

he should fly to Detroit and speak to him in person—he should have done it a week ago—he could have done it tonight. . . . “You’re not listening,” said his mother at the breakfast table, when his mind wandered to the current coal price index, while she was telling him about the dream she’d had last night. “You’ve never listened to a living soul. You’re not interested in anything but yourself. You don’t give a damn about people, not about a single human creature on God’s earth.” . . . The typed pages lying on the desk in his office were a report on the tests of an airplane motor made of Rearden Metal—perhaps of all things on earth, the one he wanted most at this moment was to read it—it had lain on his desk, untouched, for three days, he had had no time for it—why didn’t he do it now and—

He shook his head violently, opening his eyes, stepping back from the mirror.

He tried to reach for the shirt studs. He saw his hand reaching, instead, for the pile of mail on his dresser. It was mail picked as urgent, it had to be read tonight, but he had had no time to read it in the office. His secretary had stuffed it into his pocket on his way out. He had thrown it there while undressing.

A newspaper clipping fluttered down to the floor. It was an editorial which his secretary had marked with an angry slash in red pencil. It was entitled “Equalization of Opportunity.” He had to read it: there had been too much talk about this issue in the last three months, ominously too much.

He read it, with the sound of voices and forced laughter coming from downstairs, reminding him that the guests were arriving, that the party had started and that he would face the bitter, reproachful glances of his family when he came down.

The editorial said that at a time of dwindling production, shrinking markets and vanishing opportunities to make a living, it was unfair to let one man hoard several business enterprises, while others had none; it was destructive to let a few corner all the resources, leaving others no chance; competition was essential to society, and it was society’s duty to see that no competitor ever rose beyond the range of anybody who wanted to compete with him. The editorial predicted the passage of a bill which had been proposed, a bill forbidding any person or corporation to own more than one business concern.

Wesley Mouch, his Washington man, had told Rearden not to worry; the fight would be stiff, he had said, but the bill would be defeated. Rearden understood nothing about that kind of fight. He left it to Mouch and his staff. He could barely find time to skim through their reports from Washington and to sign the checks which Mouch requested for the battle.

Rearden did not believe that the bill would pass. He was incapable of believing it. Having dealt with the clean reality of metals, technology, production all his life, he had acquired the conviction that one had to concern oneself with the rational, not the insane—that one had to seek that which was right, because the right answer always won—that the senseless, the wrong, the monstrously unjust could not work, could not succeed, could do nothing but defeat itself. A battle against a thing such as that bill seemed preposterous and faintly

embarrassing to him, as if he were suddenly asked to compete with a man who calculated steel mixtures by the formulas of numerology.

He had told himself that the issue was dangerous. But the loudest screaming of the most hysterical editorial roused no emotion in him—while a variation of a decimal point in a laboratory report on a test of Rearden Metal made him leap to his feet in eagerness or apprehension. He had no energy to spare for anything else.

He crumpled the editorial and threw it into the wastebasket. He felt the leaden approach of that exhaustion which he never felt at his job, the exhaustion that seemed to wait for him and catch him the moment he turned to other concerns. He felt as if he were incapable of any desire except a desperate longing for sleep.

He told himself that he had to attend the party—that his family had the right to demand it of him—that he had to learn to like their kind of pleasure, for their sake, not his own.

He wondered why this was a motive that had no power to impel him. Throughout his life, whenever he became convinced that a course of action was right, the desire to follow it had come automatically. What was happening to him?—he wondered. The impossible conflict of feeling reluctance to do that which was right—wasn't it the basic formula of moral corruption? To recognize one's guilt, yet feel nothing but the coldest, most profound indifference—wasn't it a betrayal of that which had been the motor of his life-course and of his pride?

He gave himself no time to seek an answer. He finished dressing, quickly, pitilessly.

Holding himself erect, his tall figure moving with the unstressed, unhurried confidence of habitual authority, the white of a fine handkerchief in the breast pocket of his black dinner jacket, he walked slowly down the stairs to the drawing room, looking—to the satisfaction of the dowagers who watched him—like the perfect figure of a great industrialist.

He saw Lillian at the foot of the stairs. The patrician lines of a lemon-yellow Empire evening gown stressed her graceful body, and she stood like a person proudly in control of her proper background. He smiled; he liked to see her happy; it gave some reasonable justification to the party.

He approached her—and stopped. She had always shown good taste in her use of jewelry, never wearing too much of it. But tonight she wore an ostentatious display—a diamond necklace, earrings, rings and brooches. Her arms looked conspicuously bare by contrast. On her right wrist, as sole ornament, she wore the bracelet of Rearden Metal. The glittering gems made it look like an ugly piece of dime-store jewelry.

When he moved his glance from her wrist to her face, he found her looking at him. Her eyes were narrowed and he could not define their expression; it was a look that seemed both veiled and purposeful, the look of something hidden that flaunted its security from detection.

He wanted to tear the bracelet off her wrist. Instead, in obedience