of what amount. Then a bright young boy just out of college had been sent to him from Washington, as Deputy Director of Distribution. After many telephone conferences with the capital, the boy announced that customers would get five hundred tons of the Metal each, in the order of the dates of their applications. Nobody had argued against his figure. There was no way to form an argument; the figure could have been one pound or one million tons, with the same validity. The boy had established an office at the Rearden mills, where four girls took applications for shares of Rearden Metal. At the present rate of the mills' production, the applications extended well into the next century.

Five hundred tons of Rearden Metal could not provide three miles of rail for Taggart Transcontinental; it could not provide the bracing for one of Ken Danagger's coal mines. The largest industries, Rearden's best customers, were denied the use of his Metal. But golf clubs made of Rearden Metal were suddenly appearing on the market, as well as coffee pots, garden tools and bathroom faucets. Ken Danagger, who had seen the value of the Metal and had dared to order it against a fury of public opinion, was not permitted to obtain it; his order had been left unfilled, cut off without warning by the new laws. Mr. Mowen, who had betrayed Taggart Transcontinental in its most dangerous hour, was now making switches of Rearden Metal and selling them to the Atlantic Southern. Rearden looked on, his emotions plugged out.

He turned away, without a word, when anybody mentioned to him what everybody knew; the quick fortunes that were being made on Rearden Metal. "Well, no," people said in drawing rooms, "you mustn't call it black market, because it isn't, really. Nobody is selling the *Metal* illegally. They're just selling their *right* to it. Not selling really, just pooling their shares." He did not want to know the insect intricacy of the deals, through which the "shares" were sold and pooled—nor how a manufacturer in Virginia had produced, in two months, five thousand tons of castings made of Rearden Metal—nor what man in Washington was that manufacturer's unlisted partner. He knew that their profit on a ton of Rearden Metal was five times larger than his own. He said nothing. Everybody had a right to the Metal, except himself.

The young boy from Washington—whom the steel workers had nicknamed the Wet Nurse—hung around Rearden with a primitive, astonished curiosity which, incredibly, was a form of admiration. Rearden watched him with disgusted amusement. The boy had no inkling of any concept of morality; it had been bred out of him by his college; this had left him an odd frankness, naïve and cynical at once, like the innocence of a savage.

"You despise me, Mr. Rearden," he had declared once, suddenly and without any resentment. "That's impractical."

"Why is it impractical?" Rearden had asked.

The boy had looked puzzled and had found no answer. He never had an answer to any "why?" He spoke in flat assertions. He would say about people, "He's old-fashioned," "He's unreconstructed," "He's unadjusted," without hesitation or explanation; he would also

say, while being a graduate in metallurgy, "Iron smelting, I think, seems to require a high temperature." He uttered nothing but uncertain opinions about physical nature—and nothing but categorical imperatives about men.

"Mr. Rearden," he had said once, "if you feel you'd like to hand out more of the Metal to friends of yours - I mean, in bigger hauls—it could be arranged, you know. Why don't we apply for a special permission on the ground of essential need? I've got a few friends in Washington. Your friends are pretty important people, big businessmen, so it wouldn't be difficult to get away with the essential need dodge. Of course, there would be a few expenses. For things in Washington. You know how it is, things always occasion expenses."

"What things?"

"You understand what I mean."

"No," Rearden had said, "I don't. Why don't you explain it to me?"

The boy had looked at him uncertainly, weighed it in his mind, then come out with: "It's bad psychology."

"What is?"

"You know, Mr. Rearden, it's not necessary to use such words as that."

"As what?"

"Words are relative. They're only symbols. If we don't use ugly symbols, we won't have any ugliness. Why do you want me to say things one way, when I've already said them another?"

"Which way do I want you to say them?"

"Why do you want me to?"

"For the same reason that you don't."

The boy had remained silent for a moment, then had said, "You know, Mr. Rearden, there are no absolute standards. We can't go by rigid principles, we've got to be flexible, we've got to adjust to the reality of the day and act on the expediency of the moment."

"Run along, punk. Go and try to pour a ton of steel without rigid principles, on the expediency of the moment."

A strange sense, which was almost a sense of style, made Rearden feel contempt for the boy, but no resentment. The boy seemed to fit the spirit of the events around them. It was as if they were being carried back across a long span of centuries to the age where the boy had belonged, but he, Rearden, had not. Instead of building new furnaces, thought Rearden, he was now running a losing race to keep the old ones going; instead of starting new ventures, new research, new experiments in the use of Rearden Metal, he was spending the whole of his energy on a quest for sources of iron ore: like the men at the dawn of the Iron Age—he thought—but with less hope.

He tried to avoid these thoughts. He had to stand on guard against his own feeling—as if some part of him had become a stranger that had to be kept numb, and his will had to be its constant, watchful anesthetic. That part was an unknown of which he knew only that he must never see its root and never give it voice. He had lived through one dangerous moment which he could not allow to return.

It was the moment when—alone in his office, on a winter evening,