

into the nearest chair, watching him, nervously uncertain of whether he would follow her example.

"What was it you wanted?" he asked, sitting down.

His mother sat erect and oddly hunched, her shoulders raised, her head half-lowered. "Mercy, Henry," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you understand me?"

"No."

"Well"—she spread her hands in an untidily fluttering gesture of helplessness—"Well . . ." Her eyes darted about, struggling to escape his attentive glance. "Well, there are so many things to say and . . . and I don't know how to say them, but . . . well, there's one practical matter, but it's not important by itself . . . it's not why I called you here . . ."

"What is it?"

"The practical matter? Our allowance checks—Philip's and mine. It's the first of the month, but on account of that attachment order, the checks couldn't come through. You know that, don't you?"

"I know it."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, what are *you* going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

His mother sat staring at him, as if counting the seconds of silence. "Nothing, Henry?"

"I have no power to do anything."

They were watching his face with a kind of searching intensity; he felt certain that his mother had told him the truth, that immediate financial worry was not their purpose, that it was only the symbol of a much wider issue.

"But, Henry, we're caught short."

"So was I."

"But can't you send us some cash or something?"

"They gave me no warning, no time to get any cash."

"Then . . . Look, Henry, the thing was so unexpected, it scared people. I guess—the grocery store refuses to give us credit, unless *you* ask for it. I think they want you to sign a credit card or something. So will you speak to them and arrange it?"

"I will not."

"You won't?" She choked on a small gasp. "Why?"

"I will not assume obligations that I can't fulfill."

"What do you mean?"

"I will not assume debts I have no way of repaying."

"What do you mean, no way? That attachment is only some sort of technicality, it's only temporary, everybody knows that!"

"Do they? I don't."

"But, Henry—a grocery bill! You're not sure you'll be able to pay a grocery bill, *you*, with all the millions you own?"

"I'm not going to defraud the grocer by pretending that I own those millions."

"What are you talking about? Who owns them?"

"Nobody."

"What do you mean?"

"Mother, I think you understand me fully. I think you understood it before I did. There isn't any ownership left in existence or any property. It's what you approved of and believed in for years. You wanted me tied. I'm tied. Now it's too late to play any games about it."

"Are you going to let some political ideas of yours--" She saw the look on his face and stopped abruptly.

Lillian sat looking down at the floor, as if afraid to glance up at this moment. Philip sat cracking his knuckles.

His mother dragged her eyes into focus again and whispered, "Don't abandon us, Henry." Some faint stab of life in her voice told him that the lid of her real purpose was cracking open. "These are terrible times, and we're scared. That's the truth of it, Henry, we're scared, because you're turning away from us. Oh, I don't mean just that grocery bill, but that's a sign—a year ago you wouldn't have let that happen to us. Now . . . now you don't care." She made an expectant pause. "Do you?"

"No."

"Well . . . well, I guess the blame is ours. That's what I wanted to tell you—that we know we're to blame. We haven't treated you right, all these years. We've been unfair to you, we've made you suffer, we've used you and given you no thanks in return. We're guilty, Henry, we've sinned against you, and we confess it. What more can we say to you now? Will you find it in your heart to forgive us?"

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked, in the clear, flat tone of a business conference.

"I don't know! Who am I to know? But that's not what I'm talking of right now. Not of *doing*, only of *feeling*. It's your feeling that I'm begging you for, Henry—just your feeling—even if we don't deserve it. You're generous and strong. Will you cancel the past, Henry? Will you forgive us?"

The look of terror in her eyes was real. A year ago, he would have told himself that this was her way of making amends; he would have choked his revulsion against her words, words which conveyed nothing to him but the fog of the meaningless; he would have violated his mind to give them meaning, even if he did not understand; he would have ascribed to her the virtue of sincerity in her own terms, even if they were not his. But he was through with granting respect to any terms other than his own.

"Will you forgive us?"

"Mother, it would be best not to speak of that. Don't press me to tell you why. I think you know it as well as I do. If there's anything you want done, tell me what it is. There's nothing else to discuss."

"But I don't understand you! I don't! That's what I called you here for—to ask your forgiveness! Are you going to refuse to answer me?"

"Very well. What would it mean, my forgiveness?"

"Uh?"

"I said, what would it mean?"

She spread her hands out in an astonished gesture to indicate the self-evident. "Why, it . . . it would make us feel better."

"Will it change the past?"

"It would make us feel better to know that you've forgiven it."

"Do you wish me to pretend that the past has not existed?"

"Oh God, Henry, can't you see? All we want is only to know that you . . . that you feel some concern for us."

"I don't feel it. Do you wish me to fake it?"

"But that's what I'm begging you for—to *feel* it!"

"On what ground?"

"Ground?"

"In exchange for what?"

"Henry, Henry, it's not business we're talking about, not steel tonnages and bank balances, it's *feelings*—and you talk like a trader!"

"I am one."

What he saw in her eyes was terror—not the helpless terror of struggling and failing to understand, but the terror of being pushed toward the edge where to avoid understanding would no longer be possible.

"Look, Henry," said Philip hastily. "Mother can't understand those things. We don't know how to approach you. We can't speak your language."

"I don't speak yours."

"What she's trying to say is that we're sorry. We're terribly sorry that we've hurt you. You think we're not paying for it, but we are. We're suffering remorse."

The pain in Philip's face was real. A year ago, Rearden would have felt pity. Now, he knew that they had held him through nothing but his reluctance to hurt them, his fear of *their* pain. He was not afraid of it any longer.

"We're sorry, Henry. We know we've harmed you. We wish we could atone for it. But what can we do? The past is past. We can't undo it."

"Neither can I."

"You can accept our repentance," said Lillian, in a voice glassy with caution. "I have nothing to gain from you now. I only want you to know that whatever I've done, I've done it because I loved you."

He turned away, without answering.

"Henry!" cried his mother. "What's happened to you? What's changed you like that? You don't seem to be human any more! You keep pressing us for answers, when we haven't any answers to give. You keep beating us with logic—what's logic at a time like this?—what's logic when people are suffering?"

"We can't help it!" cried Philip.

"We're at your mercy," said Lillian.

They were throwing their pleas at a face that could not be reached. They did not know—and their panic was the last of their struggle to escape the knowledge—that his merciless sense of justice, which had