

he asked, a little too casually, "have you got any family? Any relatives you'd like to see?"

"No."

"Any friends?"

"No."

"Have you got a sweetheart?"

"No."

"It's just that I wouldn't want you to get lonesome. We can let you have visitors, any visitor you name, if there's anyone you care for."

"There isn't."

Mr. Thompson paused at the door, turned to look at Galt for a moment and shook his head. "I can't figure you out," he said. "I just can't figure you out."

Galt smiled, shrugged and answered, "Who is John Galt?"

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A whirling mesh of sleet hung over the entrance of the Wayne-Falkland Hotel, and the armed guards looked oddly, desolately helpless in the circle of light: they stood hunched, heads down, hugging their guns for warmth—as if, were they to release all the spitting violence of their bullets at the storm, it would not bring comfort to their bodies.

From across the street, Chick Morrison, the Morale Conditioner—on his way to a conference on the fifty-ninth floor—noted that the rare, lethargic passers-by were not taking the trouble to glance at the guards, as they did not take the trouble to glance at the soggy headlines of a pile of unsold newspaper on the stand of a ragged, shivering vendor: "John Galt Promises Prosperity."

Chick Morrison shook his head uneasily six days of front-page stories—about the united efforts of the country's leaders working with John Galt to shape new policies—had brought no results. People were moving, he observed, as if they did not care to see anything around them. No one took any notice of his existence, except a ragged old woman who stretched out her hand to him silently, as he approached the lights of the entrance; he hurried past, and only drops of sleet fell on the gnarled, naked palm.

It was his memory of the streets that gave a jagged sound to Chick Morrison's voice, when he spoke to a circle of faces in Mr. Thompson's room on the fifty-ninth floor. The look of the faces matched the sound of his voice.

"It doesn't seem to work," he said, pointing to a pile of reports from his public-pulse-takers. "All the press releases about our collaborating with John Galt don't seem to make any difference. People don't care. They don't believe a word of it. Some of them say that he'll never collaborate with us. Most of them don't even believe that we've got him. I don't know what's happened to people. They don't believe anything any more." He sighed. "Three factories went out of business in Cleveland, day before yesterday. Five factories closed in Chicago yesterday. In San Francisco—"

"I know, I know," snapped Mr. Thompson, tightening the muffler around his throat: the building's furnace had gone out of order.

"There's no choice about it: he's got to give in and take over. He's got to!"

Wesley Mouch glanced at the ceiling. "Don't ask me to talk to him again," he said, and shuddered. "I've tried. One can't talk to that man."

"I . . . I can't, Mr. Thompson!" cried Chick Morrison, in answer to the stop of Mr. Thompson's roving glance. "I'll resign, if you want me to! I can't talk to him again! Don't make me!"

"Nobody can talk to him," said Dr. Floyd Ferris. "It's a waste of time. He doesn't hear a word you say."

Fred Kinnan chuckled. "You mean, he hears too much, don't you? And what's worse, he answers it."

"Well, why don't *you* try it again?" snapped Mouch. "You seem to have enjoyed it. Why don't *you* try to persuade him?"

"I know better," said Kinnan. "Don't fool yourself, brother. Nobody's going to persuade him, I won't try it twice. . . . Enjoyed it?" he added, with a look of astonishment. "Yeah . . . yeah, I guess I did."

"What's the matter with you? Are you falling for him? Are you letting him win you over?"

"Me?" Kinnan chuckled mirthlessly. "What use would he have for me? I'll be the first one to go down the drain when he wins. . . . It's only"—he glanced wistfully up at the ceiling—"it's only that he's a man who talks straight."

"He won't win!" snapped Mr. Thompson. "It's out of the question!"

There was a long pause.

"There are hunger riots in West Virginia," said Wesley Mouch. "And the farmers in Texas have—"

"Mr. Thompson!" said Chick Morrison desperately. "Maybe . . . maybe we could let the public see him . . . at a mass rally . . . or maybe on TV . . . just see him, just so they'd believe that we've really got him. . . . It would give people hope, for a while . . . it would give us a little time. . . ."

"Too dangerous," snapped Dr. Ferris. "Don't let him come anywhere near the public. There's no limit to what he'll permit himself to do."

"He's got to give in," said Mr. Thompson stubbornly. "He's got to join us. One of you must—"

"No!" screamed Eugene Lawson. "Not me! I don't want to see him at all! Not once! I don't want to have to believe it!"

"What?" asked James Taggart; his voice had a note of dangerously reckless mockery; Lawson did not answer. "What are you scared of?" The contempt in Taggart's voice sounded abnormally stressed, as if the sight of someone's greater fear were tempting him to defy his own. "What is it you're scared to believe, Gene?"

"I won't believe it! I won't!" Lawson's voice was half-snarl, half-whimper. "You can't make me lose my faith in humanity! You shouldn't permit such a man to be possible! A ruthless egoist who—"

"You're a fine bunch of intellectuals, you are," said Mr. Thompson scornfully. "I thought you could talk to him in his own lingo—but

he's scared the lot of you. Ideas? Where are your ideas now? Do something! Make him join us! Win him over!"

"Trouble is, he doesn't want anything," said Mouch. "What can we offer a man who doesn't want anything?"

"You mean," said Kinnan, "what can we offer a man who wants to live?"

"Shut up!" screamed James Taggart. "Why did you say that? What made you say it?"

"What made you scream?" asked Kinnan.

"Keep quiet, all of you!" ordered Mr. Thompson. "You're fine at fighting one another, but when it comes to fighting a real man—"

"So he's got you, too?" yelled Lawson.

"Aw, pipe down," said Mr. Thompson wearily. "He's the toughest bastard I've ever been up against. You wouldn't understand that. He's as hard as they come . . ." The faintest tinge of admiration crept into his voice. "As hard as they come . . ."

"There are ways to persuade tough bastards," drawled Dr. Ferris casually, "as I've explained to you."

"No!" cried Mr. Thompson. "No! Shut up! I won't listen to you! I won't hear of it!" His hands moved frantically, as if struggling to dispel something he would not name. "I told him . . . that that's not true . . . that we're not . . . that I'm not a . . ." He shook his head violently, as if his own words were some unprecedented form of danger. "No, look, boys, what I mean is, we've got to be practical . . . and cautious. Damn cautious. We've got to handle it peacefully. We can't afford to antagonize him or . . . or harm him. We don't dare take any chances on . . . anything happening to him. Because . . . because, if he goes, we go. He's our last hope. Make no mistake about it. If he goes, we perish. You all know it." His eyes swept over the faces around him: they knew it.

The sleet of the following morning fell down on front-page stories announcing that a constructive, harmonious conference between John Galt and the country's leaders, on the previous afternoon, had produced "The John Galt Plan," soon to be announced. The snowflakes of the evening fell down upon the furniture of an apartment house whose front wall had collapsed—and upon a crowd of men waiting silently at the closed cashier's window of a plant whose owner had vanished.

"The farmers of South Dakota," Wesley Mouch reported to Mr. Thompson, next morning, "are marching on the state capital, burning every government building on their way, and every home worth more than ten thousand dollars."

"California's blown to pieces," he reported in the evening. "There's a civil war going on there—if that's what it is, which nobody seems to be sure of. They've declared that they're seceding from the Union, but nobody knows who's now in power. There's armed fighting all over the state, between a 'People's Party,' led by Ma Chalmers and her soybean cult of Orient-admirers—and something called 'Back to God,' led by some former oil-field owners."

"Miss Taggart!" moaned Mr. Thompson, when she entered his