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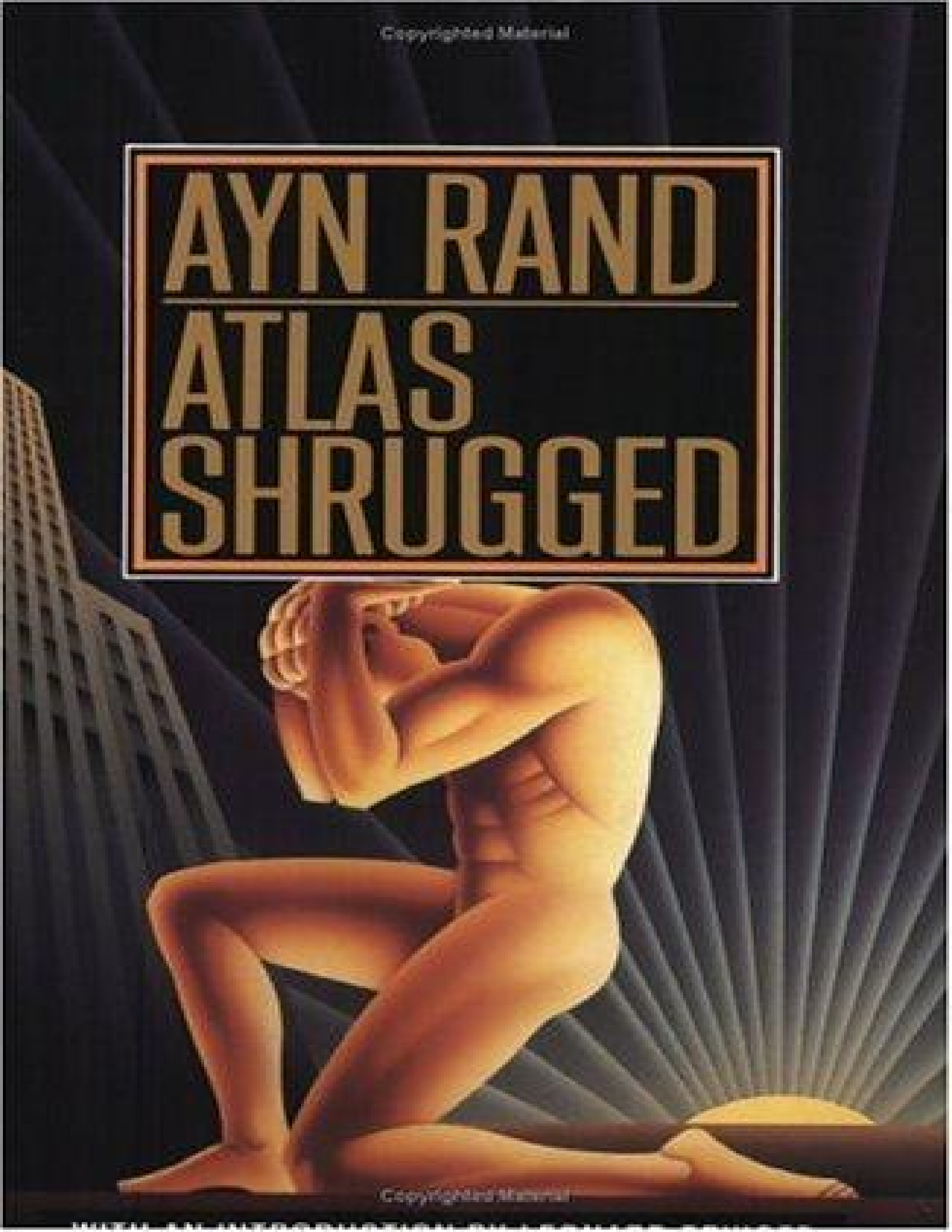
ATLAS SHRUGGED



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Atlas Shrugged

Ayn Rand

PART I
NON-CONTRADICTION

CHAPTER I
THE THEME

"Who is John Galt?"

The light was ebbing, and Eddie Willers could not distinguish the bum's face. The bum had said it simply, without expression. But from the sunset far at the end of the street, yellow glints caught his eyes, and the eyes looked straight at Eddie Willers, mocking and still—as if the question had been addressed to the causeless uneasiness within him.

"Why did you say that?" asked Eddie Willers, his voice tense.

The bum leaned against the side of the doorway; a wedge of broken glass behind him reflected the metal yellow of the sky.

"Why does it bother you?" he asked.

"It doesn't," snapped Eddie Willers.

He reached hastily into his pocket. The bum had stopped him and asked for a dime, then had gone on talking, as if to kill that moment and postpone the problem of the next. Pleas for dimes were so frequent in the streets these days that it was not necessary to listen to explanations, and he had no desire to hear the details of this bum's particular despair.

"Go get your cup of coffee," he said, handing the dime to the shadow that had no face.

"Thank you, sir," said the voice, without interest, and the face leaned forward for a moment. The face was wind-browned, cut by lines of weariness and cynical resignation; the eyes were intelligent. Eddie Willers walked on, wondering why he always felt it at this time of day, this sense of dread without reason. No, he thought, not dread, there's nothing to fear: just an immense, diffused apprehension, with no source or object. He had become accustomed to the feeling, but he could find no explanation for it; yet the bum had spoken as if he knew that Eddie felt it, as if he thought that one should feel it, and more: as if he knew the reason.

Eddie Willers pulled his shoulders straight, in conscientious self-discipline. He had to stop this, he thought; he was beginning to imagine things. Had he always felt it? He was thirty-two years old. He tried to think back. No, he hadn't; but he could not remember when it had started. The feeling came to him Suddenly, at random intervals, and now it was coming more often than ever. It's the twilight, he thought; I hate the twilight.

The clouds and the shafts of skyscrapers against them were turning brown, like an old painting in oil, the color of a fading masterpiece. Long streaks of grime ran from under the pinnacles down the slender, soot-eaten walls. High on the side of a tower there was a crack in the shape of a motionless lightning, the length of ten stories. A jagged object cut the sky above the roofs; it was half a spire, still holding the glow of the sunset; the gold leaf had long since peeled off the other half. The glow was red and still, like the reflection of a fire: not an active fire, but a dying one which it is too late to stop.

No, thought Eddie Willers, there was nothing disturbing in the sight of the city. It looked as it had always looked.

He walked on, reminding himself that he was late in returning to the office. He did not like the task which he had to perform on his return, but it had to be done. So he did not attempt to delay it, but made himself walk faster.

He turned a corner. In the narrow space between the dark silhouettes of two buildings, as in the crack of a door, he saw the page of a gigantic calendar suspended in the sky.

It was the calendar that the mayor of New York had erected last year on the top of a building, so that citizens might tell the day of the month as they told the hours of the day, by glancing up at a public tower. A white rectangle hung over the city, imparting the date to the men in the streets below. In the rusty light of this evening's sunset, the rectangle said: September 2.

Eddie Willers looked away. He had never liked the sight of that calendar. It disturbed him, in a manner he could not explain or define. The feeling seemed to blend with his sense of uneasiness; it had the same quality.

He thought suddenly that there was some phrase, a kind of quotation, that expressed what the calendar seemed to suggest. But he could not recall it.

He walked, groping for a sentence that hung in his mind as an empty shape. He could neither fill it nor dismiss it. He glanced back. The white rectangle stood above the roofs, saying in immovable finality: September 2.

Eddie Willers shifted his glance down to the street, to a vegetable pushcart at the stoop of a brownstone house. He saw a pile of bright gold carrots and the fresh green of onions. He saw a clean white curtain blowing at an open window. He saw a bus turning a corner, expertly steered. He wondered why he felt reassured—and then, why he felt the sudden, inexplicable wish that these things were not left in the open, unprotected against the empty space above.

When he came to Fifth Avenue, he kept his eyes on the windows of the stores he passed. There was nothing he needed or wished to buy; but he liked to see the display of good?, any goods, objects made by men, to be used by men. He enjoyed the sight of a prosperous street; not more than every fourth one of the stores was out of business, its windows dark and empty.

He did not know why he suddenly thought of the oak tree. Nothing had recalled it. But he thought of it and of his childhood summers on the Taggart estate. He had spent most of his childhood with the Taggart children, and now he worked for them, as his father and grandfather had worked for their father and grandfather.

The great oak tree had stood on a hill over the Hudson, in a lonely spot of the Taggart estate. Eddie Willers, aged seven, liked to come and look at that tree. It had stood there for hundreds of years, and he thought it would always stand there. Its roots clutched the hill like a fist with fingers sunk into the soil, and he thought that if a giant were to seize it by the top, he would not be able to uproot it, but would swing the hill and the whole of the earth with it, like a ball at the end of a string. He felt safe in the oak tree's presence; it was a thing that nothing could change or threaten; it was his greatest symbol of strength.

One night, lightning struck the oak tree. Eddie saw it the next morning. It lay broken in half, and he looked into its trunk as into the mouth of a black tunnel. The trunk was only an empty shell; its heart had rotted away long ago; there was nothing inside—just a thin gray dust that was being

dispersed by the whim of the faintest wind. The living power had gone, and the shape it left had not been able to stand without it.

Years later, he heard it said that children should be protected from shock, from their first knowledge of death, pain or fear. But these had never scarred him; his shock came when he stood very quietly, looking into the black hole of the trunk. It was an immense betrayal—the more terrible because he could not grasp what it was that had been betrayed. It was not himself, he knew, nor his trust; it was something else. He stood there for a while, making no sound, then he walked back to the house. He never spoke about it to anyone, then or since.

Eddie Willers shook his head, as the screech of a -rusty mechanism changing a traffic light stopped him on the edge of a curb. He felt anger at himself. There was no reason that he had to remember the oak tree tonight. It meant nothing to him any longer, only a faint tinge of sadness—and somewhere within him, a drop of pain moving briefly and vanishing, like a raindrop on the glass of a window, its course in the shape of a question mark.

He wanted no sadness attached to his childhood; he loved its memories: any day of it he remembered now seemed flooded by a still, brilliant sunlight. It seemed to him as if a few rays from it reached into his present: not rays, more like pinpoint spotlights that gave an occasional moment's glitter to his job, to his lonely apartment, to the quiet, scrupulous progression of his existence.

He thought of a summer day when he was ten years old. That day, in a clearing of the woods, the one precious companion of his childhood told him what they would do when they grew up. The words were harsh and glowing, like the sunlight. He listened in admiration and in wonder. When he was asked what he would want to do, he answered at once, "Whatever is right," and added, "You ought to do something great . . . I mean, the two of us together." "What?" she asked. He said, "I don't know. That's what we ought to find out. Not just what you said. Not just business and earning a living. Things like winning battles, or saving people out of fires, or climbing mountains." "What for?" she asked. He said, "The minister said last Sunday that we must always reach for the best within us. What do you

suppose is the best within us?" "I don't know." "We'll have to find out." She did not answer; she was looking away, up the railroad track.

Eddie Willers smiled. He had said, "Whatever is right," twenty-two years ago. He had kept that statement unchallenged ever since; the other questions had faded in his mind; he had been too busy to ask them. But he still thought it self-evident that one had to do what was right; he had never learned how people could want to do otherwise; he had learned only that they did. It still seemed simple and incomprehensible to him: simple that things should be right, and incomprehensible that they weren't. He knew that they weren't. He thought of that, as he turned a corner and came to the great building of Taggart Transcontinental.

The building stood over the street as its tallest and proudest structure. Eddie Willers always smiled at his first sight of it. Its long bands of windows were unbroken, in contrast to those of its neighbors. Its rising lines cut the sky, with no crumbling corners or worn edges. It seemed to stand above the years, untouched. It would always stand there, thought Eddie Willers.

Whenever he entered the Taggart Building, he felt relief and a sense of security. This was a place of competence and power. The floors of its hallways were mirrors made of marble. The frosted rectangles of its electric fixtures were chips of solid light. Behind sheets of glass, rows of girls sat at typewriters, the clicking of their keys like the sound of speeding train wheels. And like an answering echo, a faint shudder went through the walls at times, rising from under the building, from the tunnels of the great terminal where trains started out to cross a continent and stopped after crossing it again, as they had started and stopped for generation after generation. Taggart Transcontinental, thought Eddie Willers, From Ocean to Ocean—the proud slogan of his childhood, so much more shining and holy than any commandment of the Bible. From Ocean to Ocean, forever—thought Eddie Willers, in the manner of a rededication, as he walked through the spotless halls into the heart of the building, into the office of James Taggart, President of Taggart Transcontinental.

James Taggart sat at his desk. He looked like a man approaching fifty, who had crossed into age from adolescence, without the intermediate stage of youth. He had a small, petulant mouth, and thin hair clinging to a bald forehead. His posture had a limp, decentralized sloppiness, as if in defiance

of his tall, slender body, a body with an elegance of line intended for the confident poise of an aristocrat, but transformed into the gawkiness of a lout. The flesh of his face was pale and soft. His eyes were pale and veiled, with a glance that moved slowly, never quite stopping, gliding off and past things in eternal resentment of their existence. He looked obstinate and drained. He was thirty-nine years old.

He lifted his head with irritation, at the sound of the opening door.

"Don't bother me, don't bother me, don't bother me," said James Taggart.

Eddie Willers walked toward the-desk.

"It's important, Jim," he said, not raising his voice.

"All right, all right, what is it?"

Eddie Willers looked at a map on the wall of the office. The map's colors had faded under the glass—he wondered dimly how many Taggart presidents had sat before it and for how many years. The Taggart Transcontinental Railroad, the network of red lines slashing the faded body of the country from New York to San Francisco, looked like a system of blood vessels. It looked as if once, long ago, the blood had shot down the main artery and, under the pressure of its own overabundance, had branched out at random points, running all over the country. One red streak twisted its way from Cheyenne, Wyoming, down to El Paso, Texas—the Rio Norte Line of Taggart Transcontinental. New tracing had been added recently and the red streak had been extended south beyond El Paso—but Eddie Willers turned away hastily when his eyes reached that point.

He looked at James Taggart and said, "It's the Rio Norte Line." He noticed Taggart's glance moving down to a corner of the desk. "We've had another wreck."

"Railroad accidents happen every day. Did you have to bother me about that?"

"You know what I'm saying, Jim. The Rio Norte is done for. That track is shot. Down the whole line."

"We are getting a new track."

Eddie Willers continued as if there had been no answer: "That track is shot. It's no use trying to run trains down there. People are giving up trying to use them."

"There is not a railroad in the country, it seems to me, that doesn't have a few branches running at a deficit. We're not the only ones. It's a national condition—a temporary national condition."

Eddie stood looking at him silently. What Taggart disliked about Eddie Willers was this habit of looking straight into people's eyes. Eddie's eyes were blue, wide and questioning; he had blond hair and a square face, unremarkable except for that look of scrupulous attentiveness and open, puzzled wonder.

"What do you want?" snapped Taggart.

"I just came to tell you something you had to know, because somebody had to tell you."

"That we've had another accident?"

"That we can't give up the Rio Norte Line."

James Taggart seldom raised his head; when he looked at people, he did so by lifting his heavy eyelids and staring upward from under the expanse of his bald forehead.

"Who's thinking of giving up the Rio Norte Line?" he asked.

"There's never been any question of giving it up. I resent your saying it. I resent it very much."

"But we haven't met a schedule for the last six months. We haven't completed a run without some sort of breakdown, major or minor. We're losing all our shippers, one after another. How long can we last?"

"You're a pessimist, Eddie. You lack faith. That's what undermines the morale of an organization."

"You mean that nothing's going to be done about the Rio Norte Line?"

"I haven't said that at all. Just as soon as we get the new track-"

"Jim, there isn't going to be any new track." He watched Taggart's eyelids move up slowly. "I've just come back from the office of Associated Steel.