

the sort of deals needed nowadays," he said, in answer to the unspoken thoughts that hung across his desk.

The purchasing manager shook his head. "No, Mr. Rearden, it's one or the other. The same kind of brain can't do both. Either you're good at running the mills or you're good at running to Washington."

"Maybe I ought to learn their method."

"You couldn't learn it and it wouldn't do you any good. You wouldn't win in any of those deals. Don't you understand? You're the one who's got something to be looted."

When he was left alone, Rearden felt a jolt of blinding anger, as it had come to him before, painful, single and sudden like an electric shock--the anger bursting out of the knowledge that one cannot deal with pure evil, with the naked, full-conscious evil that neither has nor seeks justification. But when he felt the wish to fight and kill in the rightful cause of self-defense --he saw the fat, grinning face of Mayor Bascom and heard the drawling voice saying, ". . . you and the charming lady who is not your wife."

Then no rightful cause was left, and the pain of anger was turning into the shameful pain of submission. He had no right to condemn anyone--he thought --to denounce anything, to fight and die joyously, claiming the sanction of virtue. The broken promises, the unconfessed desires, the betrayal, the deceit, the lies, the fraud--he was guilty of them all. What form of corruption could he scorn? Degrees do not matter, he thought; one does not bargain about inches of evil.

He did not know--as he sat slumped at his desk, thinking of the honesty he could claim no longer, of the sense of justice he had lost--that it was his rigid honesty and ruthless sense of justice that were now knocking his only weapon out of his hands. He would fight the looters, but the wrath and the fire were gone. He would fight, but only as one guilty wretch against the others. He did not pronounce the words, but the pain was their equivalent, the ugly pain saying: Who am I to cast the first stone?

He let his body fall across the desk. . . Dagny, he thought, Dagny, if this is the price I have to pay, I'll pay it. . . He was still the trader who knew no code except that of full payment for his desires.

It was late when he came home and hurried soundlessly up the stairs to his bedroom. He hated himself for being reduced to sneaking, but he had done it on most of his evenings for months. The sight of his family had become unbearable to him; he could not tell why. Don't hate them for your own guilt, he had told himself, but knew dimly that this was not the root of his hatred.

He closed the door of his bedroom like a fugitive winning a moment's reprieve. He moved cautiously, undressing for bed: he wanted no sound to betray his presence to his family, he wanted no contact with them, not even in their own minds.

He had put on his pajamas and stopped to light a cigarette, when the door of his bedroom opened. The only person who could properly enter his room without knocking had never volunteered to enter it, so he stared blankly for a moment before he was able to believe that it was Lillian who came in.

She wore an Empire garment of pale chartreuse, its pleated skirt

streaming gracefully from its high waistline; one could not tell at first glance whether it was an evening gown or a negligee; it was a negligee. She paused in the doorway, the lines of her body flowing into an attractive silhouette against the light.

"I know I shouldn't introduce myself to a stranger," she said softly, "but I'll have to: my name is Mrs. Rearden." He could not tell whether it was sarcasm or a plea.

She entered and threw the door closed with a casual, imperious gesture, the gesture of an owner.

"What is it, Lillian?" he asked quietly.

"My dear, you mustn't confess so much so bluntly"—she moved in a leisurely manner across the room, past his bed, and sat down in an armchair—"and so unflatteringly. It's an admission that I need to show special cause for taking your time. Should I make an appointment through your secretary?"

He stood in the middle of the room, holding the cigarette at his lips, looking at her, volunteering no answer.

She laughed. "My reason is so unusual that I know it will never occur to you: loneliness, darling. Do you mind throwing a few crumbs of your expensive attention to a beggar? Do you mind if I stay here without any formal reason at all?"

"No," he said quietly, "not if you wish to."

"I have nothing weighty to discuss—no million-dollar orders, no transcontinental deals, no rails, no bridges. Not even the political situation. I just want to chatter like a woman about perfectly unimportant things."

"Go ahead."

"Henry, there's no better way to stop me, is there?" She had an air of helpless, appealing sincerity. "What can I say after that? Suppose I wanted to tell you about the new novel which Ralph Eubank is writing—he is dedicating it to me—would that interest you?"

"If it's the truth you want—not in the least."

She laughed. "And if it's not the truth that I want?"

"Then I wouldn't know what to say," he answered—and felt a rush of blood to his brain, tight as a slap, realizing suddenly the double infamy of a lie uttered in protestation of honesty; he had said it sincerely, but it implied a boast to which he had no right any longer. "Why would you want it, if it's not the truth?" he asked. "What for?"

"Now you see, *that's* the cruelty of conscientious people. You wouldn't understand it—would you?—if I answered that real devotion consists of being willing to lie, cheat and fake in order to make another person happy—to create for him the reality he wants, if he doesn't like the one that exists."

"No," he said slowly, "I wouldn't understand it."

"It's really very simple. If you tell a beautiful woman that she is beautiful, what have you given her? It's no more than a fact and it has cost you nothing. But if you tell an ugly woman that she is beautiful, you offer her the great homage of corrupting the concept of beauty. To love a woman for her virtues is meaningless. She's earned it, it's a payment, not a gift. But to love her for her vices is a real gift, unearned and undeserved. To love her for her vices is to defile