

A worker saw him and grinned in understanding, like a fellow accomplice in a great celebration, who knew why that tall, blond figure had had to be present here tonight. Rearden smiled in answer: it was the only salute he had received. Then he started back for his office, once again a figure with an expressionless face.

It was late when Hank Rearden left his office that night to walk from his mills to his house. It was a walk of some miles through empty country, but he had felt like doing it, without conscious reason.

He walked, keeping one hand in his pocket, his fingers closed about a bracelet. It was made of Rearden Metal, in the shape of a chain. His fingers moved, feeling its texture once in a while. It had taken ten years to make that bracelet. Ten years, he thought, is a long time.

The road was dark, edged with trees. Looking up, he could see a few leaves against the stars; the leaves were twisted and dry, ready to fall. There were distant lights in the windows of houses scattered through the countryside; but the lights made the road seem lonelier.

He never felt loneliness except when he was happy. He turned, once in a while, to look back at the red glow of the sky over the mills.

He did not think of the ten years: What remained of them tonight was only a feeling which he could not name, except that it was quiet and solemn. The feeling was a sum, and he did not have to count again the parts that had gone to make it. But the parts, unrecalled, were there, within the feeling. They were the nights spent at scorching ovens in the research laboratory of the mills—

—the nights spent in the workshop of his home, over sheets of paper which he filled with formulas, then tore up in angry failure—

—the days when the young scientists of the small staff he had chosen to assist him waited for instructions like soldiers ready for a hopeless battle, having exhausted their ingenuity, still willing, but silent, with the unspoken sentence hanging in the air: “Mr. Rearden, it can’t be done—”

—the meals, interrupted and abandoned at the sudden flash of a new thought, a thought to be pursued at once, to be tried, to be tested, to be worked on for months, and to be discarded as another failure—

—the moments snatched from conferences, from contracts, from the duties of running the best steel mills in the country, snatched almost guiltily, as for a secret love—

—the one thought held immovably across a span of ten years, under everything he did and everything he saw, the thought held in his mind when he looked at the buildings of a city, at the track of a railroad, at the light in the windows of a distant farmhouse, at the knife in the hands of a beautiful woman cutting a piece of fruit at a banquet, the thought of a metal alloy that would do more than steel had ever done, a metal that would be to steel what steel had been to iron—

—the acts of self-torment when he discarded a hope or a sample, not permitting himself to know that he was tired, not giving himself time to feel, driving himself through the wringing torture of: “not

good enough still not good enough " and going on with no motor save the conviction that it could be done —

—then the day when it was done and its result was called Rearden Metal —

—these were the things that had come to white heat, had melted and fused within him, and *their* alloy was a strange, quiet feeling that made him smile at the countryside in the darkness and wonder why happiness could hurt

After a while, he realized that he was thinking of his past, as if certain days of it were spread before him, demanding to be seen again He did not want to look at them, he despised memories as a pointless indulgence But then he understood that he thought of them tonight in honor of that piece of metal in his pocket Then he permitted himself to look

He saw the day when he stood on a rocky ledge and felt a thread of sweat running from his temple down his neck He was fourteen years old and it was his first day of work in the iron mines of Minnesota He was trying to learn to breathe against the scalding pain in his chest He stood, cursing himself, because he had made up his mind that he would not be tired After a while he went back to his task, he decided that pain was not a valid reason for stopping

He saw the day when he stood at the window of his office and looked at the mines he owned them as of that morning He was thirty years old What had gone on in the years between did not matter, just as pain had not mattered He had worked in mines in foundries in the steel mills of the north moving toward the purpose he had chosen All he remembered of those jobs was that the men around him had never seemed to know what to do while he had always known He remembered wondering why so many iron mines were closing, just as these had been about to close until he took them over He looked at the shelves of rock in the distance Workers were putting up a new sign above a gate at the end of a road Rearden Ore

He saw an evening when he sat slumped across his desk in that office It was late and his staff had left so he could lie there alone unwitnessed He was tired It was as if he had run a race against his own body, and all the exhaustion of years which he had refused to acknowledge, had caught him at once and flattened him against the desk top He felt nothing, except the desire not to move He did not have the strength to feel —not even to suffer He had burned every thing there was to burn within him, he had scattered so many sparks to start so many things—and he wondered whether someone could give him now the spark he needed now when he felt unable ever to rise again He asked himself who had started him and kept him going Then he raised his head Slowly, with the greatest effort of his life, he made his body rise until he was able to sit upright with only one hand pressed to the desk and a trembling arm to support him He never asked that question again

He saw the day when he stood on a hill and looked at a grimy wasteland of structures that had been a steel plant It was closed and given up He had bought it the night before There was a strong