

There was no trace of amusement left in Francisco's eyes; Rearden had never faced so solemn a look of respect. "Yes, Mr. Rearden," he answered quietly.

"I told you that I didn't need it and I insulted you for it. All right, you've won. That speech you made tonight—that was what you were offering me, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Rearden."

"It was more than gratitude, and I needed the gratitude; it was more than admiration, and I needed that, too; it was much more than any word I can find, it will take me days to think of all that it's given me—but one thing I do know: I needed it. I've never made an admission of this kind, because I've never cried for anyone's help. If it amused you to guess that I was glad to see you, you have something real to laugh about now, if you wish."

"It might take me a few years, but I will prove to you that these are the things I do not laugh about."

"Prove it now—by answering one question: Why don't you practice what you preach?"

"Are you sure that I don't?"

"If the things you said are true, if you have the greatness to know it, you should have been the leading industrialist of the world by now."

Francisco said gravely, as he had said to the portly man, but with an odd note of gentleness in his voice, "I suggest that you think twice, Mr. Rearden."

"I've thought about you more than I care to admit. I have found no answer."

"Let me give you a hint: If the things I said are true, who is the guiltiest man in this room tonight?"

"I suppose—James Taggart?"

"No, Mr. Rearden, it is not James Taggart. But you must define the guilt and choose the man yourself."

"A few years ago, I would have said that it's you. I still think that that's what I ought to say. But I'm almost in the position of that fool woman who spoke to you: every reason I know tells me that you're guilty—and yet I can't feel it."

"You *are* making the same mistake as that woman, Mr. Rearden, though in a nobler form."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean much more than just your judgment of me. That woman and all those like her keep evading the thoughts which they know to be good. You keep pushing out of your mind the thoughts which you believe to be evil. They do it, because they want to avoid effort. You do it, because you won't permit yourself to consider anything that would spare you. They indulge their emotions at any cost. You sacrifice your emotions as the first cost of any problem. They are willing to bear nothing. You are willing to bear anything. They keep evading responsibility. You keep assuming it. But don't you see that the essential error is the same? Any refusal to recognize reality, for any reason whatever, has disastrous consequences. There are no evil thoughts except one: the refusal to think. Don't ignore your own

desires, Mr. Rearden. Don't sacrifice them. Examine their cause. There is a limit to how much you should have to bear."

"How did you know this about me?"

"I made the same mistake, once. But not for long."

"I wish—" Rearden began and stopped abruptly.

Francisco smiled. "Afraid to wish, Mr. Rearden?"

"I wish I could permit myself to like you as much as I do."

"I'd give—" Francisco stopped; inexplicably, Rearden saw the look of an emotion which he could not define, yet felt certain to be pain; he saw Francisco's first moment of hesitation. "Mr. Rearden, do you own any d'Anconia Copper stock?"

Rearden looked at him, bewildered. "No."

"Some day, you'll know what treason I'm committing right now, but . . . Don't ever buy any d'Anconia Copper stock. Don't ever deal with d'Anconia Copper in any way."

"Why?"

"When you'll learn the full reason, you'll know whether there's ever been anything—or anyone—that meant a damn to me, and . . . and how much he did mean."

Rearden frowned: he had remembered something. "I wouldn't deal with your company. Didn't you call them the men of the double standard? Aren't you one of the looters who is growing rich right now by means of directives?"

Inexplicably, the words did not hit Francisco as an insult, but cleared his face back into his look of assurance. "Did you think that it was I who wheedled those directives out of the robber planners?"

"If not, then who did it?"

"My hitchhikers."

"Without your consent?"

"Without my knowledge."

"I'd hate to admit how much I want to believe you - but there's no way for you to prove it now."

"No? I'll prove it to you within the next fifteen minutes."

"How? The fact remains that you've profited the most from those directives."

"That's true. I've profited more than Mr. Mouch and his gang could ever imagine. After my years of work, they gave me just the chance I needed."

"Are you boasting?"

"You bet I am!" Rearden saw incredulously that Francisco's eyes had a hard, bright look, the look, not of a party hound, but of a man of action. "Mr. Rearden, do you know where most of those new aristocrats keep their hidden money? Do you know where most of the fair-share vultures have invested their profits from Rearden Metal?"

"No, but—"

"In d'Anconia Copper stock. Safely out of the way and out of the country. D'Anconia Copper— an old, invulnerable company, so rich that it would last for three more generations of looting. A company managed by a decadent playboy who doesn't give a damn, who'll let them use his property in any way they please and just continue to

make money for them—automatically, as did his ancestors. Wasn't that a perfect setup for the looters, Mr. Rearden? Only—what one single point did they miss?"

Rearden was staring at him. "What are you driving at?"

Francisco laughed suddenly. "It's too bad about those profiteers on Rearden Metal. You wouldn't want them to lose the money you made for them, would you, Mr. Rearden? But accidents do happen in the world—you know what they say, man is only a helpless plaything at the mercy of nature's disasters. For instance, there was a fire at the d'Anconia ore docks in Valparaiso tomorrow morning, a fire that razed them to the ground along with half of the port structures. What time is it, Mr. Rearden? Oh, did I mix my tenses? Tomorrow afternoon, there will be a rock slide in the d'Anconia mines at Orano—no lives lost, no casualties, except the mines themselves. It will be found that the mines are done for, because they had been worked in the wrong places for months—what can you expect from a playboy's management? The great deposits of copper will be buried under tons of mountain where a Sebastián d'Anconia would not be able to reclaim them in less than three years, and a People's State will never reclaim them at all. When the stockholders begin to look into things, they will find that the mines at Campos, at San Felix, at Las Heras have been worked in exactly the same manner and have been running at a loss for over a year, only the playboy juggled the books and kept it out of the newspapers. Shall I tell you what they will discover about the management of the d'Anconia foundries? Or of the d'Anconia ore fleet? But all these discoveries won't do the stockholders any good anyway, because the stock of d'Anconia Copper will have crashed tomorrow morning, crashed like an electric bulb against concrete, crashed like an express elevator, spattering pieces of hitchhikers all over the gutters!"

The triumphant rise of Francisco's voice merged with a matching sound Rearden burst out laughing

Rearden did not know how long that moment lasted or what he had felt, it had been like a blow hurling him into another kind of consciousness, then a second blow returning him to his own—all that was left, as at the awakening from a narcotic, was the feeling that he had known some immense kind of freedom, never to be matched in reality. This was like the Wyatt fire again, he thought, this was his secret danger.

He found himself backing away from Francisco d'Anconia. Francisco stood watching him intently and looked as if he had been watching him all through that unknown length of time.

"There are no evil thoughts, Mr. Rearden," Francisco said softly, "except one: the refusal to think."

"No," said Rearden; it was almost a whisper, he had to keep his voice down, he was afraid that he would hear himself scream it, "no . . . if this is the key to you, no, don't expect me to cheer you . . . you didn't have the strength to fight them . . . you chose the easiest, most vicious way . . . deliberate destruction. . . the destruction of an achievement you hadn't produced and couldn't match. . . ."

"That's not what you'll read in the newspapers tomorrow. There