

Then he spoke in the brusque manner of an executive. "First, we'll try to see if we can find their personnel office here. We'll look for their records, if there's any left. We want the names of their research staff and their engineers. I don't know who owns this place now, and I suspect that the owners will be hard to find, or they wouldn't have let it come to this. Then we'll go over every room in the laboratory. Later, we'll get a few engineers to fly here and comb the rest of the place."

They started out, but she stopped for a moment on the threshold. "Hank, that motor was the most valuable thing inside this factory," she said, her voice low. "It was more valuable than the whole factory and everything it ever contained. Yet it was passed up and left in the refuse. It was the one thing nobody found worth the trouble of taking."

"That's what frightens me about this," he answered.

The personnel office did not take them long. They found it by the sign which was left on the door, but it was the only thing left. There was no furniture inside, no papers, nothing but the splinters of smashed windows.

They went back to the room of the motor. Crawling on hands and knees, they examined every scrap of the junk that littered the floor. There was little to find. They put aside the papers that seemed to contain laboratory notes, but none referred to the motor, and there were no pages of the manuscript among them. The popcorn wrappers and the whiskey bottle testified to the kind of invading hordes that had rolled through the room, like waves washing the remnants of destruction away to unknown bottoms.

They put aside a few bits of metal that could have belonged to the motor, but these were too small to be of value. The motor looked as if parts of it had been ripped off, perhaps by someone who thought he could put them to some customary use. What had remained was too unfamiliar to interest anybody.

On aching knees, her palms spread flat upon the gritty floor, she felt the anger trembling within her, the hurting, helpless anger that answers the sight of desecration. She wondered whether someone's diapers hung on a clothesline made of the motor's missing wires—whether its wheels had become a rope pulley over a communal well—whether its cylinder was now a pot containing geraniums on the window sill of the sweetheart of the man with the whiskey bottle.

There was a remnant of light on the hill, but a blue haze was moving in upon the valleys, and the red and gold of the leaves was spreading to the sky in strips of sunset.

It was dark when they finished. She rose and leaned against the empty frame of the window for a touch of cool air on her forehead. The sky was dark blue. "It could have set the whole country in motion and on fire." She looked down at the motor. She looked out at the country. She moaned suddenly, hit by a single long shudder, and dropped her head on her arm, standing pressed to the frame of the window.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She did not answer.

He looked out. Far below, in the valley, in the gathering night, there trembled a few pale smears which were the lights of tallow candles.

## Chapter X WYATT'S TORCH

"God have mercy on us, ma'am!" said the clerk of the Hall of Records. "Nobody knows who owns that factory now. I guess nobody will ever know it."

The clerk sat at a desk in a ground-floor office, where dust lay undisturbed on the files and few visitors ever called. He looked at the shining automobile parked outside his window, in the muddy square that had once been the center of a prosperous county seat; he looked with a faint, wistful wonder at his two unknown visitors.

"Why?" asked Dagny.

He pointed helplessly at the mass of papers he had taken out of the files. "The court will have to decide who owns it, which I don't think any court can do. If a court ever gets to it, I don't think it will."

"Why? What happened?"

"Well, it was sold out--the Twentieth Century. I mean. The Twentieth Century Motor Company. It was sold twice, at the same time and to two different sets of owners. That was sort of a big scandal at the time two years ago, and now it's just"--he pointed--"just a bunch of paper lying around, waiting for a court hearing. I don't see how any judge will be able to untangle any property rights out of it--or any right at all."

"Would you tell me please just what happened?"

"Well, the last legal owner of the factory was The People's Mortgage Company, of Rome, Wisconsin. That's the town the other side of the factory, thirty miles north. That Mortgage Company was a sort of noisy outfit that did a lot of advertising about easy credit. Mark Yonts was the head of it. Nobody knew where he came from and nobody knows where he's gone to now, but what they discovered, the morning after The People's Mortgage Company collapsed, was that Mark Yonts had sold the Twentieth Century Motor factory to a bunch of suckers from South Dakota, and that he'd also given it as collateral for a loan from a bank in Illinois. And when they took a look at the factory, they discovered that he'd moved all the machinery out and sold it piece-meal. God only knows where and to whom. So it seems like everybody owns the place--and nobody. That's how it stands now--the South Dakotans and the bank and the attorney for the creditors of The People's Mortgage Company all suing one another, all claiming this factory, and nobody having the right to move a wheel in it, except that there's no wheels left to move."

"Did Mark Yonts operate the factory before he sold it?"

"Lord, no, ma'am! He wasn't the kind that ever operates anything. He didn't want to *make* money, only to *get* it. Guess he got it, too--more than anyone could have made out of that factory."

He wondered why the blond, hard-faced man, who sat with the woman in front of his desk, looked grimly out the window at their

car, at a large object wrapped in canvas, roped tightly under the raised cover of the car's luggage compartment.

"What happened to the factory records?"

"Which do you mean, ma'am?"

"Their production records. Their work records. Their . . . personnel files."

"Oh, there's nothing left of that now. There's been a lot of looting going on. All the mixed owners grabbed what furniture or things they could haul out of there, even if the sheriff did put a padlock on the door. The papers and stuff like that—I guess it was all taken by the scavengers from Starnesville, that's the place down in the valley, where they're having it pretty tough these days. They burned the stuff for kindling, most likely."

"Is there anyone left here who used to work in the factory?" asked Rearden.

"No, sir. Not around here. They all lived down in Starnesville."

"All of them?" whispered Dagny; she was thinking of the ruins "The . . . engineers, too?"

"Yes, ma'am. That was the factory town. They've all gone, long ago."

"Do you happen to remember the names of any men who worked there?"

"No, ma'am."

"What owner was the last to operate the factory?" asked Rearden.

"I couldn't say, sir. There's been so much trouble up there and the place has changed hands so many times, since old Jed Starnes died. He's the man who built the factory. He made this whole part of the country, I guess. He died twelve years ago."

"Can you give us the names of all the owners since?"

"No, sir. We had a fire in the old courthouse, about three years ago, and all the old records are gone. I don't know where you could trace them now."

"You don't know how this Mark Yonts happened to acquire the factory?"

"Yes, I know that. He bought it from Mayor Bascom of Rome. How Mayor Bascom happened to own it, I don't know."

"Where is Mayor Bascom now?"

"Still there, in Rome."

"Thank you very much," said Rearden, rising. "We'll call on him."

They were at the door when the clerk asked, "What is it you're looking for, sir?"

"We're looking for a friend of ours," said Rearden. "A friend we've lost, who used to work in that factory."

\* \*

Mayor Bascom of Rome, Wisconsin, leaned back in his chair; his chest and stomach formed a pear-shaped outline under his soiled shirt. The air was a mixture of sun and dust, pressing heavily upon the porch of his house. He waved his arm, the ring on his finger flashing a large topaz of poor quality.

"No use, no use, lady, absolutely no use," he said. "Would be just a waste of your time, trying to question the folks around here. There's