

lips. He took one for himself, struck a match, lighted both and they walked on.

They walked, over rotting logs that sank without resistance into the shifting ground, through a vast, uncongealed globe of moonlight and coiling mist—with two spots of living fire in their hands and the glow of two small circles to light their faces.

"Fire, a dangerous force, tamed at his fingertips . . ." she remembered the old man saying to her, the old man who had said that these cigarettes were not made anywhere on earth. "When a man thinks, there is a spot of fire alive in his mind—and it's proper that he should have the burning point of a cigarette as his one expression."

"I wish you'd tell me who makes them," she said, in the tone of a hopeless plea.

He chuckled good-naturedly. "I can tell you this much: they're made by a friend of mine, for sale, but—not being a common carrier—he sells them only to his friends."

"Sell me that package, will you?"

"I don't think you'll be able to afford it, Miss Taggart, but—all right, if you wish."

"How much is it?"

"Five cents."

"Five cents?" she repeated, bewildered.

"Five cents—" he said, and added, "in gold."

She stopped, staring at him. "In gold?"

"Yes, Miss Taggart."

"Well, what's your rate of exchange? How much is it in our normal money?"

"There is no rate of *exchange*, Miss Taggart. No amount of physical—or spiritual—currency, whose sole standard of value is the decree of Mr. Wesley Mouch, will buy these cigarettes."

"I see."

He reached into his pocket, took out the package and handed it to her. "I'll give them to you, Miss Taggart," he said, "because you've earned them many times over—and because you need them for the same purpose we do."

"What purpose?"

"To remind us—in moments of discouragement, in the loneliness of exile—of our true homeland, which has always been yours, too, Miss Taggart."

"Thank you," she said. She put the cigarettes in her pocket; he saw that her hand was trembling.

When they reached the fourth of the five mileposts, they had been silent for a long time, with no strength left for anything but the effort of moving their feet. Far ahead, they saw a dot of light, too low on the horizon and too harshly clear to be a star. They kept watching it, as they walked, and said nothing until they became certain that it was a powerful electric beacon blazing in the midst of the empty prairie.

"What is that?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "It looks like—"

"No," she broke in hastily, "it couldn't be. Not around here."

She did not want to hear him name the hope which she had felt for many minutes past. She could not permit herself to think of it or to know that the thought was hope.

They found the telephone box at the fifth milepost. The beacon hung like a violent spot of cold fire, less than half a mile farther south.

The telephone was working. She heard the buzz of the wire, like the breath of a living creature, when she lifted the receiver. Then a drawling voice answered, "Jessup, at Bradshaw." The voice sounded sleepy.

"This is Dagny Taggart, speaking from—"

"Who?"

"Dagny Taggart, of Taggart Transcontinental, speaking—"

"Oh . . . Oh yes . . . I see . . . Yes?"

"—speaking from your track phone Number 83. The Comet is stalled seven miles north of here. It's been abandoned. The crew has deserted."

There was a pause. "Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

She had to pause in turn, in order to believe it. "Are you the night dispatcher?"

"Yeah."

"Then send another crew out to us at once."

"A full passenger train crew?"

"Of course."

"Now?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. "The rules don't say anything about that."

"Get me the chief dispatcher," she said, choking.

"He's away on his vacation."

"Get the division superintendent."

"He's gone down to Laurel for a couple of days."

"Get me somebody who's in charge."

"I'm in charge."

"Listen," she said slowly, fighting for patience, "do you understand that there's a train, a passenger limited, abandoned in the middle of the prairie?"

"Yeah, but how am I to know what I'm supposed to do about it? The rules don't provide for it. Now if you had an accident, we'd send out the wrecker, but if there was no accident . . . you don't need the wrecker, do you?"

"No. We don't need the wrecker. We need men. Do you understand? Living men to run an engine."

"The rules don't say anything about a train without men. Or about men without a train. There's no rule for calling out a full crew in the middle of the night and sending them to hunt for a train somewhere. I've never heard of it before."

"You're hearing it now. Don't you know what you have to do?"

"Who am I to know?"

"Do you know that your job is to keep trains moving?"

"My job is to obey the rules. If I send out a crew when I'm not supposed to, God only knows what's going to happen! What with

the Unification Board and all the regulations they've got nowadays, who am I to take it upon myself?"

"And what's going to happen if you leave a train stalled on the line?"

"That's not my fault. I had nothing to do with it. They can't blame me. I couldn't help it."

"You're to help it now."

"Nobody told me to."

"I'm telling you to!"

"How do I know whether you're supposed to tell me or not? We're not supposed to furnish any Taggart crews. You people were to run with your own crews. That's what we were told."

"But this is an emergency!"

"Nobody told me anything about an emergency."

She had to take a few seconds to control herself. She saw Kellogg watching her with a bitter smile of amusement.

"Listen," she said into the phone, "do you know that the Comet was due at Bradshaw over three hours ago?"

"Oh, sure. But nobody's going to make any trouble about that. No train's ever on schedule these days."

"Then do you intend to leave us blocking your track forever?"

"We've got nothing due till Number 4, the northbound passenger out of Laurel, at eight thirty-seven A.M. You can wait till then. The day-trick dispatcher will be on then. You can speak to him."

"You blasted idiot! This is *the Comet*!"

"What's that to me? This isn't Taggart Transcontinental. You people expect a lot for your money. You've been nothing but a headache to us, with all the extra work at no extra pay for the little fellows." His voice was slipping into whining insolence. "You can't talk to me that way. The time's past when you could talk to people that way."

She had never believed that there were men with whom a certain method, which she had never used, would work; such men were not hired by Taggart Transcontinental and she had never been forced to deal with them before.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked, in the cold, overbearing tone of a personal threat.

It worked. "I . . . I guess so," he answered.

"Then let me tell you that if you don't send a crew to me at once, you'll be out of a job within one hour after I reach Bradshaw, which I'll reach sooner or later. You'd better make it sooner."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Call out a full passenger train crew and give them orders to run us to Laurel, where we have our own men."

"Yes, ma'am." He added, "Will you tell headquarters that it was you who told me to do it?"

"I will."

"And that it's you who're responsible for it?"

"I am."

There was a pause, then he asked helplessly. "Now how am I going to call the men? Most of them haven't got any phones."

"Do you have a call boy?"