

roles of great seductress. But do you know that it works in exactly the same way as what you did at your trial? If you want to defeat any kind of vicious fraud—comply with it literally, adding nothing of your own to disguise its nature. Those women understood. They saw whether there's any satisfaction in being envied by others for a feat one has not achieved. Instead of self-esteem, their publicized romances with me have given them a deeper sense of inferiority: each one of them knows that she's tried and failed. If dragging me into bed is supposed to be her public standard of value, she knows that she couldn't live up to it. I think those women hate me more than any other man on earth. But my secret is safe—because each one of them thinks that she was the only one who failed, while all the others succeeded, so she'll be the more vehement in swearing to our romance and will never admit the truth to anybody."

"But what have you done to your own reputation?"

Francisco shrugged. "Those whom I respect, will know the truth about me, sooner or later. The others"—his face hardened—"the others consider that which I really am as evil. Let them have what they prefer—what I appear to be on the front pages."

"But what for? Why did you do it? Just to teach them a lesson?"

"Hell, no! I wanted to be known as a playboy."

"Why?"

"A playboy is a man who just can't help letting money run through his fingers."

"Why did you want to assume such an ugly sort of role?"

"Camouflage."

"For what?"

"For a purpose of my own."

"What purpose?"

Francisco shook his head. "Don't ask me to tell you that. I've told you more than I should. You'll come to know the rest of it soon, anyway."

"If it's more than you should, why did you tell me?"

"Because . . . you've made me become impatient for the first time in years." The note of a suppressed emotion came back into his voice. "Because I've never wanted anyone to know the truth about me as I wanted you to know it. Because I knew that you'd despise a playboy more than any other sort of man—as I would, too. Playboy? I've never loved but one woman in my life and still do and always will!" It was an involuntary break, and he added, his voice low, "I've never confessed that to anyone . . . not even to her."

"Have you lost her?"

Francisco sat looking off into space; in a moment, he answered tonelessly, "I hope not."

The light of the lamp hit his face from below, and Rearden could not see his eyes, only his mouth drawn in lines of endurance and oddly solemn resignation. Rearden knew that this was a wound not to be probed any further.

With one of his swift changes of mood, Francisco said, "Oh well, it's just a little longer!" and rose to his feet, smiling.

"Since you trust me," said Rearden. "I want to tell you a secret

of mine in exchange. I want you to know how much I trusted you before I came here. And I might need your help later."

"You're the only man left whom I'd like to help."

"There's a great deal that I don't understand about you, but I'm certain of one thing: that you're not a friend of the looters."

"I'm not." There was a hint of amusement in Francisco's face, as at an understatement.

"So I know that you won't betray me if I tell you that I'm going to continue selling Rearden Metal to customers of my own choice in any amount I wish, whenever I see a chance to do it. Right now, I'm getting ready to pour an order twenty times the size of the one they tried me for."

Sitting on the arm of a chair, a few feet away, Francisco leaned forward to look at him silently, frowning, for a long moment. "Do you think that you're fighting them by doing it?" he asked.

"Well, what would *you* call it? Co-operating?"

"You were willing to work and produce Rearden Metal for them at the price of losing your profits, losing your friends, enriching stray bastards who had the pull to rob you, and taking their abuse for the privilege of keeping them alive. Now you're willing to do it at the price of accepting the position of a criminal and the risk of being thrown in jail at any moment—for the sake of keeping in existence a system which can be kept going only by its victims, only by the breaking of its own laws."

"It's not for their system, but for customers whom I can't abandon to the mercy of their system—I intend to outlast that system of theirs—I don't intend to let them stop me, no matter how hard they make it for me—and I don't intend to give up the world to them, even if I am the last man left. Right now, that illegal order is more important to me than the whole of my mills."

Francisco shook his head slowly and did not answer; then he asked, "To which one of your friends in the copper industry are you going to give the valuable privilege of informing on you this time?"

Rearden smiled. "Not this time. This time, I'm dealing with a man I can trust."

"Really? Who is it?"

"You."

Francisco sat up straight. "What?" he asked, his voice so low that he almost succeeded in hiding the sound of a gasp.

Rearden was smiling. "You didn't know that I'm one of your customers now? It was done through a couple of stooges and under a phony name—but I'll need your help to prevent anyone on your staff from becoming inquisitive about it. I need that copper, I need it on time—and I don't care if they arrest me later, so long as I get this through. I know that you've lost all concern for your company, your wealth, your work, because you don't care to deal with looters like Taggart and Boyle. But if you meant all the things you taught me, if I am the last man left whom you respect, you'll help me to survive and to beat them. I've never asked for anyone's help. I'm asking for yours. I need you. I trust you. You've always professed your admiration for me. Well, there's my life in your hands—if you