

tion of time before our unified teamwork puts every railroad in the country back on its feet. The Plan, I'm in a position to assure you, would work as successfully for any other industry."

"No doubt about that," said Rearden, and turned to Mouch. "Why do you ask the stooge to waste my time? What has the Railroad Unification Plan to do with me?"

"But, Mr. Rearden," cried Mouch with desperate cheerfulness, "that's the pattern we're to follow! That's what we called you here to discuss!"

"What?"

"The Steel Unification Plan!"

There was an instant of silence, as of breaths drawn after a plunge. Rearden sat looking at them with a glance that seemed to be a glance of interest.

"In view of the critical plight of the steel industry," said Mouch with a sudden rush, as if not to give himself time to know what made him uneasy about the nature of Rearden's glance, "and since steel is the most vitally, crucially basic commodity, the foundation of our entire industrial structure, drastic measures must be taken to preserve the country's steel-making facilities, equipment and plant." The tone and impetus of public speaking carried him that far and no farther. "With this objective in view, our Plan is . . . our Plan is . . ."

"Our Plan is really very simple," said Tinky Holloway, striving to prove it by the gaily bouncing simplicity of his voice. "We'll lift all restrictions from the production of steel and every company will produce all it can, according to its ability. But to avoid the waste and danger of dog-eat-dog competition, all the companies will deposit their gross earnings into a common pool, to be known as the Steel Unification Pool, in charge of a special Board. At the end of the year, the Board will distribute these earnings by totaling the nation's steel output and dividing it by the number of open-hearth furnaces in existence, thus arriving at an average which will be fair to all—and every company will be paid according to its need. The preservation of its furnaces being its basic need, every company will be paid according to the number of furnaces it owns."

He stopped, waited, then added, "That's it, Mr. Rearden," and getting no answer, said, "Oh, there's a lot of wrinkles to be ironed out, but . . . but that's it."

Whatever reaction they had expected, it was not the one they saw. Rearden leaned back in his chair, his eyes attentive, but fixed on space, as if looking at a not too distant distance, then he asked, with an odd note of quietly impersonal amusement, "Will you tell me just one thing, boys, what is it you're counting on?"

He knew that they understood. He saw, on their faces, that stubbornly evasive look which he had once thought to be the look of a liar cheating a victim, but which he now knew to be worse: the look of a man cheating himself of his own consciousness. They did not answer. They remained silent, as if struggling, not to make him forget his question, but to make themselves forget that they had heard it.

"It's a sound, practical Plan!" snapped James Taggart unexpect-

edly, with an angry edge of sudden animation in his voice. "It will work! It has to work! We want it to work!"

No one answered him.

"Mr. Rearden . . . ?" said Holloway timidly.

"Well, let me see," said Rearden. "Orren Boyle's Associated Steel owns 60 open-hearth furnaces, one-third of them standing idle and the rest producing an average of 300 tons of steel per furnace per day. I own 20 open-hearth furnaces, working at capacity, producing 750 tons of Rearden Metal per furnace per day. So we own 80 'pooled' furnaces with a 'pooled' output of 27,000 tons, which makes an average of 337.5 tons per furnace. Each day of the year, I producing 15,000 tons, will be paid for 6,750 tons. Boyle, producing 12,000 tons, will be paid for 20,250 tons. Never mind the other members of the pool, they won't change the scale, except to bring the average still lower, most of them doing worse than Boyle, none of them producing as much as I. Now how long do you expect me to last under your Plan?"

There was no answer, then Lawson cried suddenly, blindly, righteously, "In time of national peril, it is your duty to serve, suffer and work for the salvation of the country!"

"I don't see why pumping my earnings into Orren Boyle's pocket is going to save the country."

"You have to make certain sacrifices to the public welfare!"

"I don't see why Orren Boyle is more 'the public' than I am."

"Oh, it's not a question of Mr. Boyle at all! It's much wider than any one person. It's a matter of preserving the country's natural resources—such as factories—and saving the whole of the nation's industrial plant. We cannot permit the ruin of an establishment as vast as Mr. Boyle's. The country needs it."

"I think," said Rearden slowly, "that the country needs me much more than it needs Orren Boyle."

"But of course!" cried Lawson with startled enthusiasm. "The country needs you, Mr. Rearden! You do realize that, don't you?"

But Lawson's avid pleasure at the familiar formula of self-immolation, vanished abruptly at the sound of Rearden's voice, a cold, trader's voice answering: "I do."

"It's not Boyle alone who's involved," said Holloway pleadingly. "The country's economy would not be able to stand a major dislocation at the present moment. There are thousands of Boyle's workers, suppliers and customers. What would happen to them if Associated Steel went bankrupt?"

"What will happen to the thousands of my workers, suppliers and customers when I go bankrupt?"

"You, Mr. Rearden?" said Holloway incredulously. "But you're the richest, safest and strongest industrialist in the country at this moment!"

"What about the moment after next?"

"Uh?"

"How long do you expect me to be able to produce at a loss?"

"Oh, Mr. Rearden, I have complete faith in you!"

"To hell with your faith! How do you expect me to do it?"

"You'll manage!"

"How?"

There was no answer.

"We can't theorize about the future," cried Wesley Mouch, "when there's an immediate national collapse to avoid! We've got to save the country's economy! We've got to do something!" Rearden's imperturbable glance of curiosity drove him to heedlessness. "If you don't like it, do you have a better solution to offer?"

"Sure," said Rearden easily. "If it's production that you want, then get out of the way, junk all of your damn regulations, let Orren Boyle go broke, let me buy the plant of Associated Steel—and it will be pouring a thousand tons a day from every one of its sixty furnaces."

"Oh, but . . . but we couldn't!" gasped Mouch. "That would be monopoly!"

Rearden chuckled. "Okay," he said indifferently, "then let my mills superintendent buy it. He'll do a better job than Boyle."

"Oh, but that would be letting the strong have an advantage over the weak! We couldn't do that!"

"Then don't talk about saving the country's economy."

"All we want is—" He stopped.

"All you want is production without men who're able to produce, isn't it?"

"That . . . that's theory. That's just a theoretical extreme. All we want is a temporary adjustment."

"You've been making those temporary adjustments for years. Don't you see that you've run out of time?"

"That's just theo . . ." His voice trailed off and stopped.

"Well, now, look here," said Holloway cautiously, "it's not as if Mr. Boyle were actually . . . weak. Mr. Boyle is an extremely able man. It's just that he's suffered some unfortunate reverses, quite beyond his control. He had invested large sums in a public-spirited project to assist the undeveloped peoples of South America, and that copper crash of theirs has dealt him a severe financial blow. So it's only a matter of giving him a chance to recover, a helping hand to bridge the gap, a bit of temporary assistance, nothing more. All we have to do is just equalize the sacrifice—then everybody will recover and prosper."

"You've been equalizing sacrifice for over a hundred"—he stopped—"for thousands of years," said Rearden slowly. "Don't you see that you're at the end of the road?"

"That's just theory!" snapped Wesley Mouch.

Rearden smiled. "I know your practice," he said softly. "It's your theory that I'm trying to understand."

He knew that the specific reason behind the Plan was Orren Boyle; he knew that the working of an intricate mechanism, operated by pull, threat, pressure, blackmail—a mechanism like an irrational adding machine run amuck and throwing up any chance sum at the whim of any moment—had happened to add up to Boyle's pressure upon these men to extort for him this last piece of plunder. He knew also that Boyle was not the cause of it or the essential to consider,