

"Shall I tell you the rest of the words?"

"Go ahead."

"You stood here and watched the storm with the greatest pride one can ever feel—because you are able to have summer flowers and half-naked women in your house on a night like this, in demonstration of your victory over that storm. And if it weren't for you, most of those who are here would be left helpless at the mercy of that wind in the middle of some such plain."

"How did you know that?"

In time with his question, Rearden realized that it was not his thoughts this man had named, but his most hidden, most personal emotion; and that he, who would never confess his emotions to anyone, had confessed it in his question. He saw the faintest flicker in Francisco's eyes, as of a smile or a check mark.

"What would *you* know about a pride of that kind?" Rearden asked sharply, as if the contempt of the second question could erase the confidence of the first.

"That is what I felt once, when I was young."

Rearden looked at him. There was neither mockery nor self-pity in Francisco's face; the fine, sculptured planes and the clear, blue eyes held a quiet composure, the face was open, offered to any blow, unflinching.

"Why do you want to talk about it?" Rearden asked, prompted by a moment's reluctant compassion.

"Let us say—by way of gratitude, Mr. Rearden."

"Gratitude to me?"

"If you will accept it."

Rearden's voice hardened. "I haven't asked for gratitude. I don't need it."

"I have not said you needed it. But of all those whom you are saving from the storm tonight, I am the only one who will offer it."

After a moment's silence, Rearden asked, his voice low with a sound which was almost a threat. "What are you trying to do?"

"I am calling your attention to the nature of those for whom you are working."

"It would take a man who's never done an honest day's work in his life, to think or say that." The contempt in Rearden's voice had a note of relief; he had been disarmed by a doubt of his judgment on the character of his adversary; now he felt certain once more. "You wouldn't understand it if I told you that the man who works, works for himself, even if he does carry the whole wretched bunch of you along. Now I'll guess what you're thinking: go ahead, say that it's evil, that I'm selfish, conceited, heartless, cruel. I am. I don't want any part of that tripe about working for others. I'm not."

For the first time, he saw the look of a personal reaction in Francisco's eyes, the look of something eager and young. "The only thing that's wrong in what you said," Francisco answered, "is that you permit anyone to call it evil." In Rearden's pause of incredulous silence, he pointed at the crowd in the drawing room. "Why are you willing to carry them?"

"Because they're a bunch of miserable children who struggle to

remain alive, desperately and very badly, while I—I don't even notice the burden."

"Why don't you tell them that?"

"What?"

"That you're working for your own sake, not theirs."

"They know it."

"Oh yes, they know it. Every single one of them here knows it. But they don't think you do. And the aim of all their efforts is to keep you from knowing it."

"Why should I care what they think?"

"Because it's—a battle in which one must make one's stand clear."

"A battle? What battle? I hold the whip hand. I don't fight the disarmed."

"Are they? They have a weapon against you. It's their only weapon, but it's a terrible one. Ask yourself what it is, some time."

"Where do you see any evidence of it?"

"In the unforgivable fact that you're as unhappy as you are."

Rearden could accept any form of reproach, abuse, damnation anyone chose to throw at him: the only human reaction which he would not accept was pity. The stab of a coldly rebellious anger brought him back to the full context of the moment. He spoke, fighting not to acknowledge the nature of the emotion rising within him. "What sort of effrontery are you indulging in? What's your motive?"

"Let us say—to give you the words you need, for the time when you'll need them."

"Why should you want to speak to me on such a subject?"

"In the hope that you will remember it."

What he felt, thought Rearden, was anger at the incomprehensible fact that he had allowed himself to enjoy this conversation. He felt a dim sense of betrayal, the hint of an unknown danger. "Do you expect me to forget what you are?" he asked, knowing that this was what he had forgotten.

"I do not expect you to think of me at all."

Under his anger, the emotion which Rearden would not acknowledge remained unstated and unthought; he knew it only as a hint of pain. Had he faced it, he would have known that he still heard Francisco's voice saying, "I am the only one who will offer it . . . if you will accept it. . . ." He heard the words and the strangely solemn inflection of the quiet voice and an inexplicable answer of his own, something within him that wanted to cry yes, to accept, to tell this man that he accepted, that he needed it—though there was no name for what he needed, it was not gratitude, and he knew that it was not gratitude this man had meant.

Aloud, he said, "I didn't seek to talk to you. But you've asked for it and you're going to hear it. To me, there's only one form of human depravity—the man without a purpose."

"That is true."

"I can forgive all those others, they're not vicious, they're merely helpless. But you—you're the kind who can't be forgiven."

"It is against the sin of forgiveness that I wanted to warn you."

"You had the greatest chance in life. What have you done with it? If you have the mind to understand all the things you said, how can you speak to me at all? How can you face anyone after the sort of irresponsible destruction you've perpetrated in that Mexican business?"

"It is your right to condemn me for it, if you wish."

Dagny stood by the corner of the window recess, listening. They did not notice her. She had seen them together and she had approached, drawn by an impulse she could not explain or resist; it seemed crucially important that she know what these two men said to each other.

She had heard their last few sentences. She had never thought it possible that she would see Francisco taking a beating. He could smash any adversary in any form of encounter. Yet he stood, offering no defense. She knew that it was not indifference; she knew his face well enough to see the effort his calm cost him—she saw the faint line of a muscle pulled tight across his cheek.

"Of all those who live by the ability of others," said Rearden, "you're the one real parasite."

"I have given you grounds to think so."

"Then what right have you to talk about the meaning of being a man? You're the one who has betrayed it."

"I am sorry if I have offended you by what you may rightly consider as a presumption."

Francisco bowed and turned to go. Rearden said involuntarily, not knowing that the question negated his anger, that it was a plea to stop this man and hold him, "What did you want to learn to understand about me?"

Francisco turned. The expression of his face had not changed; it was still a look of gravely courteous respect. "I have learned it," he answered.

Rearden stood watching him as he walked off into the crowd. The figures of a butler, with a crystal dish, and of Dr. Pritchett, stooping to choose another canapé, hid Francisco from sight. Rearden glanced out at the darkness: nothing could be seen there but the wind.

Dagny stepped forward, when he came out of the recess; she smiled, openly inviting conversation. He stopped. It seemed to her that he had stopped reluctantly. She spoke hastily, to break the silence. "Hank, why do you have so many intellectuals of the looter persuasion here? I wouldn't have them in my house."

This was not what she had wanted to say to him. But she did not know what she wanted to say; never before had she felt herself left wordless in his presence.

She saw his eyes narrowing, like a door being closed. "I see no reason why one should not invite them to a party," he answered coldly.

"Oh, I didn't mean to criticize your choice of guests. But . . . Well, I've been trying not to learn which one of them is Bertram Scudder. If I do, I'll slap his face." She tried to sound casual. "I don't want to create a scene, but I'm not sure I'll be able to control myself. I