

"What?"

"Don't tell me what you're going to allow me to do."

"Well, I meant we're not going to allow our men to run your train."

"That's different."

"Well, that's what we've decided."

"Who's decided it?"

"The committee. What you're doing is a violation of human rights. You can't force men to go out to get killed—when that bridge collapses just to make money for you."

She searched for a sheet of blank paper and handed it to him. "Put it down in writing," she said, "and we'll sign a contract to that effect."

"What contract?"

"That no member of your union will ever be employed to run an engine on the John Galt Line."

"Why . . . wait a minute . . . I haven't said—"

"You don't want to sign such a contract?"

"No I—"

"Why not, since you know that the bridge is going to collapse?"

"I only want —"

"I know what you want. You want a stranglehold on your men by means of the jobs which I give them—and on me, by means of your men. You want me to provide the jobs, and you want to make it impossible for me to have any jobs to provide. Now I'll give you a choice. That train is going to be run. You have no choice about that. But you can choose whether it's going to be run by one of your men or not. If you choose not to let them, the train will still run, if I have to drive the engine myself. Then, if the bridge collapses, there won't be any railroad left in existence, anyway. But if it doesn't collapse, no member of your union will ever get a job on the John Galt Line. If you think that I need your men more than they need me, choose accordingly. If you know that I can run an engine, but they can't build a railroad, choose according to that. Now are you going to forbid your men to run that train?"

"I didn't say we'd forbid it. I haven't said anything about forbidding. But . . . but you can't force men to risk their lives on something nobody's ever tried before."

"I'm not going to force anyone to take that run."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ask for a volunteer."

"And if none of them volunteers?"

"Then it will be my problem, not yours."

"Well, let me tell you that I'm going to advise them to refuse."

"Go ahead. Advise them anything you wish. Tell them whatever you like. But leave the choice to them. Don't try to forbid it."

The notice that appeared in every roundhouse of the Taggart system was signed "Edwin Willers, Vice-President in Charge of Operation." It asked engineers, who were willing to drive the first train on the John Galt Line, so to inform the office of Mr. Willers, not later than eleven A.M. of July 15.

It was a quarter of eleven, on the morning of the fifteenth, when the telephone rang in her office. It was Eddie, calling from high up in the Taggart Building outside her window. "Dagny, I think you'd better come over." His voice sounded queer.

She hurried across the street, then down the marble-floored halls, to the door that still carried the name "Dagny Taggart" on its glass panel. She pulled the door open.

The anteroom of the office was full. Men stood jammed among the desks, against the walls. As she entered, they took their hats off in sudden silence. She saw the graying heads, the muscular shoulders, she saw the smiling faces of her staff at their desks and the face of Eddie Willers at the end of the room. Everybody knew that nothing had to be said.

Eddie stood by the open door of her office. The crowd parted to let her approach him. He moved his hand, pointing at the room, then at a pile of letters and telegrams.

"Dagny, every one of them," he said. "Every engineer on Taggart Transcontinental. Those who could, came here, some from as far as the Chicago Division." He pointed at the mail. "There's the rest of them. To be exact, there's only three I haven't heard from: one's on a vacation in the north woods, one's in a hospital, and one's in jail for reckless driving—of his automobile."

She looked at the men. She saw the suppressed grins on the solemn faces. She inclined her head, in acknowledgment. She stood for a moment, head bowed, as if she were accepting a verdict, knowing that the verdict applied to her, to every man in the room and to the world beyond the walls of the building.

"Thank you," she said.

Most of the men had seen her many times. Looking at her, as she raised her head, many of them thought—in astonishment and for the first time—that the face of their Operating Vice-President was the face of a woman and that it was beautiful.

Someone in the back of the crowd cried suddenly, cheerfully, "To hell with Jim Taggart!"

An explosion answered him. The men laughed, they cheered, they broke into applause. The response was out of all proportion to the sentence. But the sentence had given them the excuse they needed. They seemed to be applauding the speaker, in insolent defiance of authority. But everyone in the room knew who it was that they were cheering.

She raised her hand. "We're too early," she said, laughing. "Wait till a week from today. That's when we ought to celebrate. And believe me, we will!"

They drew lots for the run. She picked a folded slip of paper from among a pile containing all their names. The winner was not in the room, but he was one of the best men on the system, Pat Logan, engineer of the Taggart Comet on the Nebraska Division.

"Wire Pat and tell him he's been demoted to a freight," she said to Eddie. She added casually, as if it were a last-moment decision, but it fooled no one, "Oh yes, tell him that I'm going to ride with him in the cab of the engine on that run."

An old engineer beside her grinned and said, "I thought you would, Miss Taggart."

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Rearden was in New York on the day when Dagny telephoned him from her office. "Hank, I'm going to have a press conference tomorrow."

He laughed aloud. "No!"

"Yes." Her voice sounded earnest, but, dangerously, a bit too earnest. "The newspapers have suddenly discovered me and are asking questions. I'm going to answer them."

"Have a good time."

"I will. Are you going to be in town tomorrow? I'd like to have you in on it."

"Okay. I wouldn't want to miss it."

The reporters who came to the press conference in the office of the John Galt Line were young men who had been trained to think that their job consisted of concealing from the world the nature of its events. It was their daily duty to serve as audience for some public figure who made utterances about the public good, in phrases carefully chosen to convey no meaning. It was their daily job to sling words together in any combination they pleased, so long as the words did not fall into a sequence saying something specific. They could not understand the interview now being given to them.

Dagny Taggart sat behind her desk in an office that looked like a slum basement. She wore a dark blue suit with a white blouse, beautifully tailored, suggesting an air of formal, almost military elegance. She sat straight, and her manner was severely dignified, just a shade too dignified.

Rearden sat in a corner of the room, sprawled across a broken armchair, his long legs thrown over one of its arms, his body leaning against the other. His manner was pleasantly informal, just a bit too informal.

In the clear, monotonous voice of a military report, consulting no papers, looking straight at the men, Dagny recited the technological facts about the John Galt Line, giving exact figures on the nature of the rail, the capacity of the bridge, the method of construction, the costs. Then, in the dry tone of a banker, she explained the financial prospects of the Line and named the large profits she expected to make. "That is all," she said.

"All?" said one of the reporters. "Aren't you going to give us a message for the public?"

"That was my message."

"But hell—I mean, aren't you going to defend yourself?"

"Against what?"

"Don't you want to tell us something to justify your Line?"

"I have."

A man with a mouth shaped as a permanent sneer asked, "Well, what I want to know, as Bertram Scudder stated, is what protection do we have against your Line being no good?"

"Don't ride on it."