

and child in this country will obey your orders and do whatever you wish."

"After I teach them to do it?"

"If you want anything for your own gang—for all those men who've disappeared—jobs, positions, authority, tax exemptions, any special favor at all just name it and they'll get it."

"After I bring them back?"

"Well, what on earth *do* you want?"

"What on earth do I need *you* for?"

"Huh?"

"What have you got to offer me that I couldn't get without you?"

There was a different look in Mr. Thompson's eyes when he drew back, as if cornered, yet looked straight at Galt for the first time and said slowly, "Without me, you couldn't get out of this room, right now."

Galt smiled. "True."

"You wouldn't be able to produce anything. You could be left here to starve."

"True."

"Well, don't you see?" The loudness of homey joviality came back into Mr. Thompson's voice, as if the hint given and received were now to be safely evaded by means of humor. "What I've got to offer you is your life."

"It's not yours to offer, Mr. Thompson," said Galt softly.

Something about his voice made Mr. Thompson jerk to glance at him, then jerk faster to look away. Galt's smile seemed almost gentle.

"Now," said Galt, "do you see what I mean when I said that a zero can't hold a mortgage over life? It's I who'd have to grant you that kind of mortgage—and I don't. The removal of a threat is not a payment, the negation of a negative is not a reward, the withdrawal of your armed hoodlums is not an incentive, the offer not to murder me is not a value."

"Who . . . who's said anything about murdering you?"

"Who's said anything about anything else? If you weren't holding me here at the point of a gun, under threat of death, you wouldn't have a chance to speak to me at all. And *that* is as much as your guns can accomplish. I don't pay for the removal of threats. I don't buy my life from anyone."

"That's not true," said Mr. Thompson brightly. "If you had a broken leg, you'd pay a doctor to set it."

"Not if he was the one who broke it." He smiled at Mr. Thompson's silence. "I'm a practical man, Mr. Thompson. I don't think it's practical to establish a person whose sole means of livelihood is the breaking of my bones. I don't think it's practical to support a protection racket."

Mr. Thompson looked thoughtful, then shook his head. "I don't think you're practical," he said. "A practical man doesn't ignore the facts of reality. He doesn't waste his time wishing things to be different or trying to change them. He takes things as they are. We're holding you. It's a fact. Whether you like it or not, it's a fact. You should act accordingly."

"I am."

"What I mean is, you should co-operate. You should recognize an existing situation, accept it and adjust to it."

"If you had blood poisoning, would you adjust to it or act to change it?"

"Oh, that's different! That's physical!"

"You mean, physical facts are open to correction, but your whims are not?"

"Huh?"

"You mean, physical nature can be adjusted to men, but your whims are above the laws of nature, and men must adjust to *you*?"

"I mean that I hold the upper hand!"

"With a gun in it?"

"Oh, forget about guns! I—"

"I can't forget a fact of reality, Mr. Thompson. That would be impractical."

"All right, then: I hold a gun. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll act accordingly. I'll obey you."

"What?"

"I'll do whatever you *tell* me to."

"Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. *Literally*." He saw the eagerness of Mr. Thompson's face ebb slowly under a look of bewilderment. "I will perform any motion you order me to perform. If you order me to move into the office of an Economic Dictator, I'll move into it. If you order me to sit at a desk, I will sit at it. If you order me to issue a directive, I will issue the directive you order me to issue."

"Oh, but I don't know what directives to issue!"

"I don't, either."

There was a long pause.

"Well?" said Galt. "What are your orders?"

"I want you to save the economy of the country!"

"I don't know how to save it."

"I want you to find a way!"

"I don't know how to find it."

"I want you to think!"

"How will your gun make me do that, Mr. Thompson?"

Mr. Thompson looked at him silently—and Galt saw, in the tightened lips, in the jutting chin, in the narrowed eyes, the look of an adolescent bully about to utter that philosophical argument which is expressed by the sentence: I'll bash your teeth in. Galt smiled, looking straight at him, as if hearing the unspoken sentence and under-scoring it. Mr. Thompson looked away.

"No," said Galt, "you don't want me to think. When you force a man to act against his own choice and judgment, it's his thinking that you want him to suspend. You want him to become a robot. I shall comply."

Mr. Thompson sighed. "I don't get it," he said in a tone of genuine helplessness. "Something's off and I can't figure it out. Why should you ask for trouble? With a brain like yours—you can beat anybody."

I'm no match for you, and you know it. Why don't you pretend to join us, then gain control and outsmart me?"

"For the same reason that makes you offer it: because you'd win."

"Huh?"

"Because it's the attempt of your betters to beat you on your terms that has allowed your kind to get away with it for centuries. Which one of us would succeed, if I were to compete with you for control over your musclemen? Sure, I could pretend—and I wouldn't save your economy or your system, nothing will save them now—but I'd perish and what you'd win would be what you've always won in the past: a postponement, one more stay of execution, for another year—or month—bought at the price of whatever hope and effort might still be squeezed out of the best of the human remnants left around you, including me. That's all you're after and *that* is the length of your range. A month? You'd settle for a week—on the unchallenged absolute that there will always be another victim to find. But you've found your last victim—the one who refuses to play his historical part. The game is up, brother."

"Oh, that's just theory!" snapped Mr. Thompson, a little too sharply; his eyes were roving about the room, in the manner of a substitute for pacing; he glanced at the door, as if longing to escape. "You say that if we don't give up the system, we'll perish?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then, since we're holding you, you will perish with us?"

"Possibly."

"Don't you want to live?"

"Passionately." He saw the snap of a spark in Mr. Thompson's eyes and smiled. "I'll tell you more: I know that I want to live much more intensely than you do. I know that that's what you're counting on. I know that you, in fact, do not want to live at all. I want it. And because I want it so much, I will accept no substitute."

Mr. Thompson jumped to his feet. "That's not true!" he cried. "My not wanting to live—it's not true! Why do you talk like that?" He stood, his limbs drawn faintly together, as if against a sudden chill. "Why do you say such things? I don't know what you mean." He backed a few steps away. "And it's not true that I'm a gunman. I'm not. I don't intend to harm you. I never intended to harm anybody. I want people to like me. I want to be your friend . . . I want to be your friend!" he cried to the space at large.

Galt's eyes were watching him, without expression, giving him no clue to what they were seeing, except that they were seeing it.

Mr. Thompson jerked suddenly into bustling, unnecessary motions, as if he were in a hurry. "I've got to run along," he said. "I . . . I have so many appointments. We'll talk about it some more. Think it over. Take your time. I'm not trying to high-pressure you. Just relax, take it easy and make yourself at home. Ask for anything you like—food, drinks, cigarettes, the best of anything." He waved his hand at Galt's garments. "I'm going to order the most expensive tailor in the city to make some decent clothes for you. I want you to get used to the best. I want you to be comfortable and . . . Say,"