rules objectively defined, but to the arbitrary mercy of a judge with a wizened face and a look of empty cunning.

Lillian was not present in the courtroom; her attorney made gestures once in a while, with the energy of letting water run through his fingers. They all knew the verdict in advance and they knew its reason; no other reason had existed for years, where no standards, save whim, had existed. They seemed to regard it as their rightful prerogative; they acted as if the purpose of the procedure were not to try a case, but to give them jobs, as if their jobs were to recite the appropriate formulas with no responsibility to know what the formulas accomplished, as if a courtroom were the one place where questions of right and wrong were irrelevant and they, the men in charge of dispensing justice, were safely wise enough to know that no justice existed. They acted like savages performing a ritual devised to set them free of objective reality.

But the ten years of his marriage had been real, he thought—and *these* were the men who assumed the power to dispose of it, to decide whether he would have a chance of contentment on earth or be condemned to torture for the rest of his lifetime. He remembered the austerely pitiless respect he had felt for his contract of marriage, for all his contracts and all his legal obligations—and he saw what sort of legality his scrupulous observance was expected to serve.

He noticed that the puppets of the courtroom had started by glancing at him in the sly, wise manner of fellow conspirators sharing a common guilt, mutually safe from moral condemnation. Then, when they observed that he was the only man in the room who looked steadily straight at anyone's face, he saw resentment growing in their eyes. Incredulously, he realized what it was that had been expected of him: he, the victim, chained, bound, gagged and left with no recourse save to bribery, had been expected to believe that the farce he had purchased was a process of law, that the edicts enslaving him had moral validity, that he was guilty of corrupting the integrity of the guardians of justice, and that the blame was his, not theirs. It was like blaming the victim of a holdup for corrupting the integrity of the thug. And yet—he thought—through all the generations of political extortion, it was not the looting bureaucrats who had taken the blame, but the chained industrialists, not the men who peddled legal favors, but the men who were forced to buy them; and through all those generations of crusades against corruption, the remedy had always been, not the liberating of the victims, but the granting of wider powers for extortion to the extortionists. The only guilt of the victims, he thought, had been that they accepted it as guilt.

When he walked out of the courtroom into the chilly drizzle of a gray afternoon, he felt as if he had been divorced, not only from Lillian, but from the whole of the human society that supported the procedure he had witnessed.

The face of his attorney, an elderly man of the old-fashioned school, wore an expression that made it look as if he longed to take a bath. "Say, Hank," he asked as sole comment, "is there something the looters are anxious to get from you right now?" "Not that I know of. Why?" "The thing went too smoothly. There were a few

points at which I expected pressure and hints for some extras, but the boys sailed past and took no advantage of it. Looks to me as if orders had come from on high to treat you gently and let you have your way. Are they planning something against your mills?" "Not that I know of," said Rearden—and was astonished to hear it in his mind: Not that I care.

It was on the same afternoon, at the mills, that he saw the Wet Nurse hurrying toward him—a gangling, coltish figure with a peculiar mixture of brusqueness, awkwardness and decisiveness.

"Mr. Rearden, I would like to speak to you." His voice was diffident, yet oddly firm.

"Go ahead."

"There's something I want to ask you." The boy's face was solemn and taut. "I want you to know that I know you should refuse me, but I want to ask it just the same . . . and . . . and if it's presumptuous, then just tell me to go to hell."

"Okay. Try it."

"Mr. Rearden, would you give me a job?" It was the effort to sound normal that betrayed the days of struggle behind the question. "I want to quit what I'm doing and go to work. I mean, real work—in steel-making, like I thought I'd started to, once. I want to earn my keep. I'm tired of being a bedbug."

Rearden could not resist smiling and reminding him, in the tone of a quotation, "Now why use such words, Non-Absolute? If we don't use ugly words, we won't have any ugliness and—" But he saw the desperate earnestness of the boy's face and stopped, his smile vanishing.

"I mean it, Mr. Rearden. And I know what the word means and it's the right word. I'm tired of being paid, with your money, to do nothing except make it impossible for you to make any money at all. I know that anyone who works today is only a sucker for bastards like me, but . . . well, God damn it, I'd rather be a sucker, if that's all there's left to be!" His voice had risen to a cry. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Rearden," he said stiffly, looking away. In a moment, he went on in his woodenly unemotional tone. "I want to get out of the Deputy-Director-of-Distribution racket. I don't know that I'd be of much use to you. I've got a college diploma in metallurgy, but that's not worth the paper it's printed on. But I think I've learned a little about the work in the two years I've been here—and if you could use me at all, as a sweeper or scrap man or whatever you'd trust me with, I'd tell them where to put the deputy directorship and I'd go to work for you tomorrow, next week, this minute or whenever you say." He avoided looking at Rearden, not in a manner of evasion, but as if he had no right to do it.

"Why were you afraid to ask me?" said Rearden gently.

The boy glanced at him with indignant astonishment, as if the answer were self-evident. "Because after the way I started here and the way I acted and what I'm deputy of, if I come asking you for favors, you ought to kick me in the teeth!"

"You *have* learned a great deal in the two years you've been here."