There are many reasons—business reasons—why it is sometimes advisable not to make one's investments directly."

"One reason is that a man doesn't want people to know he's rich. Another is that he doesn't want them to learn how he got that way."

"I don't know what you mean or why you should object."

"Oh, I don't object at all. I appreciate it. A great many investors—the old-fashioned sort—dropped me after the San Sebastián Mines. It scared them away. But the modern ones had more faith in me and acted as they always do—on faith. I can't tell you how thoroughly I appreciate it."

Taggart wished Francisco would not talk so loudly; he wished people would not gather around them. "You have been doing extremely well," he said, in the safe tone of a business compliment.

"Yes, haven't I? It's wonderful how the stock of d'Anconia Copper has risen within the last year. But I don't think I should be too conceited about it—there's not much competition left in the world, there's no place to invest one's money, if one happens to get rich quickly, and here's d'Anconia Copper, the oldest company on earth, the one that's been the safest bet for centuries. Just think of what it managed to survive through the ages. So if you people have decided that it's the best place for your hidden money, that it can't be beaten, that it would take a most unusual kind of man to destroy d'Anconia Copper—you were right."

"Well, I hear it said that you've begun to take your responsibilities seriously and that you've settled down to business at last. They say you've been working very hard."

"Oh, has anybody noticed that? It was the old-fashioned investors who made it a point to watch what the president of a company was doing. The modern investors don't find knowledge necessary. I don't think they ever look into my activities."

Taggart smiled. "They look at the ticker tape of the stock exchange. That tells the whole story, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it does--in the long run."

"I must say I'm glad that you haven't been much of a party hound this past year. The results show in your work."

"Do they? Well, no, not quite yet."

"I suppose," said Taggart, in the cautious tone of an indirect question, "that I should feel flattered you chose to come to this party."

"Oh, but I had to come. I thought you were expecting me."

"Why, no, I wasn't . . . that is, I mean—"

"You should have expected me, James. This is the great, formal, nose-counting event, where the victims come in order to show how safe it is to destroy them, and the destroyers form pacts of eternal friendship, which lasts for three months. I don't know exactly which group I belong to, but I had to come and be counted, didn't I?"

"What in hell do you think you're saying?" Taggart cried furiously, seeing the tension on the faces around them.

"Be careful, James. If you try to pretend that you don't understand me, I'm going to make it much clearer."

"If you think it's proper to utter such—"

"I think it's funny. There was a time when men were afraid that somebody would reveal some secret of theirs that was unknown to their fellows. Nowadays, they're afraid that somebody will name what everybody knows. Have you practical people ever thought that that's all it would take to blast your whole, big, complex structure,