

She had given him her name; she did not know why she now felt glad that he had not recognized it and why she preferred not to enlighten him. "I did not say I was from a newspaper," she answered. "I need some information on that motor factory for a private purpose of my own, not for publication."

"Oh." He looked disappointed. He went on sullenly, as if she were guilty of a deliberate offense against him. "I thought maybe you came for an advance interview because I'm writing my autobiography." He pointed to the papers on the table. "And what I intend to tell is plenty. I intend— Oh, hell!" he said suddenly, remembering something.

He rushed to the stove, lifted the lid off the pot and went through the motions of stirring the stew, hatefully, paying no attention to his performance. He flung the wet spoon down on the stove, letting the grease drip into the gas burners, and came back to the table.

"Yeah, I'll write my autobiography if anybody ever gives me a chance," he said. "How can I concentrate on serious work when this is the sort of thing I have to do?" He jerked his head at the stove. "Friends, huh! Those people think that just because they took me in, they can exploit me like a Chinese coolie! Just because I had no other place to go. They have it easy, those good old friends of mine. He never lifts a finger around the house, just sits in his store all day; a lousy little two-bit stationery store—can it compare in importance with the book I'm writing? And she goes out shopping and asks me to watch her damn stew for her. She knows that a writer needs peace and concentration, but does she care about that? Do you know what she did today?" He leaned confidentially across the table, pointing at the dishes in the sink. "She went to the market and left all the breakfast dishes there and said she'd do them later. I know what she wanted. She expected me to do them. Well, I'll fool her. I'll leave them just where they are."

"Would you allow me to ask you a few questions about the motor factory?"

"Don't imagine that that motor factory was the only thing in my life. I'd held many important positions before. I was prominently connected, at various times, with enterprises manufacturing surgical appliances, paper containers, men's hats and vacuum cleaners. Of course, that sort of stuff didn't give me much scope. But the motor factory—that was my big chance. That was what I'd been waiting for."

"How did you happen to acquire it?"

"It was meant for me. It was my dream come true. The factory was shut down—bankrupt. The heirs of Jed Starnes had run it into the ground pretty fast. I don't know exactly what it was, but there had been something goofy going on up there, so the company went broke. The railroad people closed their branch line. Nobody wanted the place, nobody would bid on it. But there it was, this great factory, with all the equipment, all the machinery, all the things that had made millions for Jed Starnes. That was the kind of setup I wanted, the kind of opportunity I was entitled to. So I got a few friends together and we formed the Amalgamated Service Corporation and we scraped up a little money. But we didn't have enough, we needed a loan to help us out and give us a start. It was a perfectly safe bet, we were

young men embarking on great careers, full of eagerness and hope for the future. But do you think anybody gave us any encouragement? They did not. Not those greedy, entrenched vultures of privilege! How were we to succeed in life if nobody would give us a factory? We couldn't compete against the little snots who inherit whole chains of factories, could we? Weren't we entitled to the same break? Aw, don't let me hear anything about justice! I worked like a dog, trying to get somebody to lend us the money. But that bastard Midas Mulligan put me through the wringer."

She sat up straight. "Midas Mulligan?"

"Yeah—the banker who looked like a truck driver and acted it, too!"

"Did you know Midas Mulligan?"

"Did I know him? I'm the only man who ever beat him--not that it did me any good!"

At odd moments, with a sudden sense of uneasiness, she had wondered—as she wondered about the stories of deserted ships found floating at sea or of sourceless lights flashing in the sky--about the disappearance of Midas Mulligan. There was no reason why she felt that she had to solve these riddles, except that they were mysteries which had no business being mysteries, they could not be causeless, yet no known cause could explain them.

Midas Mulligan had once been the richest and, consequently, the most denounced man in the country. He had never taken a loss on any investment he made; everything he touched turned into gold. "It's because I know what to touch," he said. Nobody could grasp the pattern of his investments: he rejected deals that were considered flawlessly safe, and he put enormous amounts into ventures that no other banker would handle. Through the years, he had been the trigger that had sent unexpected, spectacular bullets of industrial success shouting over the country. It was he who had invested in Rearden Steel at its start, thus helping Rearden to complete the purchase of the abandoned steel mills in Pennsylvania. When an economist referred to him once as an audacious gambler, Mulligan said, "The reason why you'll never get rich is because you think that what I do is gambling."

It was rumored that one had to observe a certain unwritten rule when dealing with Midas Mulligan: if an applicant for a loan ever mentioned his personal need or any personal feeling whatever, the interview ended and he was never given another chance to speak to Mr. Mulligan.

"Why yes, I can," said Midas Mulligan, when he was asked whether he could name a person more evil than the man with a heart closed to pity. "The man who uses another's pity for him as a weapon."

In his long career, he had ignored all the public attacks on him, except one. His first name had been Michael; when a newspaper columnist of the humanitarian clique nicknamed him Midas Mulligan and the tag stuck to him as an insult, Mulligan appeared in court and petitioned for a legal change of his first name to "Midas." The petition was granted.

In the eyes of his contemporaries, he was a man who had committed the one unforgivable sin: he was proud of his wealth.