

those qualities of character which are your highest pride. You have been called selfish for the courage of acting on your own judgment and bearing sole responsibility for your own life. You have been called arrogant for your independent mind. You have been called cruel for your unyielding integrity. You have been called antisocial for the vision that made you venture upon undiscovered roads. You have been called ruthless for the strength and self-discipline of your drive to your purpose. You have been called greedy for the magnificence of your power to create wealth. You, who've expended an inconceivable flow of energy, have been called a parasite. You, who've created abundance where there had been nothing but wastelands and helpless, starving men before you, have been called a robber. You, who've kept them all alive, have been called an exploiter. You, the purest and most moral man among them, have been sneered at as a 'vulgar materialist.' Have you stopped to ask them: by what right?—by what code?—by what standard? No, you have borne it all and kept silent. You bowed to their code and you never upheld your own. You knew what exacting morality was needed to produce a single metal nail, but you let them brand you as immoral. You knew that man needs the strictest code of values to deal with nature, but you thought that you needed no such code to deal with men. You left the deadliest weapon in the hands of your enemies, a weapon you never suspected or understood. Their moral code is their weapon. Ask yourself how deeply and in how many terrible ways you have accepted it. Ask yourself what it is that a code of moral values does to a man's life, and why he can't exist without it, and what happens to him if he accepts the wrong standard, by which the evil is the good. Shall I tell you why you're drawn to me, even though you think you ought to damn me? It's because I'm the first man who has given you what the whole world owes you and what you should have demanded of all men before you dealt with them: a moral sanction."

Rearden whirled to him, then remained still, with a stillness like a gasp. Francisco leaned forward, as if he were reaching the landing of a dangerous flight; and his eyes were steady, but their glance seemed to tremble with intensity.

"You're guilty of a great sin, Mr. Rearden, much guiltier than they tell you, but not in the way they preach. The worst guilt is to accept an undeserved guilt—and that is what you have been doing all your life. You have been paying blackmail, not for your vices, but for your virtues. You have been willing to carry the load of an unearned punishment—and to let it grow the heavier the greater the virtues you practiced. But your virtues were those which keep men alive. Your own moral code—the one you lived by, but never stated, acknowledged or defended—was the code that preserves man's existence. If you were punished for it, what was the nature of those who punished you? Yours was the code of life. What, then, is theirs? What standard of value lies at its root? What is its ultimate purpose? Do you think that what you're facing is merely a conspiracy to seize your wealth? You, who know the source of wealth, should know it's much more and much worse than that. Did you ask me to name

man's motive power? Man's motive power is his moral code. Ask yourself where their code is leading you and what it offers you as your final goal. A viler evil than to murder a man, is to sell him suicide as an act of virtue. A viler evil than to throw a man into a sacrificial furnace, is to demand that he leap in, of his own will, and that he build the furnace, besides. By their own statement, it is *they* who need you and have nothing to offer you in return. By their own statement, you must support them because they cannot survive without you. Consider the obscenity of offering their impotence and their need—their need of *you*—as a justification for your torture. Are you willing to accept it? Do you care to purchase—at the price of your great endurance, at the price of your agony—the satisfaction of the needs of your own destroyers?"

"No!"

"Mr. Rearden," said Francisco, his voice solemnly calm, "if you saw Atlas, the giant who holds the world on his shoulders, if you saw that he stood, blood running down his chest, his knees buckling, his arms trembling but still trying to hold the world aloft with the last of this strength, and the greater his effort the heavier the world bore down on his shoulders—what would you tell him to do?"

"I . . . don't know. What . . . could he do? What would *you* tell him?"

"To shrug."

The clatter of the metal came in a flow of irregular sounds without discernible rhythm, not like the action of a mechanism, but as if some conscious impulse were behind every sudden, tearing rise that went up and crashed, scattering into the faint moan of gears. The glass of the windows tinkled once in a while.

Francisco's eyes were watching Rearden as if he were examining the course of bullets on a battered target. The course was hard to trace: the gaunt figure on the edge of the desk was erect, the cold blue eyes showed nothing but the intensity of a glance fixed upon a great distance, only the inflexible mouth betrayed a line drawn by pain.

"Go on," said Rearden with effort, "continue. You haven't finished, have you?"

"I have barely begun," Francisco's voice was hard

"What . . . are you driving at?"

"You'll know it before I'm through. But first, I want you to answer a question, if you understand the nature of your burden, how can you . . ."

The scream of an alarm siren shattered the space beyond the window and shot like a rocket in a long, thin line to the sky. It held for an instant, then fell, then went on in rising, falling spirals of sound, as if fighting for breath against terror to scream louder. It was the shriek of agony, the call for help, the voice of the mills as of a wounded body crying to hold its soul.

Rearden thought that he leaped for the door the instant the scream hit his consciousness, but he saw that he was an instant late, because Francisco had preceded him. Flung by the blast of the same response as his own, Francisco was flying down the hall, pressing the button