like a man who had not permitted himself to know that he was bearing too much: some overstrained connection snapped for good.

When Eddie Willers called for the conductor, he waited a long time before the man came in, and he sensed the answer to his question by the look of resignation on the man's face.

"The engineer is trying to find out what's wrong, Mr. Willers," he answered softly, in a tone implying that it was his duty to hope, but that he had held no hope for years.

"He doesn't know?"

"He's working on it." The conductor waited for a polite half-minute and turned to go, but stopped to volunteer an explanation, as if some dim, rational habit told him that any attempt to explain made any unadmitted terror easier to bear. "Those Diesels of ours aren't fit to be sent out on the road, Mr. Willers. They weren't worth repairing long ago."

"I know," said Eddie Willers quietly.

The conductor sensed that his explanation was worse than none: it led to questions that men did not ask these days. He shook his head and went out.

Eddie Willers sat looking at the empty darkness beyond the window. This was the first eastbound Comet out of San Francisco in many days: she was the child of his tortured effort to re-establish transcontinental service. He could not tell what the past few days had cost him or what he had done to save the San Francisco terminal from the blind chaos of a civil war that men were fighting with no concept of their goals; there was no way to remember the deals he had made on the basis of the range of every shifting moment. He knew only that he had obtained immunity for the terminal from the leaders of three different warring factions, that he had found a man for the post of terminal manager who did not seem to have given up altogether; that he had started one more Taggart Comet on her eastward run, with the best Diesel engine and the best crew available; and that he had boarded her for his return journey to New York, with no knowledge of how long his achievement would last.

He had never worked so hard; he had done his job as conscientiously well as he had always done any assignment, but it was as if he had worked in a vacuum, as if his energy had found no transmitters and had run into the sands of . . . of some such desert as the one beyond the window of the Comet. He shuddered; he felt a moment's kinship with the stalled engine of the train.

After a while, he summoned the conductor once more. "How is it going?" he asked.

The conductor shrugged and shook his head.

"Send the fireman to a track phone. Have him tell the Division Headquarters to send us the best mechanic available."

"Yes, sir."

There was nothing to see beyond the windows; turning off the light, Eddie Willers could distinguish a gray spread dotted by the black spots of cacti, with no start to it and no end. He wondered how men had ever ventured to cross it, and at what price, in the days

when there were no trains. He jerked his head away and snapped on the light.

It was only the fact that the Comet was in exile, he thought, that gave him this sense of pressing anxiety. She was stalled on an alien rail—on the borrowed track of the Atlantic Southern that ran through Arizona, the track they were using without payment. He had to get her out of here, he thought, he would not feel like this once they returned to their own rail. But the junction suddenly seemed an insurmountable distance away: on the shore of the Mississippi, at the Taggart Bridge.

No, he thought, that was not all. He had to admit to himself what images were nagging him with a sense of uneasiness he could neither grasp nor dispel; they were too meaningless to define and too inexplicable to dismiss. One was the image of a way station they had passed without stopping, more than two hours ago: he had noticed the empty platform and the brightly lighted windows of the small station building; the lights came from empty rooms, he had seen no single human figure, neither in the building nor on the tracks outside. The other image was of the next way station they had passed: its platform was jammed with an agitated mob. Now they were far beyond the reach of the light or sound of any station.

He had to get the Comet out of here, he thought. He wondered why he felt it with such urgency and why it had seemed so crucially important to re-establish the Comet's run. A mere handful of passengers was rattling in her empty cars, men had no place to go and no goals to reach. It was not for their sake that he had struggled; he could not say for whose. Two phrases stood as the answer in his mind, driving him with the vagueness of a prayer and the scalding force of an absolute. One was: From Ocean to Ocean, forever—the other was: Don't let it go! . . .

The conductor returned an hour later, with the fireman, whose face looked oddly grim.

"Mr. Willers," said the fireman slowly, "Division Headquarters does not answer."

Eddie Willers sat up, his mind refusing to believe it, yet knowing suddenly that for some inexplicable reason *this* was what he had expected. "It's impossible!" he said, his voice low, the fireman was looking at him, not moving. "The track phone must have been out of order."

"No, Mr. Willers. It was not out of order. The line was alive all right. The Division Headquarters wasn't. I mean, there was no one there to answer, or else no one who cared to."

"But you know that that's impossible!"

The fireman shrugged; men did not consider any disaster impossible these days.

Eddie Willers leaped to his feet. "Go down the length of the train," he ordered the conductor. "Knock on all the doors—the occupied ones, that is—and see whether there's an electrical engineer aboard."

"Yes, sir."

Eddie knew that they felt, as he felt it, that they would find no