

badly. Isn't it generally conceded that when you hire a man for a job, it is his need that counts, not his ability? Doesn't everyone believe that in order to get the goods, all you have to do is need them? I have carried out every moral precept of our age. I expected gratitude and a citation of honor. I do not understand why I am being damned."

In the silence of those who had listened, the sole comment was the shrill, sudden giggle of Betty Pope: she had understood nothing, but she saw the look of helpless fury on James Taggart's face.

People were looking at Taggart, expecting an answer. They were indifferent to the issue, they were merely amused by the spectacle of someone's embarrassment. Taggart achieved a patronizing smile.

"You don't expect me to take this seriously?" he asked.

"There was a time," Francisco answered, "when I did not believe that anyone could take it seriously. I was wrong."

"This is outrageous!" Taggart's voice started to rise. "It's perfectly outrageous to treat your public responsibilities with such thoughtless levity!" He turned to hurry away.

Francisco shrugged, spreading his hands. "You see? I didn't think you wanted to speak to me."

Rearden stood alone, far at the other end of the room. Philip noticed him, approached and waved to Lillian, calling her over.

"Lillian, I don't think that Henry is having a good time," he said, smiling; one could not tell whether the mockery of his smile was directed at Lillian or at Rearden. "Can't we do something about it?"

"Oh, nonsense!" said Rearden.

"I wish I knew what to do about it, Philip," said Lillian. "I've always wished Henry would learn to relax. He's so grimly serious about everything. He's such a rigid Puritan. I've always wanted to see him drunk, just once. But I've given up. What would you suggest?"

"Oh, I don't know! But he shouldn't be standing around all by himself."

"Drop it," said Rearden. While thinking dimly that he did not want to hurt their feelings, he could not prevent himself from adding, "You don't know how hard I've tried to be left standing all by myself."

"There—you see?" Lillian smiled at Philip. "To enjoy life and people is not so simple as pouring a ton of steel. Intellectual pursuits are not learned in the market place."

Philip chuckled. "It's not intellectual pursuits I'm worried about. How sure are you about that Puritan stuff, Lillian? If I were you, I wouldn't leave him free to look around. There are too many beautiful women here tonight."

"Henry entertaining thoughts of infidelity? You flatter him, Philip. You overestimate his courage." She smiled at Rearden, coldly, for a brief, stressed moment, then moved away.

Rearden looked at his brother. "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, stop playing the Puritan! Can't you take a joke?"

Moving aimlessly through the crowd, Dagny wondered why she had accepted the invitation to this party. The answer astonished her:

it was because she had wanted to see Hank Rearden. Watching him in the crowd, she realized the contrast for the first time. The faces of the others looked like aggregates of interchangeable features, every face oozing to blend into the anonymity of resembling all, and all looking as if they were melting. Rearden's face, with the sharp planes, the pale blue eyes, the ash-blond hair, had the firmness of ice; the uncompromising clarity of its lines made it look, among the others, as if he were moving through a fog, hit by a ray of light.

Her eyes kept returning to him involuntarily. She never caught him glancing in her direction. She could not believe that he was avoiding her intentionally; there could be no possible reason for it; yet she felt certain that he was. She wanted to approach him and convince herself that she was mistaken. Something stopped her; she could not understand her own reluctance.

Rearden bore patiently a conversation with his mother and two ladies whom she wished him to entertain with stories of his youth and his struggle. He complied, telling himself that she was proud of him in her own way. But he felt as if something in her manner kept suggesting that she had nursed him through his struggle and that she was the source of his success. He was glad when she let him go. Then he escaped once more to the recess of the window.

He stood there for a while, leaning on a sense of privacy as if it were a physical support.

"Mr. Rearden," said a strangely quiet voice beside him, "permit me to introduce myself. My name is d'Anconia."

Rearden turned, startled; d'Anconia's manner and voice had a quality he had seldom encountered before: a tone of authentic respect.

"How do you do," he answered. His voice was brusque and dry; but he had answered.

"I have observed that Mrs. Rearden has been trying to avoid the necessity of presenting me to you, and I can guess the reason. Would you prefer that I leave your house?"

The action of naming an issue instead of evading it, was so unlike the usual behavior of all the men he knew, it was such a sudden, startling relief, that Rearden remained silent for a moment, studying d'Anconia's face. Francisco had said it very simply, neither as a reproach nor a plea, but in a manner which, strangely, acknowledged Rearden's dignity and his own.

"No," said Rearden. "whatever else you guessed, I did not say that."

"Thank you. In that case, you will allow me to speak to you."

"Why should you wish to speak to me?"

"My motives cannot interest you at present."

"Mine is not the sort of conversation that could interest you at all."

"You are mistaken about one of us, Mr. Rearden, or both. I came to this party solely in order to meet you."

There had been a faint tone of amusement in Rearden's voice; now it hardened into a hint of contempt. "You started by playing it straight. Stick to it."

"I am."

"What did you want to meet me for? In order to make me lose money?"

Francisco looked straight at him. "Yes—eventually."

"What is it, this time? A gold mine?"

Francisco shook his head slowly; the conscious deliberation of the movement gave it an air that was almost sadness. "No," he said, "I don't want to sell you anything. As a matter of fact, I did not attempt to sell the copper mine to James Taggart, either. He came to me for it. You won't."

Rearden chuckled. "If you understand that much, we have at least a sensible basis for conversation. Proceed on that. If you don't have some fancy investment in mind, what did you want to meet me for?"

"In order to become acquainted with you."

"That's not an answer. It's just another way of saying the same thing."

"Not quite, Mr. Rearden."

"Unless you mean—in order to gain my confidence?"

"No. I don't like people who speak or think in terms of gaining anybody's confidence. If one's actions are honest, one does not need the predicated confidence of others, only their rational perception. The person who craves a moral blank check of that kind, has dishonest intentions, whether he admits it to himself or not."

Rearden's startled glance at him was like the involuntary thrust of a hand grasping for support in a desperate need. The glance betrayed how much he wanted to find the sort of man he thought he was seeing. Then Rearden lowered his eyes; almost closing them, slowly, shutting out the vision and the need. His face was hard, it had an expression of severity, an inner severity directed at himself; it looked austere and lonely.

"All right," he said tonelessly. "What do you want, if it's not my confidence?"

"I want to learn to understand you."

"What for?"

"For a reason of my own which need not concern you at present."

"What do you want to understand about me?"

Francisco looked silently out at the darkness. The fire of the mills was dying down. There was only a faint tinge of red left on the edge of the earth, just enough to outline the scraps of clouds ripped by the tortured battle of the storm in the sky. Dim shapes kept sweeping through space and vanishing, shapes which were branches, but looked as if they were the fury of the wind made visible.

"It's a terrible night for any animal caught unprotected on that plain," said Francisco d'Anconia. "This is when one should appreciate the meaning of being a man."

Rearden did not answer for a moment; then he said, as if in answer to himself, a tone of wonder in his voice, "Funny . . ."

"What?"

"You told me what I was thinking just a while ago . . ."

"You were?"

". . . only I didn't have the words for it."