

longer than the span of one deal, who had no payrolls to meet, no overhead to carry, no real estate to own, no equipment to build, whose only asset and sole investment consisted of an item known as "friendship." These were the men whom official speeches described as "the progressive businessmen of our dynamic age," but whom people called "the pull peddlers"—the species included many breeds, those of "transportation pull," and of "steel pull" and "oil pull" and "wage-raise pull" and "suspended sentence pull"—men who were dynamic, who kept darting all over the country while no one else could move, men who were active and mindless, active, not like animals, but like that which breeds, feeds and moves upon the stillness of a corpse.

She knew that there was money to be had out of the railroad business and she knew who was now obtaining it. Cuffy Meigs was selling trains as he was selling the last of the railroad's supplies, whenever he could rig a setup which would not let it be discovered or proved—selling rail to roads in Guatemala or to trolley companies in Canada, selling wire to manufacturers of juke boxes, selling cross-ties for fuel in resort hotels.

Did it matter—she thought, looking at the map—which part of the corpse had been consumed by which type of maggot, by those who gorged themselves or by those who gave the food to other maggots? So long as living flesh was prey to be devoured, did it matter whose stomachs it had gone to fill? There was no way to tell which devastation had been accomplished by the humanitarians and which by undisguised gangsters. There was no way to tell which acts of plunder had been prompted by the charity-lust of the Lawsons and which by the gluttony of Cuffy Meigs—no way to tell which communities had been immolated to feed another community one week closer to starvation and which to provide yachts for the pull-peddlers. Did it matter? Both were alike in fact as they were alike in spirit, both were in need and need was regarded as sole title to property, both were acting in strictest accordance with the same code of morality. Both held the immolation of men as proper and both were achieving it. There wasn't even any way to tell who were the cannibals and who the victims—the communities that accepted as their rightful due the confiscated clothing or fuel of a town to the east of them, found, next week, their granaries confiscated to feed a town to the west—men had achieved the ideal of the centuries, they were practicing it in unobstructed perfection, they were serving *need* as their highest ruler, need as first claim upon them, need as their standard of value, as the coin of their realm, as more sacred than right and life. Men had been pushed into a pit where, shouting that man is his brother's keeper, each was devouring his neighbor, and was being devoured by his neighbor's brother, each was proclaiming the righteousness of the unearned and wondering who was stripping the skin off his back, each was devouring himself, while screaming in terror that some unknowable evil was destroying the earth.

"What complaint do they now have to make?" she heard Hugh Akston's voice in her mind. "That the universe is irrational? Is it?"

She sat looking at the map, her glance dispassionately solemn, as

if no emotion save respect were permissible when observing the awesome power of logic. She was seeing—in the chaos of a perishing continent—the precise, mathematical execution of all the ideas men had held. They had not wanted to know that *this* was what they wanted, they had not wanted to see that they had the power to wish, but not the power to fake—and they had achieved their wish to the letter, to the last bloodstained comma of it.

What were they thinking now, the champions of need and the lechers of pity?—she wondered. What were they counting on? Those who had once simpered: “I don’t want to destroy the rich, I only want to seize a little of their surplus to help the poor, just a *little*, they’ll never miss it!”—then, later, had snapped: “The tycoons can stand being squeezed; they’ve amassed enough to last them for three generations”—then, later, had yelled: “Why should the people suffer while businessmen have reserves to last a year?”—now were screaming: “Why should we starve while some people have reserves to last a week?” What were they counting on?—she wondered.

“You must do something!” cried James Taggart.

She whirled to face him. “*I?*”

“It’s *your* job, it’s *your* province, it’s *your* duty!”

“What is?”

“To act. To do.”

“To do—what?”

“How should I know? It’s *your* special talent. You’re the doer.”

She glanced at him: the statement was so oddly perceptive and so incongruously irrelevant. She rose to her feet.

“Is this all, Jim?”

“No! No! I want a discussion!”

“Go ahead.”

“But you haven’t said anything!”

“You haven’t, either.”

“But . . . What I mean is, there are practical problems to solve, which . . . For instance, what was that matter of our last allocation of new rail vanishing from the storehouse in Pittsburgh?”

‘Cuffy Meigs stole it and sold it.’

“Can you prove it?” he snapped defensively.

“Have your friends left any means, methods, rules or agencies of proof?”

“Then don’t talk about it, don’t be theoretical, we’ve got to deal with facts! We’ve got to deal with facts as they are today . . . I mean, we’ve got to be realistic and devise some practical means to protect our supplies under existing conditions, not under unprovable assumptions, which . . .”

She chuckled. *There* was the form of the tornless, she thought, *there* was the method of his consciousness: he wanted her to protect him from Cuffy Meigs without acknowledging Meigs’ existence, to fight it without admitting its reality, to defeat it without disturbing its game.

“What do you find so damn funny?” he snapped angrily.

“You know it.”

“I don’t know what’s the matter with you! I don’t know what’s