

no factory people left, and nobody that would remember much about them. So many families have moved away that what's left here is plain no good, if I do say so myself, plain no good, just being Mayor of a bunch of trash."

He had offered chairs to his two visitors, but he did not mind it if the lady preferred to stand at the porch railing. He leaned back, studying her long-lined figure; high-class merchandise, he thought; but then, the man with her was obviously rich.

Dagny stood looking at the streets of Rome. There were houses, sidewalks, lampposts, even a sign advertising soft drinks; but they looked as if it were now only a matter of inches and hours before the town would reach the stage of Starnesville.

"Naw, there's no factory records left," said Mayor Bascom. "If that's what you want to find, lady, give it up. It's like chasing leaves in a storm now. Just like leaves in a storm. Who cares about papers? At a time like this, what people save is good, solid, material objects. One's got to be practical."

Through the dusty windowpanes, they could see the living room of his house: there were Persian rugs on a buckled wooden floor, a portable bar with chromium strips against a wall stained by the seepage of last year's rains, an expensive radio with an old kerosene lamp placed on top of it.

"Sure, it's me that sold the factory to Mark Yonts. Mark was a nice fellow, a nice, lively, energetic fellow. Sure, he did trim a few corners, but who doesn't? Of course, he went a bit too far. That, I didn't expect. I thought he was smart enough to stay within the law---whatever's left of it nowadays."

Mayor Bascom smiled, looking at them in a manner of placid frankness. His eyes were shrewd without intelligence, his smile good-natured without kindness.

"I don't think you folks are detectives," he said, "but even if you were, it wouldn't matter to me. I didn't get any rake-off from Mark, he didn't let me in on any of his deals, I haven't any idea where he's gone to now." He sighed. "I liked that fellow. Wish he'd stayed around. Never mind the Sunday sermons. He had to live, didn't he? He was no worse than anybody, only smarter. Some get caught at it and some don't---that's the only difference. . . . Nope, I didn't know what he was going to do with it, when he bought that factory. Sure, he paid me quite a bit more than the old booby trap was worth. Sure, he was doing me a favor when he bought it. Nope, I didn't put any pressure on him to make him buy it. Wasn't necessary. I'd done him a few favors before. There's plenty of laws that's sort of made of rubber, and a mayor's in a position to stretch them a bit for a friend. Well, what the hell? That's the only way anybody ever gets rich in this world"--he glanced at the luxurious black car--"as you ought to know."

"You were telling us about the factory," said Rearden, trying to control himself.

"What I can't stand," said Mayor Bascom, "is people who talk about principles. No principle ever filled anybody's milk bottle. The only thing that counts in life is solid, material assets. It's no time for

theories, when everything is falling to pieces around us. Well, me—I don't aim to go under. Let them keep their ideas and I'll take the factory. I don't want ideas, I just want my three square meals a day."

"Why did you buy that factory?"

"Why does anybody buy any business? To squeeze whatever can be squeezed out of it. I know a good chance when I see it. It was a bankruptcy sale and nobody much who'd want to bid on the old mess. So I got the place for peanuts. Didn't have to hold it long, either—Mark took it off my hands in two-three months. Sure, it was a smart deal, if I say so myself. No big business tycoon could have done any better with it."

"Was the factory operating when you took it over?"

"Naw. It was shut down."

"Did you attempt to reopen it?"

"Not me. I'm a practical person."

"Can you recall the names of any men who worked there?"

"No. Never met 'em."

"Did you move anything out of the factory?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I took a look around—and what I liked was old Jed's desk. Old Jed Starnes. He was a real big shot in his time. Wonderful desk, solid mahogany. So I carted it home. And some executive, don't know who he was, had a stall shower in his bathroom, the like of which I never saw. A glass door with a mermaid cut in the glass, real art work, and hot stuff, too, hotter than any oil painting. So I had that shower lifted and moved here. What the hell, I owned it, didn't I? I was entitled to get something valuable out of that factory."

"Whose bankruptcy sale was it, when you bought the factory?"

"Oh, that was the big crash of the Community National Bank in Madison. Boy, was that a crash! It just about finished the whole state of Wisconsin—sure finished this part of it. Some say it was this motor factory that broke the bank, but others say it was only the last drop in a leaking bucket, because the Community National had bum investments all over three or four states. Eugene Lawson was the head of it. The banker with a heart, they called him. He was quite famous in these parts two-three years ago."

"Did Lawson operate the factory?"

"No. He merely lent an awful lot of money on it, more than he could ever hope to get back out of the old dump. When the factory busted, that was the last straw for Gene Lawson. The bank busted three months later." He sighed. "It hit the folks pretty hard around here. They all had their life savings in the Community National."

Mayor Bascom looked regretfully past his porch railing at his town. He jerked his thumb at a figure across the street: it was a white-haired charwoman, moving painfully on her knees, scrubbing the steps of a house.

"See that woman, for instance? They used to be solid, respectable folks. Her husband owned the dry-goods store. He worked all his life to provide for her in her old age, and he did, too, by the time he died—only the money was in the Community National Bank."

"Who operated the factory when it failed?"

"Oh, that was some quicky corporation called Amalgamated Ser-