

won't be any evidence of deliberate destruction. Everything happened in the normal, explicable, justifiable course of plain incompetence. Incompetence isn't supposed to be punished nowadays, is it? The boys in Buenos Aires and the boys in Santiago will probably want to hand me a subsidy, by way of consolation and reward. There's still a great part of the d'Anconia Copper Company left, though a great part of it is gone for good. Nobody will say that I've done it intentionally. You may think what you wish."

"I think you're the guiltiest man in this room," said Rearden quietly, wearily; even the fire of his anger was gone; he felt nothing but the emptiness left by the death of a great hope. "I think you're worse than anything I had supposed. . . ."

Francisco looked at him with a strange half-smile of serenity, the serenity of a victory over pain, and did not answer.

It was their silence that let them hear the voices of the two men who stood a few steps away, and they turned to look at the speakers.

The stocky, elderly man was obviously a businessman of the conscientious, unspectacular kind. His formal dress suit was of good quality, but of a cut fashionable twenty years before, with the faintest tinge of green at the seams; he had had few occasions to wear it. His shirt studs were ostentatiously too large, but it was the pathetic ostentation of an heirloom, intricate pieces of old-fashioned workmanship, that had probably come to him through four generations, like his business. His face had the expression which, these days, was the mark of an honest man: an expression of bewilderment. He was looking at his companion, trying hard—conscientiously, helplessly, hopelessly—to understand.

His companion was younger and shorter, a small man with lumpy flesh, with a chest thrust forward and the thin points of a mustache thrust up. He was saying, in a tone of patronizing boredom, "Well, I don't know. All of you are crying about rising costs, it seems to be the stock complaint nowadays, it's the usual whine of people whose profits are squeezed a little. I don't know, we'll have to see, we'll have to decide whether we'll permit you to make any profits or not."

Rearden glanced at Francisco—and saw a face that went beyond his conception of what the purity of a single purpose could do to a human countenance: it was the most merciless face one could ever be permitted to see. He had thought of himself as ruthless, but he knew that he could not match this level, naked, implacable look, dead to all feeling but justice. Whatever the rest of him—thought Rearden—the man who could experience this was a giant.

It was only a moment. Francisco turned to him, his face normal, and said very quietly, "I've changed my mind, Mr. Rearden. I'm glad that you came to this party. I want you to see this."

Then, raising his voice, Francisco said suddenly, in the gay, loose, piercing tone of a man of complete irresponsibility, "You won't grant me that loan, Mr. Rearden? It puts me on a terrible spot. I must get the money—I must raise it tonight—I must raise it before the Stock Exchange opens in the morning, because otherwise—"

He did not have to continue, because the little man with the mustache was clutching at his arm.

Rearden had never believed that a human body could change dimensions within one's sight, but he saw the man shrinking in weight, in posture, in form, as if the air were let out of his lungs, and what had been an arrogant ruler was suddenly a piece of scrap that could not be a threat to anyone.

"Is . . . is there something wrong, Señor d'Anconia? I mean, on . . . on the Stock Exchange?"

Francisco jerked his finger to his lips, with a frightened glance. "Keep quiet," he whispered. "For God's sake, keep quiet!"

The man was shaking. "Something's . . . wrong?"

"You don't happen to own any d'Anconia Copper stock, do you?" The man nodded, unable to speak. "Oh my, that's too bad! Well listen, I'll tell you, if you give me your word of honor that you won't repeat it to anyone. You don't want to start a panic."

"Word of honor . . ." gasped the man.

"What you'd better do is run to your stockbroker and sell as fast as you can--because things haven't been going too well for d'Anconia Copper. I'm trying to raise some money, but if I don't succeed, you'll be lucky if you'll have ten cents on your dollar tomorrow morning.--oh my! I forgot that you can't reach your stockbroker before tomorrow morning--well, it's too bad, but--"

The man was running across the room, pushing people out of his way, like a torpedo shot into the crowd.

"Watch," said Francisco austere, turning to Rearden.

The man was lost in the crowd, they could not see him; they could not tell to whom he was selling his secret or whether he had enough of his cunning left to make it a trade with those who held favors--but they saw the wake of his passage spreading through the room, the sudden cuts splitting the crowd, like the first few cracks, then like the accelerating branching that runs through a wall about to crumble, the streaks of emptiness slashed, not by a human touch, but by the impersonal breath of terror.

There were the voices abruptly choked off, the pools of silence, then sounds of a different nature, the rising, hysterical inflections of uselessly repeated questions, the unnatural whispers, a woman's scream, the few spaced, forced giggles of those still trying to pretend that nothing was happening.

There were spots of immobility in the motion of the crowd, like spreading blotches of paralysis; there was a sudden stillness, as if a motor had been cut off; then came the frantic, jerking, purposeless, rudderless movement of objects bumping down a hill by the blind mercy of gravitation and of every rock they hit on the way. People were running out, running to telephones, running to one another, clutching or pushing the bodies around them at random. These men, the most powerful men in the country, those who held, unanswerable to any power, the power over every man's food and every man's enjoyment of his span of years on earth--these men had become a pile of rubble, clattering in the wind of panic, the rubble left of a structure when its key pillar has been cut.