

curve and had hung like a crystal bead, gathering the weight of many seconds; the bead and the wire had given up together and, as soundless as the fall of tears, the wire had broken and fallen with the fall of the bead.

The men at the Division Headquarters of Taggart Transcontinental avoided looking at one another, when the break of the telephone line was discovered and reported. They made statements painfully miscalculated to seem to refer to the problem, yet to state nothing, none fooling the others. They knew that copper wire was a vanishing commodity, more precious than gold or honor; they knew that the division storekeeper had sold their stock of wire weeks ago, to unknown dealers who came by night and were not businessmen in the daytime, but only men who had friends in Sacramento and in Washington—just as the storekeeper, recently appointed to the division, had a friend in New York, named Cuffy Meigs, about whom one asked no questions. They knew that the man who would now assume the responsibility of ordering repairs and initiating the action which would lead to the discovery that the repairs could not be made, would incur retaliation from unknown enemies, that his fellow workers would become mysteriously silent and would not testify to help him, that he would prove nothing, and if he attempted to do his job, it would not be his any longer. They did not know what was safe or dangerous these days, when the guilty were not punished, but the accusers were; and, like animals, they knew that immobility was the only protection when in doubt and in danger. They remained immobile; they spoke about the appropriate procedure of sending reports to the appropriate authorities on the appropriate dates.

A young roadmaster walked out of the room and out of the headquarters building to the safety of a telephone booth in a drugstore and, at his own expense, ignoring the continent and the tiers of appropriate executives between, he telephoned Dagny Taggart in New York.

She received the call in her brother's office, interrupting an emergency conference. The young roadmaster told her only that the telephone line was broken and that there was no wire to repair it; he said nothing else and he did not explain why he had found it necessary to call her in person. She did not question him; she understood. "Thank you," was all that she answered.

An emergency file in her office kept a record of all the crucial materials still on hand, on every division of Taggart Transcontinental. Like the file of a bankrupt, it kept registering losses, while the rare additions of new supplies seemed like the malicious chuckles of some tormentor throwing crumbs at a starving continent. She looked through the file, closed it, sighed and said, "Montana, Eddie. Phone the Montana Line to ship half their stock of wire to California. Montana might be able to last without it—for another week." And as Eddie Willers was about to protest, she added, "Oil, Eddie. California is one of the last producers of oil left in the country. We don't dare lose the Pacific Line." Then she went back to the conference in her brother's office.

"Copper wire?" said James Taggart, with an odd glance that went

from her face to the city beyond the window. "In a very short while, we won't have any trouble about copper."

"Why?" she asked, but he did not answer. There was nothing special to see beyond the window, only the clear sky of a sunny day, the quiet light of early afternoon on the roofs of the city and, above them, the page of the calendar, saying: September 2.

She did not know why he had insisted on holding this conference in his own office, why he had insisted on speaking to her alone, which he had always tried to avoid, or why he kept glancing at his wrist watch.

"Things are, it seems to me, going wrong," he said. "Something has to be done. There appears to exist a state of dislocation and confusion tending toward an unco-ordinated, unbalanced policy. What I mean is, there's a tremendous national demand for transportation, yet we're losing money. It seems to me—"

She sat looking at the ancestral map of Taggart Transcontinental on the wall of his office, at the red arteries winding across a yellowed continent. There had been a time when the railroad was called the blood system of the nation, and the stream of trains had been like a living circuit of blood, bringing growth and wealth to every patch of wilderness it touched. Now, it was still like a stream of blood, but like the one-way stream that runs from a wound, draining the last of a body's sustenance and life. One-way traffic—she thought indifferently—consumers' traffic.

There was Train Number 193, she thought. Six weeks ago, Train Number 193 had been sent with a load of steel, not to Faulkton, Nebraska, where the Spencer Machine Tool Company, the best machine tool concern still in existence, had been idle for two weeks, waiting for the shipment—but to Sand Creek, Illinois, where Confederate Machine had been wallowing in debt for over a year, producing unreliable goods at unpredictable times. The steel had been allocated by a directive which explained that the Spencer Machine Tool Company was a rich concern, able to wait, while Confederate Machines was bankrupt and could not be allowed to collapse, being the sole source of livelihood of the community of Sand Creek, Illinois. The Spencer Machine Tool Company had closed a month ago. Confederate Machines had closed two weeks later.

The people of Sand Creek, Illinois, had been placed on national relief, but no food could be found for them in the empty granaries of the nation at the frantic call of the moment—so the seed grain of the farmers of Nebraska had been seized by order of the Unification Board—and Train Number 194 had carried the unplanted harvest and the future of the people of Nebraska to be consumed by the people of Illinois. "In this enlightened age," Eugene Lawson had said in a radio broadcast; "we have come, at last, to realize that each one of us is his brother's keeper."

"In a precarious period of emergency, like the present," James Taggart was saying, while she looked at the map, "it is dangerous to find ourselves forced to miss pay days and accumulate wage arrears on some of our divisions, a temporary condition, of course, but—"