

been their only hold on him, which had made him take any punishment and give them the benefit of every doubt, was now turned against them—that the same force that had made him tolerant, was now the force that made him ruthless—that the justice which would forgive miles of innocent errors of knowledge, would not forgive a single step taken in conscious evil.

"Henry, don't you understand us?" his mother was pleading.

"I do," he said quietly.

She looked away, avoiding the clarity of his eyes. "Don't you care what becomes of us?"

"I don't."

"Aren't you human?" Her voice grew shrill with anger. "Aren't you capable of any love at all? It's your heart I'm trying to reach, not your mind! Love is not something to argue and reason and bargain about! It's something to give! To feel! Oh God, Henry can't you feel without thinking?"

"I never have."

In a moment, her voice came back, low and droning: "We're not as smart as you are, not as strong. If we've sinned and blundered, it's because we're helpless. We need you, you're all we've got—and we're losing you—and we're afraid. These are terrible times, and getting worse, people are scared to death, scared and blind and not knowing what to do. How are we to cope with it, if you leave us? We're small and weak and we'll be swept like driftwood in that terror that's running loose in the world. Maybe we had our share of guilt for it, maybe we helped to bring it about, not knowing any better, but what's done is done—and we can't stop it now. If you abandon us, we're lost. If you give up and vanish, like all those men who—"

It was not a sound that stopped her, it was only a movement of his eyebrows, the brief, swift movement of a check mark. Then they saw him smile; the nature of the smile was the most terrifying of answers.

"So that's what you're afraid of," he said slowly.

"You can't quit!" his mother screamed in blind panic. "You can't quit now! You could have, last year, but not now! Not today! You can't turn deserter, because now they take it out on your family! They'll leave us penniless, they'll seize everything, they'll leave us to starve, they'll—"

"Keep still!" cried Lillian, more adept than the others at reading danger signs in Rearden's face.

His face held the remnant of a smile, and they knew that he was not seeing them any longer, but it was not in their power to know why his smile now seemed to hold pain and an almost wistful longing, or why he was looking across the room, at the niche of the farthest window.

He was seeing a finely sculptured face held composed under the lashing of his insults, he was hearing a voice that had said to him quietly, here, in this room: "It is against the sin of forgiveness that I wanted to warn you." You who had known it then, he thought . . . but he did not finish the sentence in his mind, he let it end in the

bitter twist of his smile, because he knew what he had been about to think: You who had known it then—forgive me.

There it was—he thought, looking at his family—the nature of their pleas for mercy, the logic of those feelings they so righteously proclaimed as non-logical—*there* was the simple, brutal essence of all men who speak of being able to feel without thought and of placing mercy over justice.

They had known what to fear; they had grasped and named, before he had, the only way of deliverance left open to him; they had understood the hopelessness of his industrial position, the futility of his struggle, the impossible burdens descending to crush him; they had known that in reason, in justice, in self-preservation, his only course was to drop it all and run—yet they wanted to hold him, to keep him in the sacrificial furnace, to make him let them devour the last of him in the name of mercy, forgiveness and brother-cannibal love.

"If you still want me to explain it, Mother," he said very quietly, "if you're still hoping that I won't be cruel enough to name what you're pretending not to know, then *here's* what's wrong with your idea of forgiveness: You regret that you've hurt me and, as your atonement for it, you ask that I offer myself to total immolation."

"Logic!" she screamed. "There you go again with your damn logic! It's pity that we need, pity, not logic!"

He rose to his feet.

"Wait! Don't go! Henry, don't abandon us! Don't sentence us to perish! Whatever we are, we're human! We want to live!"

"Why, no—" he started in quiet astonishment and ended in quiet horror, as the thought struck him fully, "I don't think you do. If you did, you would have known how to value me."

As if in silent proof and answer, Philip's face went slowly into an expression intended as a smile of amusement, yet holding nothing but fear and malice. "You won't be able to quit and run away," said Philip. "You can't run away without money."

It seemed to strike its goal. Rearden stopped short, then chuckled. "Thanks, Philip," he said.

"Uh?" Philip gave a nervous jerk of bewilderment.

"So that's the purpose of the attachment order. That's what your friends are afraid of. I knew they were getting set to spring something on me today. I didn't know that the attachment was their idea of cutting off escape." He turned incredulously to look at his mother. "And that's why you had to see me *today*, before the conference in New York."

"Mother didn't know it!" cried Philip, then caught himself and cried louder. "I don't know what you're talking about! I haven't said anything! I haven't said it!" His fear now seemed to have some much less mystic and much more practical quality.

"Don't worry, you poor little louse, I won't tell them that you've told me anything. And if you were trying—"

He did not finish; he looked at the three faces before him, and a sudden smile ended his sentence, a smile of weariness, of pity, of incredulous revulsion. He was seeing the final contradiction, the grotesque absurdity at the end of the irrationalists' game; the men in