"We were just discussing a most interesting subject," said the earnest matron. "Dr. Pritchett was telling us that nothing is anything."

"He should, undoubtedly, know more than anyone else about that," Francisco answered gravely.

"I wouldn't have supposed that you knew Dr. Pritchett so well, Señor d'Anconia," she said, and wondered why the professor looked displeased by her remark.

"I am an alumnus of the great school that employs Dr. Pritchett at present, the Patrick Henry University. But I studied under one of his predecessors—Hugh Akston."

"Hugh Akston!" the attractive young woman gasped. "But you couldn't have, Señor d'Anconia! You're not old enough. I thought he was one of those great names of . . . of the last century."

"Perhaps in spirit, madame. Not in fact."

"But I thought he died years ago."

"Why, no. He's still alive."

"Then why don't we ever hear about him anymore?"

"He retired, nine years ago."

"Isn't it odd? When a politician or a movie star retires, we read front page stories about it. But when a philosopher retires, people do not even notice it."

"They do, eventually."

A young man said, astonished, "I thought Hugh Akston was one of those classics that nobody studied any more, except in histories of philosophy. I read an article recently which referred to him as the last of the great advocates of reason."

"Just what did Hugh Akston teach?" asked the earnest matron.

Francisco answered, "He taught that everything is something."

"Your loyalty to your teacher is laudable, Señor d'Anconia," said Dr. Pritchett dryly. "May we take it that you are an example of the practical results of his teaching?"

"I am."

James Taggart had approached the group and was waiting to be noticed.

"Hello, Francisco."

"Good evening, James."

"What a wonderful coincidence, seeing you here! I've been very anxious to speak to you."

"That's new. You haven't always been."

"Now you're joking, just like in the old days." Taggart was moving slowly, as if casually, away from the group, hoping to draw Francisco after him. "You know that there's not a person in this room who wouldn't love to talk to you."

"Really? I'd be inclined to suspect the opposite." Francisco had followed obediently, but stopped within hearing distance of the others.

"I have tried in every possible way to get in touch with you," said Taggart, "but . . . but circumstances didn't permit me to succeed."

"Are you trying to hide from me the fact that I refused to see you?"

"Well . . . that is . . . I mean, why did you refuse?"

"I couldn't imagine what you wanted to speak to me about."

"The San Sebastián Mines, of course!" Taggart's voice rose a little.

"Why, what about them?"

"But . . . Now, look, Francisco, this is serious. It's a disaster, an unprecedented disaster—and nobody can make any sense out of it. I don't know what to think. I don't understand it at all. I have a right to know."

"A right? Aren't you being old-fashioned, James? But what is it you want to know?"

"Well, first of all, that nationalization—what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?!"

"But surely you don't want me to do anything about it. My mines and your railroad were seized by the will of the people. You wouldn't want me to oppose the will of the people, would you?"

"Francisco, this is not a laughing matter!"

"I never thought it was."

"I'm entitled to an explanation! You owe your stockholders an account of the whole disgraceful affair! Why did you pick a worthless mine? Why did you waste all those millions? What sort of rotten swindle was it?"

Francisco stood looking at him in polite astonishment. "Why, James," he said, "I thought you would approve of it."

"Approve?!"

"I thought you would consider the San Sebastián Mines as the practical realization of an ideal of the highest moral order. Remembering that you and I have disagreed so often in the past, I thought you would be gratified to see me acting in accordance with your principles."

"What are you talking about?"

Francisco shook his head regretfully. "I don't know why you should call my behavior rotten. I thought you would recognize it as an honest effort to practice what the whole world is preaching. Doesn't everyone believe that it is evil to be selfish? I was totally selfless in regard to the San Sebastián project. Isn't it evil to pursue a personal interest? I had no personal interest in it whatever. Isn't it evil to work for profit? I did not work for profit—I took a loss. Doesn't everyone agree that the purpose and justification of an industrial enterprise are not production, but the livelihood of its employees? The San Sebastián Mines were the most eminently successful venture in industrial history: they produced no copper, but they provided a livelihood for thousands of men who could not have achieved in a lifetime, the equivalent of what they got for one day's work, which they could not do. Isn't it generally agreed that an owner is a parasite and an exploiter, that it is the employees who do all the work and make the product possible? I did not exploit anyone. I did not burden the San Sebastián Mines with my useless presence; I left them in the hands of the men who count. I did not pass judgment on the value of that property. I turned it over to a mining specialist. He was not a very good specialist, but he needed the job very