

for which he could wish to be loved. He wondered what response they could hope to obtain from him in such manner—if his response was what they wanted. And it was, he thought; else why those constant complaints, those unceasing accusations about his indifference? Why that chronic air of suspicion, as if they were waiting to be hurt? He had never had a desire to hurt them, but he had always felt their defensive, reproachful expectation; they seemed wounded by anything he said, it was not a matter of his words or actions, it was almost . . . almost as if they were wounded by the mere fact of his being. Don't start imagining the insane—he told himself severely, struggling to face the riddle with the strictest of his ruthless sense of justice. He could not condemn them without understanding; and he could not understand.

Did he like them? No, he thought; he had wanted to like them, which was not the same. He had wanted it in the name of some unstated potentiality which he had once expected to see in any human being. He felt nothing for them now, nothing but the merciless zero of indifference, not even the regret of a loss. Did he need any person as part of his life? Did he miss the feeling he had wanted to feel? No, he thought. Had he ever missed it? Yes, he thought, in his youth; not any longer.

His sense of exhaustion was growing; he realized that it was boredom. He owed them the courtesy of hiding it, he thought—and sat motionless, fighting a desire for sleep that was turning into physical pain.

His eyes were closing, when he felt two soft, moist fingers touching his hand: Paul Larkin had pulled a chair to his side and was leaning over for a private conversation.

"I don't care what the industry says about it, Hank, you've got a great product in Rearden Metal, a great product, it will make a fortune, like everything you touch."

"Yes," said Rearden. "it will."

"I just. . . I just hope you don't run into trouble."

"What trouble?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . the way things are nowadays . . . there's people, who . . . but how can we tell? . . . anything can happen . . ."

"What trouble?"

Larkin sat hunched, looking up with his gentle, pleading eyes. His short, plumpish figure always seemed unprotected and incomplete, as if he needed a shell to shrink into at the slightest touch. His wistful eyes, his lost, helpless, appealing smile served as substitute for the shell. The smile was disarming, like that of a boy who throws himself at the mercy of an incomprehensible universe. He was fifty-three years old.

"Your public relations aren't any too good, Hank," he said. "You've always had a bad press."

"So what?"

"You're not popular, Hank."

"I haven't heard any complaints from my customers."

"That's not what I mean. You ought to hire yourself a good press agent to sell *you* to the public."

"What for? It's steel that I'm selling"

"But you don't want to have the public against you Public opinion, you know—it can mean a lot"

"I don't think the public's against me And I don't think that it means a damn, one way or another"

"The newspapers are against you"

"They have time to waste I haven't"

"I don't like it, Hank It's not good"

"What?"

"What they write about you"

"What do they write about me?"

"Well you know the stuff That you're intractable That you're ruthless That you won't allow anyone any voice in the running of your mills That your only goal is to make steel and to make money"

"But that is my only goal"

But you shouldn't say it"

"Why not? What is it I'm supposed to say?"

Oh I don't know But your mills—

"They're my mills aren't they?"

"Yes but—but you shouldn't remind people of that too loudly You know how it is nowadays They think that your attitude is anti-social"

"I don't give a damn what they think"

Paul Larkin sighed

What's the matter Paul? What are you driving at?"

"Nothing nothing in particular Only one never knows what can happen in times like these One has to be so careful"

Rearden chuckled You're not trying to worry about me are you?"

"It's just that I'm your friend Hank I'm your friend You know how much I admire you"

Paul Larkin had always been unlucky Nothing he touched ever came off quite well nothing ever quite failed or succeeded He was a businessman but he could not manage to remain for long in any one line of business At the moment he was struggling with a modest plant that manufactured mining equipment

He had clung to Rearden for years in awed admiration He came for advice he asked for loans at times but not often, the loans were modest and were always repaid though not always on time His motive in the relationship seemed to resemble the need of an anemic person who receives a kind of living transfusion from the mere sight of a savagely overabundant vitality

Watching Larkin's efforts, Rearden felt what he did when he watched an ant struggling under the load of a matchstick It's so hard for him, thought Rearden and so easy for me So he gave advice attention and a tactful patient interest whenever he could

"I'm your friend, Hank"

Rearden looked at him inquiringly

Larkin glanced away, as if debating something in his mind After a while, he asked cautiously "How is your man in Washington?"

"Okay. I guess"

"You ought to be sure of it. It's important." He looked up at Rearden, and repeated with a kind of stressed insistence, as if discharging a painful moral duty, "Hank, it's very important."

"I suppose so."

"In fact, that's what I came here to tell you."

"For any special reason?"

Larkin considered it and decided that the duty was discharged. "No," he said.

Rearden disliked the subject. He knew that it was necessary to have a man to protect him from the legislature; all industrialists had to employ such men. But he had never given much attention to this aspect of his business; he could not quite convince himself that it was necessary. An inexplicable kind of distaste, part fastidiousness, part boredom, stopped him whenever he tried to consider it.

"Trouble is, Paul," he said, thinking aloud, "that the men one has to pick for that job are such a crummy lot."

Larkin looked away. "That's life," he said.

"Damned if I see why. Can you tell me that? What's wrong with the world?"

Larkin shrugged sadly. "Why ask useless questions? How deep is the ocean? How high is the sky? Who is John Galt?"

Rearden sat up straight. "No," he said sharply. "No. There's no reason to feel that way."

He got up. His exhaustion had gone while he talked about his business. He felt a sudden spurt of rebellion, a need to recapture and defiantly to reassert his own view of existence, that sense of it which he had held while walking home tonight and which now seemed threatened in some nameless manner.

He paced the room, his energy returning. He looked at his family. They were bewildered, unhappy children—he thought—all of them, even his mother, and he was foolish to resent their ineptitude; it came from their helplessness, not from malice. It was he who had to make himself learn to understand them, since he had so much to give, since they could never share his sense of joyous, boundless power.

He glanced at them from across the room. His mother and Philip were engaged in some eager discussion; but he noted that they were not really eager, they were nervous. Philip sat in a low chair, his stomach forward, his weight on his shoulder blades, as if the miserable discomfort of his position were intended to punish the onlookers.

"What's the matter, Phil?" Rearden asked, approaching him. "You look done in."

"I've had a hard day," said Philip sullenly.

"You're not the only one who works hard," said his mother. "Others have problems, too—even if they're not billion-dollar, transsuper-continental problems like yours."

"Why, that's good. I always thought that Phil should find some interest of his own."

"Good? You mean you like to see your brother sweating his health away? It amuses you, doesn't it? I always thought it did."

"Why, no, Mother. I'd like to help."