

amusement, that the gun had been needed at the mills, not in the peaceful safety of loneliness and night; what could some starving vagrant take from him, compared to what had been taken by men who claimed to be his protectors?

He walked with an effortless speed, feeling relaxed by a form of activity that was natural to him. This was his period of training for solitude, he thought; he had to learn to live without any awareness of people, the awareness that now paralyzed him with revulsion. He had once built his fortune, starting out with empty hands; now he had to rebuild his life, starting out with an empty spirit.

He would give himself a short span of time for the training, he thought, and then he would claim the one incomparable value still left to him, the one desire that had remained pure and whole: he would go to Dagny. Two commandments had grown in his mind; one was a duty, the other a passionate wish. The first was never to let her learn the reason of his surrender to the looters; the second was to say to her the words which he should have known at their first meeting and should have said on the gallery of Ellis Wyatt's house.

There was nothing but the strong summer starlight to guide him, as he walked, but he could distinguish the highway and the remnant of a stone fence ahead, at the corner of a country crossroad. The fence had nothing to protect any longer, only a spread of weeds, a willow tree bending over the road and, farther in the distance, the ruin of a farmhouse with the starlight showing through its roof.

He walked, thinking that even this sight still retained the power to be of value: it gave him the promise of a long stretch of space undisturbed by human intrusion.

The man who stepped suddenly out into the road must have come from behind the willow tree, but so swiftly that it seemed as if he had sprung up from the middle of the highway. Rearden's hand went to the gun in his pocket, but stopped: he knew—by the proud posture of the body standing in the open, by the straight line of the shoulders against the starlit sky—that the man was not a bandit. When he heard the voice, he knew that the man was not a beggar.

"I should like to speak to you, Mr. Rearden."

The voice had the firmness, the clarity and the special courtesy peculiar to men who are accustomed to giving orders.

"Go ahead," said Rearden, "provided you don't intend to ask me for help or money."

The man's garments were rough, but efficiently trim. He wore dark trousers and a dark blue windbreaker closed tight at his throat, prolonging the lines of his long, slender figure. He wore a dark blue cap, and all that could be seen of him in the night were his hands, his face and a patch of gold-blond hair on his temple. The hands held no weapon, only a package wrapped in burlap, the size of a carton of cigarettes.

"No, Mr. Rearden," he said, "I don't intend to ask you for money, but to return it to you."

"To return money?"

"Yes."

"What money?"

"A small refund on a very large debt."

"Owed by you?"

"No, not by me. It is only a token payment, but I want you to accept it as proof that if we live long enough, you and I, every dollar of that debt will be returned to you."

"What debt?"

"The money that was taken from you by force."

He extended the package to Rearden, flipping the burlap open. Rearden saw the starlight run like fire along a mirror-smooth surface. He knew, by its weight and texture, that what he held was a bar of solid gold.

He looked from the bar to the man's face, but the face seemed harder and less revealing than the surface of the metal.

"Who are you?" asked Rearden.

"The friend of the friendless."

"Did you come here to give this to me?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that you had to stalk me at night, on a lonely road, in order, not to rob me, but to hand me a bar of gold?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"When robbery is done in open daylight by sanction of the law, is it done today, then any act of honor or restitution has to be hidden underground."

"What made you think that I'd accept a gift of this kind?"

"It is not a gift, Mr. Rearden. It is your own money. But I have one favor to ask of you. It is a request, not a condition, because there can be no such thing as conditional property. The gold is yours, so you are free to use it as you please. But I risked my life to bring it to you tonight, so I am asking, as a favor, that you save it for the future or spend it on yourself. On nothing but your own comfort and pleasure. Do not give it away and, above all, do not put it into your business."

"Because I don't want it to be of any benefit to anybody but you. Otherwise, I will have broken an oath taken long ago--as I am breaking every rule I had set for myself by speaking to you tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"I have been collecting this money for you for a long time. But I did not intend to see you or tell you about it or give it to you until much later."

"Then why did you?"

"Because I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Stand what?"

"I thought that I had seen everything one could see and that there was nothing I could not stand seeing. But when they took Rearden Metal away from you, it was too much, even for me. I know that you don't need this gold at present. What you need is the justice which it represents, and the knowledge that there are men who care for justice."

Struggling not to give in to an emotion which he felt rising through his bewilderment, past all his doubts, Rearden tried to study the

man's face, searching for some clue to help him understand. But the face had no expression; it had not changed once while speaking; it looked as if the man had lost the capacity to feel long ago, and what remained of him were only features that seemed implacable and dead. With a shudder of astonishment, Rearden found himself thinking that it was not the face of a man, but of an avenging angel.

"Why did you care?" asked Rearden. "What do I mean to you?"

"Much more than you have reason to suspect. And I have a friend to whom you mean much more than you will ever learn. He would have given anything to stand by you today. But he can't come to you. So I came in his place."

"What friend?"

"I prefer not to name him."

"Did you say that you've spent a long time collecting this money for me?"

"I have collected much more than this." He pointed at the gold "I am holding it in your name and I will turn it over to you when the time comes. This is only a sample, as proof that it does exist. And if you reach the day when you find yourself robbed of the last of your fortune, I want you to remember that you have a large bank account waiting for you."

"What account?"

"If you try to think of all the money that has been taken from you by force, you will know that your account represents a considerable sum."

"How did you collect it? Where did this gold come from?"

"It was taken from those who robbed you."

"Taken by whom?"

"By me."

"Who are you?"

"Ragnar Danneskjöld."

Rearden looked at him for a long, still moment, then let the gold fall out of his hands.

Danneskjöld's eyes did not follow it to the ground, but remained fixed on Rearden with no change of expression. "Would you rather I were a law-abiding citizen, Mr. Rearden? If so, which law should I abide by? Directive 10-289?"

"Ragnar Danneskjold . . ." said Rearden, as if he were seeing the whole of the past decade, as if he were looking at the enormity of a crime spread through ten years and held within two words.

"Look more carefully, Mr. Rearden. There are only two modes of living left to us today: to be a looter who robs disarmed victims or to be a victim who works for the benefit of his own despoilers. I did not choose to be either."

"You chose to live by means of force, like the rest of them."

"Yes—openly. Honestly, if you will. I do not rob men who are tied and gagged, I do not demand that my victims help me, I do not tell them that I am acting for their own good. I stake my life in every encounter with men, and they have a chance to match their guns and their brains against mine in fair battle. Fair? It's I against the organized strength, the guns, the planes, the battleships of five