She was astonished, approaching her vestibule, to hear the sound of voices close by. As she pulled the door open, she heard a shout: "Get off, God damn you!"

An aging tramp had taken refuge in the corner of her vestibule.

He sat on the floor, his posture suggesting that he had no strength left to stand up or to care about being caught. He was looking at the conductor, his eyes observant, fully conscious, but devoid of any reaction. The train was slowing down for a bad stretch of track, the conductor had opened the door to a cold gust of wind, and was waving at the speeding black void, ordering, "Get going! Get off as you got on or I'll kick you off head first!"

There was no astonishment in the tramp's face, no protest, no anger, no hope; he looked as if he had long since abandoned any judgment of any human action. He moved obediently to rise, his hand groping upward along the rivets of the car's wall. She saw him glance at her and glance away, as if she were merely another inanimate fixture of the train. He did not seem to be aware of her person, any more than of his own, he was indifferently ready to comply with an order which, in his condition, meant certain death.

She glanced at the conductor. She saw nothing in his face except the blind malevolence of pain, of some long-repressed anger that broke out upon the first object available, almost without consciousness of the object's identity. The two men were not human beings to each other any longer.

The tramp's suit was a mass of careful patches on a cloth so stiff and shiny with wear that one expected it to crack like glass if bent; but she noticed the collar of his shirt: it was bone-white from repeated laundering and it still preserved a semblance of shape. He had pulled himself up to his feet, he was looking indifferently at the black hole open upon miles of uninhabited wilderness where no one would see the body or hear the voice of a mangled man, but the only gesture of concern he made was to tighten his grip on a small, dirty bundle, as if to make sure he would not lose it in leaping off the train.

It was the laundered collar and this gesture for the last of his possessions—the gesture of a sense of property—that made her feel an emotion like a sudden, burning twist within her. "Wait," she said.

The two men turned to her.

"Let him be my guest," she said to the conductor, and held her door open for the tramp, ordering, "Come in."

The tramp followed her, obeying as blankly as he had been about to obey the conductor. He stood in the middle of her car, holding his bundle, looking around him with the same observant, unreacting glance.

"Sit down," she said.

He obeyed—and looked at her, as if waiting for further orders.

There was a kind of dignity in his manner, the honesty of the open admission that he had no claim to make, no plea to offer, no questions to ask, that he now had to accept whatever was done to him and was ready to accept it.

He seemed to be in his early fifties; the structure of his bones and the looseness of his suit suggested that he had once been muscular.

The lifeless indifference of his eyes did not fully hide that they had been intelligent; the wrinkles cutting his face with the record of some incredible bitterness, had not fully erased the fact that the face had once possessed the kindliness peculiar to honesty.

"When did you eat last?" she asked.

"Yesterday," he said, and added, "I think."

She rang for the porter and ordered dinner for two, to be brought to her car from the diner.
The tramp had watched her silently, but when the porter departed, he offered the only payment it was in his power to offer: "I don't want to get you in trouble, ma'am," he said.
She smiled. "What trouble?"

"You're traveling with one of those railroad tycoons, aren't you?"

"No, alone."

"Then you're the wife of one of them?"

"No."

"Oh." She saw his effort at a look of something like respect, as if to make up for having forced an improper confession, and she laughed.

"No, not that, either. I guess I'm one of the tycoons myself. My name is Dagny Taggart and I work for this railroad."

"Oh . . . I think I've heard of you, ma'am—in the old days." It was hard to tell what "the old days" meant to him, whether it was a month or a year or whatever period of time had passed since he had given up. He was looking at her with a sort of interest in the past tense, as if he were thinking that there had been a time when he would have considered her a personage worth seeing. "You were the lady who ran a railroad," he said.

"Yes," she said. "I was."

He showed no sign of astonishment at the fact that she had chosen to help him. He looked as if so much brutality had confronted him that he had given up the attempt to understand, to trust or to expect anything.

"When did you get aboard the train?" she asked.

"Back at the division point, ma'am. Your door wasn't locked." He added, "I figured maybe nobody would notice me till morning on account of it being a private car."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know." Then, almost as if he sensed that this could sound too much like an appeal for pity, he added, "I guess I just wanted to keep moving till I saw some place that looked like there might be a chance to find work there." This was his attempt to assume the responsibility of a purpose, rather than to throw the burden of his aimlessness upon her mercy—an attempt of the same order as his shirt collar.

"What kind of work are you looking for?"

"People don't look for kinds of work anymore, ma'am," he answered impassively. "They just look for work."

"What sort of place did you hope to find?"

"Oh . . . well . . . where there's factories, I guess."

"Aren't you going in the wrong direction for that? The factories are in the East."

"No." He said it with the firmness of knowledge. "There are too many people in the East. The factories are too well watched. I figured there might be a better chance some place where there's fewer people and less law."

"Oh, running away? A fugitive from the law, are you?"

"Not as you'd mean it in the old days, ma'am. But as things are now, I guess I am. I want to work."

"What do you mean?"

"There aren't any jobs back East. And a man couldn't give you a job, if he had one to give—he'd go to jail for it. He's watched. You can't get work except through the Unification Board. The Unification Board has a gang of its own friends waiting in line for the jobs, more friends than a millionaire's got relatives. Well, me—I haven't got either."

"Where did you work last?"

"I've been bumming around the country for six months—no, longer, I guess—I guess it's closer to about a year—I can't tell any more—mostly day work it was. Mostly on farms. But it's getting to be no use now. I know how the farmers look at you—they don't like to see a man starving, but they're only one jump ahead of starvation themselves, they haven't any work to give you, they haven't any food, and whatever they save, if the tax collectors don't get it, then the raiders do—you know, the gangs that rove all through the country—deserters, they call them."

"Do you think that it's any better in the West?"

"No. I don't."

"Then why are you going there?"

"Because I haven't tried it before. That's all there is left to try. It's somewhere to go. Just to keep moving . . . You know," he added suddenly, "I don't think it will be any use. But there's nothing to do in the East except sit under some hedge and wait to die. I don't think I'd mind it much now, the dying. I know it would be a lot easier. Only I think that it's a sin to sit down and let your life go, without making a try for it."

She thought suddenly of those modern college-infected parasites who assumed a sickening air of moral self-righteousness whenever they uttered the standard bromides about their concern for the welfare of others. The tramp's last sentence was one of the most profoundly moral statements she had ever heard; but the man did not know it; he had said it in his impassive, extinguished voice, simply, dryly, as a matter of fact.

"What part of the country do you come from?" she asked.

"Wisconsin," he answered.

The waiter came in, bringing their dinner. He set a table and courteously moved two chairs, showing no astonishment at the nature of the occasion.

She looked at the table; she thought that the magnificence of a world where men could afford the time and the effortless concern for such things as starched napkins and tinkling ice cubes, offered to travelers along with their meals for the price of a few dollars, was a remnant of the age when the sustenance of one's life had not been made a crime and a meal had not been a matter of running a race with death—a remnant which was soon to vanish, like the white filling station on the edge of the weeds of the jungle.

She noticed that the tramp, who had lost the strength to stand up, had not lost the respect for the meaning of the things spread before him. He did not pounce upon the food; he fought to keep his movements slow, to unfold his napkin, to pick up his fork in tempo with hers, his hand shaking—as if he still knew that this, no matter what indignity was ever forced upon them, was the manner proper to men.

"What was your line of work—in the old days?" she asked, when the waiter left. "Factories, wasn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What trade?"

"Skilled lathe-operator."

"Where did you work at it last?"

"In Colorado, ma'am. For the Hammond Car Company."

"Oh . . . !"

"Ma'am?"

"No, nothing. Worked there long?"

"No, ma'am. Just two weeks."

"How come?"

"Well, I'd waited a year for it, hanging around Colorado just to get that job. They had a waiting list too, the Hammond Car Company, only they didn't go by friendships and they didn't go by seniority, they went by a man's record. I had a good record. But it was just two weeks after I got the job that Lawrence Hammond quit. He quit and disappeared. They closed the plant. Afterwards, there was a citizens' committee that reopened it. I got called back. But five days was all it lasted. They started layoffs just about at once. By seniority. So I had to go. I heard they lasted for about three months, the citizens' committee. Then they had to close the plant for good."

"Where did you work before that?"

"Just about in every Eastern state, ma'am. But it was never more than a month or two. The plants kept closing."

"Did that happen on every job you've held?"

He glanced at her, as if he understood her question. "No, ma'am," he answered and, for the first time, she caught a faint echo of pride in his voice. "The first job I had, I held it for twenty years. Not the same job, but the same place, I mean—I got to be shop foreman. That was twelve years ago. Then the owner of the plant died, and the heirs who took it over, ran it into the ground. Times were bad then, but it was since then that things started going to pieces everywhere faster and faster. Since then, it seems like anywhere I turned—the place cracked and went. At first, we thought it was only one state or another. A lot of us thought that Colorado would last. But it went, too.

Anything you tried, anything you touched—it fell. Anywhere you looked, work was stopping—the factories were stopping—the machines were stopping—" he added slowly, in a whisper, as if seeing some secret terror of his own, "the motors . . . were . . . stopping." His voice rose: "Oh God, who is—" and broke off.

"—John Galt?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, and shook his head as if to dispel some vision, "only I don't like to say that."

"I don't, either. I wish I knew why people are saying it and who started it."

"That's it, ma'am. That's what I'm afraid of. It might have been me who started it."
"What?"

"Me or about six thousand others. We might have. I think we did.

I hope we're wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there was something that happened at that plant where I worked for twenty years. It was when the old man died and his heirs took over. There were three of them, two sons and a daughter, and they brought a new plan to run the factory. They let us vote on it, too, and everybody—almost everybody—voted for it. We didn't know. We thought it was good. No, that's not true, either. We thought that we were supposed to think it was good. The plan was that everybody in the factory would work according to his ability, but would be paid according to his need. We—what's the matter, ma'am? Why do you look like that?"

"What was the name of the factory?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

"The Twentieth Century Motor Company, ma'am, of Starnesville, Wisconsin."

"Go on."

"We voted for that plan at a big meeting, with all of us present, six thousand of us, everybody that worked in the factory. The Starnes heirs made long speeches about it, and it wasn't too clear, but nobody asked any questions. None of us knew just how the plan would work, but every one of us thought that the next fellow knew it. And if anybody had doubts, he felt guilty and kept his mouth shut—because they made it sound like anyone who'd oppose the plan was a child killer at heart and less than a human being. They told us that this plan would achieve a noble ideal. Well, how were we to know otherwise? Hadn't we heard it all our lives—from our parents and our schoolteachers and our ministers, and in every newspaper we ever read and every movie and every public speech? Hadn't we always been told that this was righteous and just? Well, maybe there's some excuse for what we did at that meeting. Still, we voted for the plan—and what we got, we had it coming to us. You know, ma'am, we are marked men, in a way, those of us who lived through the four years of that plan in the Twentieth Century factory. What is it that hell is supposed to be?

Evil—plain, naked, smirking evil, isn't it? Well, that's what we saw and helped to make—and I think we're damned, every one of us, and maybe we'll never be forgiven. . . .

"Do you know how it worked, that plan, and what it did to people?

Try pouring water into a tank where there's a pipe at the bottom draining it out faster than you pour it, and each bucket you bring breaks that pipe an inch wider, and the harder you work the more is demanded of you, and you stand slinging buckets forty hours a week, then forty-eight, then fifty-six—for your neighbor's supper—for his wife's operation—for his child's measles—for his mother's wheel chair —for his uncle's shirt—for his nephew's schooling—for the baby next door—for the baby to be born—for anyone anywhere around you— it's theirs to receive, from

diapers to dentures—and yours to work, from sunup to sundown, month after month, year after year, with nothing to show for it but your sweat, with nothing in sight for you but their pleasure, for the whole of your life, without rest, without hope, without end. . . . From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. . . .

"We're all one big family, they told us, we're all in this together.

But you don't all stand working an acetylene torch ten hours a day— together, and you don't all get a bellyache—together. What's whose ability and which of whose needs comes first? When it's all one pot, you can't let any man decide what his own needs are, can you? If you did, he might claim that he needs a yacht—and if his feelings is all you have to go by, he might prove it, too. Why not? If it's not right for me to own a car until I've worked myself into a hospital ward, earning a car for every loafer and every naked savage on earth—why can't he demand a yacht from me, too, if I still have the ability not to have collapsed? No? He can't? Then why can he demand that I go without cream for my coffee until he's replastered his living room?

. . . Oh well . . . Well, anyway, it was decided that nobody had the right to judge his own need or ability. We voted on it. Yes, ma'am, we voted on it in a public meeting twice a year. How else could it be done? Do you care to think what would happen at such a meeting? It took us just one meeting to discover that we had become beggars—rotten, whining, sniveling beggars, all of us, because no man could claim his pay as his rightful earning, he had no rights and no earnings, his work didn't belong to him, it belonged to 'the family,' and they owed him nothing in return, and the only claim he had on them was his 'need' —so he had to beg in public for relief from his needs, like any lousy moocher, listing all his troubles and miseries, down to his patched drawers and his wife's head colds, hoping that 'the family' would throw him the alms. He had to claim miseries, because it's miseries, not work, that had become the coin of the realm—so it turned into a contest among six thousand panhandlers, each claiming that his need was worse than his brother's. How else could it be done? Do you care to guess what happened, what sort of men kept quiet, feeling shame, and what sort got away with the jackpot?
"But that wasn't all. There was something else that we discovered at the same meeting. The factory's production had fallen by forty per cent, in that first half-year, so it was decided that somebody hadn't delivered 'according to his ability' Who? How would you tell it? 'The family' voted on that, too. They voted which men were the best, and these men were sentenced to work overtime each night for the next six months. Overtime without pay—because you weren't paid by tune and you weren't paid by work, only by need.

"Do I have to tell you what happened after that—and into what sort of creatures we all started turning, we who had once been human?

We began to hide whatever ability we had, to slow down and watch like hawks that we never worked any faster or better than the next fellow. What else could we do, when we knew that if we did our best for 'the family,' it's not thanks or rewards that we'd get, but punishment? We knew that for every stinker who'd ruin a batch of motors and cost the company money—either through his sloppiness, because he didn't have to care, or through plain incompetence—it's we who'd have to pay with our nights and our Sundays. So we did our best to be no good.

"There was one young boy who started out, full of fire for the noble ideal, a bright kid without any schooling, but with a wonderful head on his shoulders. The first year, he figured out a work

process that saved us thousands of man-hours. He gave it to 'the family,' didn't ask anything for it, either, couldn't ask, but that was all right with him. It was for the ideal, he said. But when he found himself voted as one of our ablest and sentenced to night work, because we hadn't gotten enough from him, he shut his mouth and his brain. You can bet he didn't come up with any ideas, the second year.

"What was it they'd always told us about the vicious competition of the profit system, where men had to compete for who'd do a better job than his fellows? Vicious, wasn't it? Well, they should have seen what it was like when we all had to compete with one another for who'd do the worst job possible. There's no surer way to destroy a man than to force him into a spot where he has to aim at not doing his best, where he has to struggle to do a bad job, day after day. That will finish him quicker than drink or idleness or pulling stick-ups for a living. But there was nothing else for us to do except to fake unfitness.

The one accusation we feared was to be suspected of ability. Ability was like a mortgage on you that you could never pay off. And what was there to work for? You knew that your basic pittance would be given to you anyway, whether you worked or not—your 'housing and feeding allowance,' it was called—and above that pittance, you had no chance to get anything, no matter how hard you tried. You couldn't count on buying a new suit of clothes next year—they might give you a 'clothing allowance' or they might not, according to whether nobody broke a leg, needed an operation or gave birth to more babies. And if there wasn't enough money for new suits for everybody, then you couldn't get yours, either.

"There was one man who'd worked hard all his life, because he'd always wanted to send his son through college. Well, the boy graduated from high school in the second year of the plan—but 'the family' wouldn't give the father any 'allowance' for the college. They said his son couldn't go to college, until we had enough to send everybody's sons to college—and that we first had to send everybody's children through high school, and we didn't even have enough for that. The father died the following year, in a knife fight with somebody in a saloon, a fight over nothing in particular—such fights were beginning to happen among us all the time.

"Then there was an old guy, a widower with no family, who had one hobby: phonograph records. I guess that was all he ever got out of life. In the old days, he used to skip meals just to buy himself some new recording of classical music. Well, they didn't give him any 'allowance' for records—'personal luxury,' they called it. But at that same meeting, Millie Bush, somebody's daughter, a mean, ugly little eight-year-old, was voted a pair of gold braces for her buck teeth—this was 'medical need,' because the staff psychologist had said that the poor girl would get an inferiority complex if her teeth weren't straightened out. The old guy' who loved music, turned to drink, instead. He got so you never saw him fully conscious any more. But it seems like there was one tiling he couldn't forget. One night, he came staggering down the street, saw Millie Bush, swung his fist and knocked all her teeth out. Every one of them.

"Drink, of course, was what we all turned to, some more, some less.

Don't ask how we got the money for it. When all the decent pleasures are forbidden, there's always ways to get the rotten ones. You don't break into grocery stores after dark and you don't pick your fellow's pockets to buy classical symphonies or fishing tackle, but if it's to get stinking drunk and forget—you do. Fishing tackle? Hunting guns?

Snapshot cameras? Hobbies? There wasn't any 'amusement allowance' for anybody. 'Amusement' was the first thing they dropped. Aren't you always supposed to be ashamed to object when anybody asks you to give up anything, if it's something that gave you pleasure? Even our 'tobacco allowance' was cut to where we got two packs of cigarettes a month—and this, they told us, was because the money had to go into the babies' milk fund. Babies was the only item of production that didn't fall, but rose and kept on rising—because people had nothing else to do, I guess, and because they didn't have to care, the baby wasn't their burden, it was 'the family's.' In fact, the best chance you had of getting a raise and breathing easier for a while was a 'baby allowance.' Either that, or a major disease.

"It didn't take us long to see how it all worked out. Any man who tried to play straight, had to refuse himself everything. He lost his taste for any pleasure, he hated to smoke a nickel's worth of tobacco or chew a stick of gum, worrying whether somebody had more need for that nickel. He felt ashamed of every mouthful of food he swallowed, wondering whose weary nights of overtime had paid for it, knowing that his food was not his by right, miserably wishing to be cheated rather than to cheat, to be a sucker, but not a blood-sucker.

He wouldn't marry, he wouldn't help his folks back home, he wouldn't put an extra burden on 'the family.' Besides, if he still had some sort of sense of responsibility, he couldn't marry or bring children into the world, when he could plan nothing, promise nothing, count on nothing. But the shiftless and the irresponsible had a field day of it. They bred babies, they got girls into trouble, they dragged in every worthless relative they had from all over the country, every unmarried pregnant sister, for an extra 'disability allowance,' they got more sicknesses than any doctor could disprove, they ruined their clothing, their furniture, their homes—what the hell, 'the family' was paying for it! They found more ways of getting in 'need' than the rest of us could ever imagine —they developed a special skill for it, which was the only ability they showed.

"God help us, ma'am! Do you see what we saw? We saw that we'd been given a law to live by, a moral law, they called it, which punished those who observed it—for observing it. The more you tried to live up to it, the more you suffered; the more you cheated it, the bigger reward you got. Your honesty was like a tool left at the mercy of the next man's dishonesty. The honest ones paid, the dishonest collected.

The honest lost, the dishonest won. How long could men stay good under this sort of a law of goodness? We were a pretty decent bunch of fellows when we started. There weren't many chiselers among us.

We knew our jobs and we were proud of it and we worked for the best factory in the country, where old man Starnes hired nothing but the pick of the country's labor. Within one year under the new plan, there wasn't an honest man left among us. That was the evil, the sort of hell-horror evil that preachers used to scare you with, but you never thought to see alive. Not that the plan encouraged a few bastards, but that it turned decent people into bastards, and there was nothing else that it could do—and it was called a moral ideal!

"What was it we were supposed to want to work for? For the love of our brothers? What brothers? For the bums, the loafers, the moochers we saw all around us? And whether they were cheating or plain incompetent, whether they were unwilling or unable—what difference did

that make to us? If we were tied for life to the level of their unfitness, faked or real, how long could we care to go on? We had no way of knowing their ability, we had no way of controlling their needs—all we knew was that we were beasts of burden struggling blindly in some sort of place that was half-hospital, half-stockyards—a place geared to nothing but disability, disaster, disease—beasts put there for the relief of whatever whoever chose to say was whichever's need.

"Love of our brothers? That's when we learned to hate our brothers for the first time in our lives. We began to hate them for every meal they swallowed, for every small pleasure they enjoyed, for one man's new shirt, for another's wife's hat, for an outing with their family, for a paint job on their house—it was taken from us, it was paid for by our privations, our denials, our hunger. We began to spy on one another, each hoping to catch the others lying about their needs, so as to cut their 'allowance' at the next meeting. We began to have stool pigeons who informed on people, who reported that somebody had bootlegged a turkey to his family on some Sunday—which he'd paid for by gambling, most likely. We began to meddle into one another's lives. We provoked family quarrels, to get somebody's relatives thrown out. Any time we saw a man starting to go steady with a girl, we made life miserable for him. We broke up many engagements.

We didn't want anyone to marry, we didn't want any more dependents to feed.

"In the old days, we used to celebrate if somebody had a baby, we used to chip in and help him out with the hospital bills, if he happened to be hard-pressed for the moment. Now, if a baby was born, we didn't speak to the parents for weeks. Babies, to us, had become what locusts were to farmers. In the old days, we used to help a man if he had a bad illness in the family. Now—well, I'll tell you about just one case. It was the mother of a man who had been with us for fifteen years. She was a kindly old lady, cheerful and wise, she knew us all by our first names and we all liked her—we used to like her. One day, she slipped on the cellar stairs and fell and broke her hip. We knew what that meant at her age. The staff doctor said that she'd have to be sent to a hospital in town, for expensive treatments that would take a long time. The old lady died the night before she was to leave for town. They never established the cause of death. No, I don't know whether she was murdered. Nobody said that. Nobody would talk about it at all. All I know is that I—and that's what I can't forget!—I, too, had caught myself wishing that she would die. This—may God forgive us!—was the brotherhood, the security, the abundance that the plan was supposed to achieve for us!

"Was there any reason why this sort of horror would ever be preached by anybody? Was there anybody who got any profit from it? There was. The Starnes heirs. I hope you're not going to remind me that they'd sacrificed a fortune and turned the factory over to us as a gift. We were fooled by that one, too. Yes, they gave up the factory. But profit, ma'am, depends on what it is you're after. And what the Starnes heirs were after, no money on earth could buy.

Money is too clean and innocent for that.

"Eric Starnes, the youngest—he was a jellyfish that didn't have the guts to be after anything in particular. He got himself voted as Director of our Public Relations Department, which didn't do anything, except that he had a staff for the not doing of anything, so he didn't have to bother sticking around the office. The pay he got—well, I shouldn't call it 'pay,' none of us was

'paid'—the alms voted to him was fairly modest, about ten times what I got, but that wasn't riches.
Eric didn't care for money—he wouldn't have known what to do with it. He spent his time hanging around among us, showing how chummy he was and democratic. He wanted to be loved, it seems. The way he went about it was to keep reminding us that he had given us the factory. We couldn't stand him.

"Gerald Starnes was our Director of Production. We never learned just what the size of his rake-off—his alms—had been. It would have taken a staff of accountants to figure that out, and a staff of engineers to trace the way it was piped, directly or indirectly, into his office.

None of it was supposed to be for him—it was all for company expenses. Gerald had three cars, four secretaries, five telephones, and he used to throw champagne and caviar parties that no tax-paying tycoon in the country could have afforded. He spent more money in one year than his father had earned in profits in the last two years of his life. We saw a hundred-pound stack—a hundred pounds, we weighed them—of magazines in Gerald's office, full of stories about our factory and our noble plan, with big pictures of Gerald Starnes, calling him a great social crusader. Gerald liked to come into the shops at night, dressed in his formal clothes, flashing diamond cuff links the size of a nickel and shaking cigar ashes all over. Any cheap show-off who's got nothing to parade but his cash, is bad enough—except that he makes no bones about the cash being his, and you're free to gape at him or not, as you wish, and mostly you don't. But when a bastard like Gerald Starnes puts on an act and keeps spouting that he doesn't care for material wealth, that he's only serving 'the family,' that all the lushness is not for himself, but for our sake and for the common good, because it's necessary to keep up the prestige of the company and of the noble plan in the eyes of the public—then that's when you learn to hate the creature as you've never hated anything human.

"But his sister Ivy was worse. She really did not care for material wealth. The alms she got was no bigger than ours, and she went about in scuffed, flat-heeled shoes and shirtwaists—just to show how selfless she was. She was our Director of Distribution. She was the lady in charge of our needs. She was the one who held us by the throat. Of course, distribution was supposed to be decided by voting—by the voice of the people. But when the people are six thousand howling voices, trying to decide without yardstick, rhyme or reason, when there are no rules to the game and each can demand anything, but has a right to nothing, when everybody holds power over everybody's life except his own—then it turns out, as it did, that the voice of the people is Ivy Starnes. By the end of the second year, we dropped the pretense of the 'family meetings'—in the name of 'production efficiency and time economy,' one meeting used to take ten days—and all the petitions of need were simply sent to Miss Starnes' office. No, not sent. They had to be recited to her in person by every petitioner.

Then she made up a distribution list, which she read to us for our vote of approval at a meeting that lasted three-quarters of an hour.

We voted approval. There was a ten-minute period on the agenda for discussion and objections. We made no objections. We knew better by that time. Nobody can divide a factory's income among thousands of people, without some sort of a gauge to measure people's value. Her gauge was bootlicking. Selfless? In her father's time, all of his money wouldn't have given him a chance to speak to his lousiest wiper and get away with it, as she spoke to our best skilled

workers and their wives. She had pale eyes that looked fishy, cold and dead. And if you ever want to see pure evil, you should have seen the way her eyes glinted when she watched some man who'd talked back to her once and who'd just heard his name on the list of those getting nothing above basic pittance. And when you saw it, you saw the real motive of any person who's ever preached the slogan: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,'

"This was the whole secret of it. At first, I kept wondering how it could be possible that the educated, the cultured, the famous men of the world could make a mistake of this size and preach, as righteousness, this sort of abomination—when five minutes of thought should have told them what would happen if somebody tried to practice what they preached. Now I know that they didn't do it by any kind of mistake. Mistakes of this size are never made innocently. If men fall for some vicious piece of insanity, when they have no way to make it work and no possible reason to explain their choice—it's because they have a reason that they do not wish to tell. And we weren't so innocent either, when we voted for that plan at the first meeting. We didn't do it just because we believed that the drippy old guff they spewed was good. We had another reason, but the guff helped us to hide it from our neighbors and from ourselves. The guff gave us a chance to pass off as virtue something that we'd be ashamed to admit otherwise. There wasn't a man voting for it who didn't think that under a setup of this kind he'd muscle in on the profits of the men abler than himself. There wasn't a man rich and smart enough but that he didn't think that somebody was richer and smarter, and this plan would give him a share of his better's wealth and brain. But while he was thinking that he'd get unearned benefits from the men above, he forgot about the men below who'd get unearned benefits, too. He forgot about all his inferiors who'd rush to drain him just as he hoped to drain his superiors. The worker who liked the idea that his need entitled him to a limousine like his boss's, forgot that every bum and beggar on earth would come howling that their need entitled them to an icebox like his own. That was our real motive when we voted—that was the truth of it—but we didn't like to think it, so the less we liked it, the louder we yelled about our love for the common good.

"Well, we got what we asked for. By the time we saw what it was that we'd asked for, it was too late. We were trapped, with no place to go. The best men among us left the factory in the first week of the plan. We lost our best engineers, superintendents, foremen and highest skilled workers. A man of self-respect doesn't turn into a milch cow for anybody. Some able fellows tried to stick it out, but they couldn't take it for long. We kept losing our men, they kept escaping from the factory like from a pesthole—till we had nothing left except the men of need, but none of the men of ability.

"And the few of us who were still any good, but stayed on, were only those who had been there too long. In the old days, nobody ever quit the Twentieth Century—and, somehow, we couldn't make ourselves believe that it was gone. After a while, we couldn't quit, because no other employer would have us—for which I can't blame him.

Nobody would deal with us in any way, no respectable person or firm.

All the small shops, where we traded, started moving out of Starnesville fast—till we had nothing left but saloons, gambling joints and crooks who sold us trash at gouging prices. The alms we got kept falling, but the cost of our living went up. The list of the factory's needy kept

stretching, but the list of its customers shrank. There was less and less income to divide among more and more people. In the old days, it used to be said that the Twentieth Century Motor trademark was as good as the karat mark on gold. I don't know what it was that the Starnes heirs thought, if they thought at all, but I suppose that like all social planners and like savages, they thought that this trademark was a magic stamp which did the trick by some sort of voodoo power and that it would keep them rich, as it had kept their father. Well, when our customers began to see that we never delivered an order on time and never put out a motor that didn't have something wrong with it—the magic stamp began to work the other way around: people wouldn't take a motor as a gift, if it was marked Twentieth Century, And it came to where our only customers were men who never paid and never meant to pay their bills. But Gerald Starnes, doped by his own publicity, got huffy and went around, with an air of moral superiority, demanding that businessmen place orders with us, not because our motors were good, but because we needed the orders so badly.

"By that time, a village half-wit could see what generations of professors had pretended not to notice. What good would our need do to a power plant when its generators stopped because of our defective engines? What good would it do to a man caught on an operating table when the electric light went out? What good would it do to the passengers of a plane when its motor failed in mid-air?

And if they bought our product, not because of its merit, but because of our need, would that be the good, the right, the moral thing to do for the owner of that power plant, the surgeon in that hospital, the maker of that plane?

"Yet this was the moral law that the professors and leaders and thinkers had wanted to establish all over the earth. If this is what it did in a single small town where we all knew one another, do you care to think what it would do on a world scale? Do you care to imagine what it would be like, if you had to live and to work, when you're tied to all the disasters and all the malingering of the globe? To work —and whenever any men failed anywhere, it's you who would have to make up for it. To work—with no chance to rise, with your meals and your clothes and your home and your pleasure depending on any swindle, any famine, any pestilence anywhere on earth. To work—with no chance for an extra ration, till the Cambodians have been fed and the Patagonians have been sent through college. To work—on a blank check held by every creature born, by men whom you'll never see, whose needs you'll never know, whose ability or laziness or sloppiness or fraud you have no way to learn and no right to question—just to work and work and work—and leave it up to the Ivys and the Geralds of the world to decide whose stomach will consume the effort, the dreams and the days of your life. And this is the moral law to accept? This—a moral ideal?

"Well, we tried it—and we learned. Our agony took four years, from our first meeting to our last, and it ended the only way it could end: in bankruptcy. At our last meeting, Ivy Starnes was the one who tried to brazen it out. She made a short, nasty, snippy little speech in which she said that the plan had failed because the rest of the country had not accepted it, that a single community could not succeed in the midst of a selfish, greedy world—and that the plan was a noble ideal, but human nature was not good enough for it. A young boy—the one who had been punished for giving us a useful idea in our first year—got up, as we all sat silent, and walked straight to Ivy Starnes on the platform. He said nothing. He spat in her face. That was the end of the noble plan and of the Twentieth Century."

The man had spoken as if the burden of his years of silence had slipped suddenly out of his grasp. She knew that this was his tribute to her: he had shown no reaction to her kindness, he had seemed numbed to human value or human hope, but something within him had been reached and his response was this confession, this long, desperate cry of rebellion against injustice, held back for years, but breaking out in recognition of the first person he had met in whose hearing an appeal for justice would not be hopeless. It was as if the life he had been about to renounce were given back to him by the two essentials he needed: by his food and by the presence of a rational being.

"But what about John Galt?" she asked.

"Oh . . ." he said, remembering. "Oh, yes . . ."

"You were going to tell me why people started asking that question."

"Yes . . ." He was looking off, as if at some sight which he had studied for years, but which remained unchanged and unsolved; his face had an odd, questioning look of terror.

"You were going to tell me who was the John Galt they mean—if there ever was such a person."

"I hope there wasn't, ma'am. I mean, I hope that it's just a coincidence, just a sentence that hasn't any meaning."

"You had something in mind. What?"

"It was . . . it was something that happened at that first meeting at the Twentieth Century factory. Maybe that was the start of it, maybe not. I don't know . . . The meeting was held on a spring night, twelve years ago. The six thousand of us were crowded on bleachers built way up to the rafters of the plant's largest hangar. We had just voted for the new plan and we were in an edgy sort of mood, making too much noise, cheering the people's victory, threatening some kind of unknown enemies and spoiling for a fight, like bullies with an uneasy conscience. There were white arclights beating down on us and we felt kind of touchy and raw, and we were an ugly, dangerous mob in that moment. Gerald Starnes, who was chairman, kept hammering his gavel for order, and we quieted down some, but not much, and you could see the whole place moving restlessly from side to side, like water in a pan that's being rocked. 'This is a crucial moment in the history of mankind!' Gerald Starnes yelled through the noise. 'Remember that none of us may now leave this place, for each of us belongs to all the others by the moral law which we all accept!'

'I don't,"said one man and stood up. He was one of the young engineers. Nobody knew much about him. He'd always kept mostly by himself. When he stood up, we suddenly turned dead-still. It was the way he held his head. He was tall and slim—and I remember thinking that any two of us could have broken his neck without trouble—but what we all felt was fear. He stood like a man who knew that he was right. 'I will put an end to this, once and for all,' he said. His voice was clear and without any feeling. That was all he said and started to walk out. He walked down the length of the place, in the white light, not hurrying and not noticing any of us. Nobody moved to stop him. Gerald Starnes cried suddenly after him, 'How?' He turned and answered, 'I will stop the motor of the world. Then he walked out. We never saw him again.

We never heard what became of him. But years later, when we saw the lights going out, one after another, in the great factories that had stood solid like mountains for generations, when we saw the gates closing and the conveyor belts turning still, when we saw the roads growing empty and the stream of cars draining off, when it began to look as if some silent power were stopping the generators of the world and the world was crumbling quietly, like a body when its spirit is gone—then we began to wonder and to ask questions about him. We began to ask it of one another, those of us who had heard him say it.

We began to think that he had kept his word, that he, who had seen and known the truth we refused to know, was the retribution we had called upon our heads, the avenger, the man of that justice which we had defied. We began to think that he had damned us and there was no escape from his verdict and we would never be able to get away from him—and this was the more terrible because he was not pursuing us, it was we who were suddenly looking for him and he had merely gone without a trace. We found no answer about him anywhere. We wondered by what sort of impossible power he could have done what he had promised to do. There was no answer to that. We began to think of him whenever we saw another collapse in the world, which nobody could explain, whenever we took another blow, whenever we lost another hope, whenever we felt caught in this dead, gray fog that's descending all over the earth. Perhaps people heard us crying that question and they did not know what we meant, but they knew too well the feeling that made us cry it. They, too, felt that something had gone from the world. Perhaps this was why they began to say it, whenever they felt that there was no hope. I'd like to think that I am wrong, that those words mean nothing, that there's no conscious intention and no avenger behind the ending of the human race. But when I hear them repeating that question, I feel afraid. I think of the man who said that he would stop the motor of the world. You see, his name was John Galt."