

tion. A practical man. Boy, are you a practical man! Whatever else I don't quite get about you, I'm sure of that. Now aren't you?"

"Practical? Yes."

"Well, so am I. We can talk straight. We can put our cards on the table. Whatever it is you're after, I'm offering you a deal."

"I'm always open to a deal."

"I knew it!" cried Mr. Thompson triumphantly, slamming his fist down on his own knee. "I told them so—all those fool intellectual theorizers, like Wesley!"

"I'm always open to a deal—with anyone who has a value to offer me."

Mr. Thompson could not tell what made him miss a beat before he answered, "Well, write your own ticket, brother! Write your own ticket!"

"What have you got to offer me?"

"Why—anything."

"Such as?"

"Anything you name. Have you heard our short-wave broadcasts to you?"

"Yes."

"We said we'll meet your terms, any terms. We meant it."

"Have you heard me say on the radio that I have no terms to bargain about? I meant it."

"Oh, but look, you misunderstood us! You thought we'd fight you. But we won't. We're not that rigid. We're willing to consider any idea. Why didn't you answer our calls and come to a conference?"

"Why should I?"

"Because . . . because we wanted to speak to you in the name of the country."

"I don't recognize your right to speak in the name of the country."

"Now look here, I'm not used to . . . Well, okay, won't you just give me a hearing? Won't you listen?"

"I'm listening."

"The country is in a terrible state. People are starving and giving up, the economy is falling to pieces, nobody is producing any longer. We don't know what to do about it. You do. You know how to make things work. Okay, we're ready to give in. We want you to tell us what to do."

"I told you what to do."

"What?"

"Get out of the way."

"That's impossible! That's fantastic! That's out of the question!"

"You see? I told you we had nothing to discuss."

"Now, wait! Wait! Don't go to extremes! There's always a middle ground. You can't have everything. We aren't . . . people aren't ready for it. You can't expect us to ditch the machinery of State. We've got to preserve the system. But we're willing to amend it. We'll modify it any way you wish. We're not stubborn, theoretical dogmatists—we're flexible. We'll do anything you say. We'll give you a free hand. We'll cooperate. We'll compromise. We'll split fifty-fifty. We'll keep the sphere of politics and give you total power over the

phere of economics. We'll turn the production of the country over to you, we'll make you a present of the entire economy. You'll run it any way you wish, you'll give the orders, you'll issue the directives—and you'll have the organized power of the State at your command to enforce your decisions. We'll stand ready to obey you, all of us, from me on down. In the field of production, we'll do whatever you say. You'll be—you'll be the Economic Dictator of the nation!"

Galt burst out laughing.

It was the simple amusement of the laughter that shocked Mr. Thompson. "What's the matter with you?"

"So that's your idea of a compromise, is it?"

"What's the . . . ? Don't sit there grinning like that! . . . I don't think you understood me. I'm offering you *Wesley Mouch's* job—and there's nothing bigger that anyone could offer you! . . . You'll be free to do anything you wish. If you don't like controls—repeal them. If you want higher profits and lower wages—decree them. If you want special privileges for the big tycoons—grant them. If you don't like labor unions—dissolve them. If you want a free economy—order people to be free! Play it any way you please. But get things going. Get the country organized. Make people work again. Make them produce. Bring back your own men—the men of brains. Lead us to a peaceful, scientific, industrial age and to prosperity."

"At the point of a gun?"

"Now look, I . . . Now what's so damn funny about it?"

"Will you tell me just one thing: if you're able to pretend that you haven't heard a word I said on the radio, what makes you think I'd be willing to pretend that I haven't said it?"

"I don't know what you mean! I—"

"Skip it. It was just a rhetorical question. The first part of it answers the second."

"Huh?"

"I don't play your kind of games, brother—if you want a translation."

"Do you mean that you're refusing my offer?"

"I am."

"But why?"

"It took me three hours on the radio to tell you why."

"Oh, that's just theory! I'm talking business. I'm offering you the greatest job in the world. Will you tell me what's wrong with it?"

"What I told you, in three hours, was that it won't work."

"You can make it work."

"How?"

Mr. Thompson spread his hands out. "I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't come to you. It's for you to figure out. You're the industrial genius. You can solve anything."

"I said it can't be done."

"You could do it."

"How?"

"Somehow." He heard Galt's chuckle, and added. "Why not? Just tell me why not?"

"Okay, I'll tell you. You want me to be the Economic Dictator?"

"Yes!"

"And you'll obey any order I give?"

"Implicitly!"

"Then start by abolishing all income taxes."

"Oh, no!" screamed Mr. Thompson, leaping to his feet. "We couldn't do that! That's . . . that's not the field of production. That's the field of distribution. How would we pay government employees?"

"Fire your government employees."

"Oh, no! *That's* politics! That's not economics! You can't interfere with politics! You can't have everything!"

Galt crossed his legs on the hassock, stretching himself more comfortably in the brocaded armchair. "Want to continue the discussion? Or do you get the point?"

"I only—" He stopped.

"Are you satisfied that *I* got the point?"

"Look," said Mr. Thompson placatingly, resuming the edge of his seat. "I don't want to argue. I'm no good at debates. I'm a man of action. Time is short. All I know is that you've got a mind. Just the sort of mind we need. You can do anything. You could make things work if you *wanted* to."

"All right, put it your own way: I don't want to. I don't want to be an Economic Dictator, not even long enough to issue that order for people to be free—which any rational human being would throw back in my face, because he'd know that his rights are not to be held, given or received by your permission or mine."

"Tell me," said Mr. Thompson, looking at him reflectively, "what is it you're after?"

"I told you on the radio."

"I don't get it. You said that you're out for your own selfish interest—and *that*, I can understand. But what can you possibly want in the future that you couldn't get right now, from us, handed down to you on a platter? I thought you were an egoist—and a practical man I offer you a blank check on anything you wish—and you tell me that you don't want it. Why?"

"Because there are no funds behind your blank check."

"What?"

"Because you have no value to offer me."

"I can offer you anything you can ask. Just name it."

"You name it."

"Well, you talked a lot about wealth. If it's money that you want—you couldn't make in three lifetimes what I can hand over to you in a minute, this minute, cash on the barrel. Want a billion dollars—a cool, neat billion dollars?"

"Which *I'll* have to produce, for you to give me?"

"No, I mean straight out of the public treasury, in fresh, new bills . . . or . . . or even in gold, if you prefer."

"What will it buy me?"

"Oh, look, when the country gets back on its feet—"

"When *I* put it back on its feet?"

"Well, if what you want is to run things your own way, if it's power that you're after, I'll guarantee you that every man, woman