

"Listen, Clem, I do know that Wesley refused to see him last week."

"That's true. Wesley is a pretty busy man."

"And I know that when Gene Lawson gave that big party ten days ago, practically everybody was there, but Buzzy Watts was not invited."

"That's so," said Mr. Weatherby peaceably.

"So I wouldn't bet on Mr. Buzzy Watts, Clem. And I wouldn't let it worry me."

"Wesley's an impartial man," said Mr. Weatherby. "A man devoted to public duty. It's the interests of the country as a whole that he's got to consider above everything else." Taggart sat up; of all the danger signs he knew, this line of talk was the worst. "Nobody can deny it, Jim, that Wesley feels a high regard for you as an enlightened businessman, a valuable adviser and one of his closest personal friends." Taggart's eyes shot to him swiftly; this was still worse. "But nobody can say that Wesley would hesitate to sacrifice his personal feelings and friendships—where the welfare of the public is concerned."

Taggart's face remained blank; his terror came from things never allowed to reach expression in words or in facial muscles. The terror was his struggle against an unadmitted thought: he himself had been "the public" for so long and in so many different issues, that he knew what it would mean if that magic title, that sacred title no one dared to oppose, were transferred, along with its "welfare," to the person of Buzzy Watts.

But what he asked, and he asked it hastily, was, "You're not implying that I would place my personal interests above the public welfare, are you?"

"No, of course not," said Mr. Weatherby, with a look that was almost a smile. "Certainly not. Not you, Jim. Your public-spirited attitude—and understanding—are too well known. That's why Wesley expects you to see every side of the picture."

"Yes, of course," said Taggart, trapped.

"Well, consider the unions' side of it. Maybe you can't afford to give them a raise, but how can they afford to exist when the cost of living has shot sky-high? They've got to eat, don't they? That comes first, railroad or no railroad." Mr. Weatherby's tone had a kind of placid righteousness, as if he were reciting a formula required to convey another meaning, clear to all of them; he was looking straight at Taggart, in special emphasis of the unstated. "There are almost a million members in the railway unions. With families, dependents and poor relatives—and, who hasn't got poor relatives these days?—it amounts to about five million votes. Persons, I mean. Wesley has to bear that in mind. He has to think of their psychology. And then, consider the public. The rates you're charging were established at a time when everybody was making money. But the way things are now, the cost of transportation has become a burden nobody can afford. People are screaming about it all over the country." He looked straight at Taggart; he merely looked, but his glance had the quality of a wink. "There's an awful lot of them, Jim. They're not

very happy at the moment about an awful lot of things. A government that would bring the railroad rates down would make a lot of folks grateful."

The silence that answered him was like a hole so deep that no sound could be heard of the things crashing down to its bottom. Taggart knew, as they all knew, to what disinterested motive Mr. Mouch would always be ready to sacrifice his personal friendships.

It was the silence and the fact that she did not want to say it, had come here resolved not to speak, but could not resist it, that made Dagny's voice sound so vibrantly harsh:

"Got what you've been asking for, all these years, gentlemen?"

The swiftness with which their eyes moved to her was an involuntary answer to an unexpected sound, but the swiftness with which they moved away—to look down at the table, at the walls, anywhere but at her—was the conscious answer to the meaning of the sounds.

In the silence of the next moment, she felt their resentment like a starch thickening the air of the room, and she knew that it was not resentment against Mr. Weatherby, but against her. She could have borne it, if they had merely let her question go unanswered; but what made her feel a sickening tightness in her stomach, was their double fraud of pretending to ignore her and then answering in their own kind of manner.

The chairman said, not looking at her, his voice pointedly noncommittal, yet vaguely purposeful at the same time, "It would have been all right, everything would have worked out fine, if it weren't for the wrong people in positions of power, such as Buzzy Watts and Chick Morrison."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about Chick Morrison," said the pallid man with the mustache. "He hasn't any top-level connections. Not really. It's Tinky Holloway that's poison."

"I don't see the picture as hopeless," said a portly man who wore a green muffler. "Joe Dunphy and Bud Hazleton are very close to Wesley. If their influence prevails, we'll be all right. However, Kip Chalmers and Tinky Holloway are dangerous."

"I can take care of Kip Chalmers," said Taggart.

Mr. Weatherby was the only person in the room who did not mind looking at Dagny; but whenever his glance rested upon her, it registered nothing; she was the only person in the room whom he did not see.

"I am thinking," said Mr. Weatherby casually, looking at Taggart, "that you might do Wesley a favor."

"Wesley knows that he can always count on me."

"Well, my thought is that if you granted the unions' wage raises—we might drop the question of cutting the rates, for the time being."

"I can't do that!" It was almost a cry. "The National Alliance of Railroads has taken a unanimous stand against the raises and has committed every member to refuse."

"That's just what I mean," said Mr. Weatherby softly. "Wesley needs to drive a wedge into that Alliance stand. If a railroad like Taggart Transcontinental were to give in, the rest would be easy. You would help Wesley a great deal. He would appreciate it."