

He would think of it later, he thought; one moves step by step and one must keep moving. For the moment, with an unnatural clarity, with a brutal simplification that made it almost easy, his consciousness contained nothing but one thought: It must not stop me. The sentence hung alone, with no past and no future. He did not think of what it was that must not stop him, or why this sentence was such a crucial absolute. It held him and he obeyed. He went step by step. He completed his schedule of appointments, as scheduled.

It was late when his last caller departed and he came out of his office. The rest of his staff had gone home. Miss Ives sat alone at her desk in an empty room. She sat straight and stiff, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. Her head was not lowered, but held rigidly level, and her face seemed frozen. Tears were running down her cheeks, with no sound, with no facial movement, against her resistance, beyond control.

She saw him and said dryly, guiltily, in apology. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rearden," not attempting the futile pretense of hiding her face.

He approached her. "Thank you," he said gently.

She looked up at him, astonished.

He smiled. "But don't you think you're underestimating me, Gwen? Isn't it too soon to cry over me?"

"I could have taken the rest of it," she whispered, "but they"—she pointed at the newspapers on her desk—"they're calling it a victory for anti-greed."

He laughed aloud. "I can see where such a distortion of the English language would make you furious," he said. "But what else?"

As she looked at him, her mouth relaxed a little. The victim whom she could not protect was her only point of reassurance in a world dissolving around her.

He moved his hand gently across her forehead; it was an unusual break of formality for him, and a silent acknowledgment of the things at which he had not laughed. "Go home, Gwen. I won't need you tonight. I'm going home myself in just a little while. No, I don't want you to wait."

It was past midnight, when, still sitting at his desk, bent over blueprints of the bridge for the John Galt Line, he stopped his work abruptly, because emotion reached him in a sudden stab, not to be escaped any longer, as if a curtain of anesthesia had broken.

He slumped down, halfway, still holding onto some shred of resistance, and sat, his chest pressed to the edge of the desk to stop him, his head hanging down, as if the only achievement still possible to him was not to let his head drop down on the desk. He sat that way for a few moments, conscious of nothing but pain, a screaming pain without content or limit—he sat, not knowing whether it was in his mind or his body, reduced to the terrible ugliness of pain that stopped thought.

In a few moments, it was over. He raised his head and sat up straight, quietly, leaning back against his chair. Now he saw that in postponing this moment for hours, he had not been guilty of evasion: he had not thought of it, because there was nothing to think.

Thought—he told himself quietly—is a weapon one uses in order

to act. No action was possible. Thought is the tool by which one makes a choice. No choice was left to him. Thought sets one's purpose and the way to reach it. In the matter of his life being torn piece by piece out of him, he was to have no voice, no purpose, no way, no defense.

He thought of this in astonishment. He saw for the first time that he had never known fear because, against any disaster, he had held the omnipotent cure of being able to act. No, he thought, not an assurance of victory—who can ever have that?—only the chance to act, which is all one needs. Now he was contemplating, impersonally and for the first time, the real heart of terror: being delivered to destruction with one's hands tied behind one's back.

Well, then, go on with your hands tied, he thought. Go on in chains. Go on. It must not stop you. . . . But another voice was telling him things he did not want to hear, while he fought back, crying through and against it: There's no point in thinking of that . . . there's no use . . . what for? . . . leave it alone!

He could not choke it off. He sat still, over the drawings of the bridge for the John Galt Line, and heard the things released by a voice that was part-sound, part-sight: They decided it without him. . . . They did not call for him, they did not ask, they did not let him speak. . . . They were not bound even by the duty to let him know—to let him know that they had slashed part of his life away and that he had to be ready to walk on as a cripple. . . . Of all those concerned, whoever they were, for whichever reason, for whatever need, he was the one they had not had to consider.

The sign at the end of a long road said: Rearden Ore. It hung over black tiers of metal . . . and over years and nights . . . over a clock ticking drops of his blood away . . . the blood he had given gladly, exultantly in payment for a distant day and a sign over a road . . . paid for with his effort, his strength, his mind, his hope . . . Destroyed at the whim of some men who sat and voted . . . Who knows by what minds? . . . Who knows whose will had placed them in power?—what motive moved them?—what was their knowledge?—which one of them, unaided, could bring a chunk of ore out of the earth? . . . Destroyed at the whim of men whom he had never seen and who had never seen those tiers of metal . . . Destroyed, because they so decided. By what right?

He shook his head. There are things one must not contemplate, he thought. There is an obscenity of evil which contaminates the observer. There is a limit to what it is proper for a man to see. He must not think of this, or look within it, or try to learn the nature of its roots.

Feeling quiet and empty, he told himself that he would be all right tomorrow. He would forgive himself the weakness of this night, it was like the tears one is permitted at a funeral, and then one learns how to live with an open wound or with a crippled factory.

He got up and walked to the window. The mills seemed deserted and still; he saw feeble snatches of red above black funnels, long coils of steam, webbed diagonals of cranes and bridges.

He felt a desolate loneliness, of a kind he had never known before.