

*privilege of strength, but I—I have the right of weakness! That's a moral absolute! Don't you know it! Don't you? Don't you?"*

His glance was now like the hands of a man hanging over an abyss, groping frantically for the slightest fissure of doubt, but slipping on the clean, polished rock of her face.

"You bastard," she said evenly, without emotion, since the words were not addressed to anything human.

It seemed to her that she saw him fall into the abyss—even though there was nothing to see in his face except the look of a con man whose trick has not worked.

There was no reason to feel more revulsion than usual, she thought; he had merely uttered the things which were preached, heard and accepted everywhere; but this creed was usually expounded in the third person, and Jim had had the open effrontery to expound it in the first. She wondered whether people accepted the doctrine of sacrifice provided its recipients did not identify the nature of their own claims and actions.

She turned to leave.

"No! No! Wait!" he cried, leaping to his feet, with a glance at his wrist watch. "It's time now! There's a particular news broadcast that I want you to hear!"

She stopped, held by curiosity.

He pressed the switch of the radio, watching her face openly, intently, almost insolently. His eyes had a look of fear and of oddly lecherous anticipation.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the voice of the radio speaker leaped forth abruptly; it had a tone of panic. "News of a shocking development has just reached us from Santiago, Chile!"

She saw the jerk of Taggart's head and a sudden anxiety in his bewildered frown, as if something about the words and voice were not what he had expected.

"A special session of the legislature of the People's State of Chile had been called for ten o'clock this morning, to pass an act of utmost importance to the people of Chile, Argentina and other South American People's States. In line with the enlightened policy of Señor Ramirez, the new Head of the Chilean State—who came to power on the moral slogan that man is his brother's keeper—the legislature was to nationalize the Chilean properties of d'Anconia Copper, thus opening the way for the People's State of Argentina to nationalize the rest of the d'Anconia properties the world over. This, however, was known only to a very few of the top-level leaders of both nations. The measure had been kept secret in order to avoid debate and reactionary opposition. The seizure of the multibillion dollar d'Anconia Copper was to come as a munificent surprise to the country.

"On the stroke of ten, in the exact moment when the chairman's gavel struck the rostrum, opening the session—almost as if the gavel's blow had set it off—the sound of a tremendous explosion rocked the hall, shattering the glass of its windows. It came from the harbor, a few streets away—and when the legislators rushed to the windows, they saw a long column of flame where once there had risen the

familiar silhouette of the ore docks of d'Anconia Copper. The ore docks had been blown to bits.

"The chairman averted panic and called the session to order. The act of nationalization was read to the assembly, to the sound of fire-alarm sirens and distant cries. It was a gray morning, dark with rain clouds, the explosion had broken an electric transmitter—so that the assembly voted on the measure by the light of candles, while the red glow of the fire kept sweeping over the great vaulted ceiling above their heads.

"But more terrible a shock came later, when the legislators called a hasty recess to announce to the nation the good news that the people now owned d'Anconia Copper. While they were voting, word had come from the closest and farthest points of the globe that there was no d'Anconia Copper left on earth. Ladies and gentlemen, not anywhere. In that same instant, on the stroke of ten, by an infernal marvel of synchronization, every property of d'Anconia Copper on the face of the globe, from Chile to Siam to Spain to Pottsville, Montana, had been blown up and swept away.

"The d'Anconia workers everywhere had been handed their last pay checks, in cash, at nine A.M., and by nine-thirty had been moved off the premises. The ore docks, the smelters, the laboratories, the office buildings were demolished. Nothing was left of the d'Anconia ore ships which had been in port—and only lifeboats carrying the crews were left of those ships which had been at sea. As to the d'Anconia mines, some were buried under tons of blasted rock, while others were found not to be worth the price of blasting. An astounding number of these mines, as reports pouring in seem to indicate, had continued to be run, even though exhausted years ago.

"Among the thousands of d'Anconia employees, the police have found no one with any knowledge of how this monstrous plot had been conceived, organized and carried out. But the cream of the d'Anconia staff are not here any longer. The most efficient of the executives, mineralogists, engineers, superintendents have vanished—all the men upon whom the People's State had been counting to carry on the work and cushion the process of readjustment. The most able—*correction* the most selfish—of the men are gone. Reports from the various banks indicate that there are no d'Anconia accounts left anywhere; the money has been spent down to the last penny.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the d'Anconia fortune—the greatest fortune on earth, the legendary fortune of the centuries—has ceased to exist. In place of the golden dawn of a new age, the People's States of Chile and Argentina are left with a pile of rubble and hordes of unemployed on their hands.

"No clue has been found to the fate or the whereabouts of Señor Francisco d'Anconia. He has vanished, leaving nothing behind him, not even a message of farewell."

Thank you, my darling—thank you in the name of the last of us, even if you will not hear it and will not care to hear . . . It was not a sentence, but the silent emotion of prayer in her mind, addressed to the laughing face of a boy she had known at sixteen.